The Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University

The Lebanese American University founded the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) in 1973. The history of the Institute is closely linked to that of its first women’s college in the Middle East, the American Junior College for Women, which was established in 1924 by the Presbyterian Mission. The College, which educated Middle Eastern women for half a century, became co-ed in 1973. In order to honor the college’s unique heritage as the first educational institution for women in the region, the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World was established that same year.

Mission
- Engage in academic research on women in the Arab world.
- Develop and integrate women’s studies in the Lebanese American University curriculum.
- Empower women in the Arab world through development programs and education.
- Serve as a catalyst for policy changes regarding the rights of women in the Arab world.
- Facilitate networking and communication among individuals, groups, and institutions concerned with women in the Arab world.
- Extend ties with international organizations and universities working on gender issues.

Al-Raida Quarterly Journal

IWSAW issues a quarterly journal, Al-Raida, whose mission is to promote research and the dissemination of updated information regarding the condition of women in the Arab world.

Each issue of Al-Raida features a file which focuses on a particular theme, in addition to articles, conference reports, interviews, book reviews, and art news.

All submitted articles are reviewed by IWSAW. IWSAW reserves the right to accept or reject the articles submitted. Those articles that are accepted will be edited according to journal standards.

For more details about our submission guidelines kindly visit our website at: http://www.lau.edu.lb/centers-institutes/iwsaw/index.html

Al-Raida’s previous issues

- Issue 32, 1995: "Women and the Environment"
- Issue 31, 1995: "Women and the Environment"
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Hard copies of recent and back issues of Al-Raida are available in English at the Institute. Online copies of issues, 2001 onwards, are available online in English (fee-free of charge).

* Out of print - *Several issues are available.
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Dima Dabbous-Sensenig

Faithful readers of Al-Raida (The Pioneer in English) will notice that this issue (118-119) looks different from the previous ones, both in content and form. This is not surprising in itself, knowing that Al-Raida underwent considerable changes in the last 30 years, since it first appeared in May 1976, 3 years after the founding of the first institute for women’s studies in the Arab world (i.e. IWSAW).

Indeed, anyone who has read Al-Raida since it first came out will remember how this pioneering publication in the Arab world started off as a thin newsletter consisting of a dozen stenciled pages, with the modest and limited purpose of reporting on the activities of the Institute. With time, however, Al-Raida grew in size and scope – a development which was also gradually reflected in its appearance. Whereas initially it consisted mostly of profiles of women, conference reports, and summaries of studies, by the mid 1980s an important addition was made – research-based articles – thus marking a qualitative and quantitative leap in terms of its content and mandate. By 1994, Al-Raida reached a new level of maturity with the introduction of a specialized section or “file” which focuses on cutting edge topics and often controversial issues related to women in the Arab world. The most recent development came about in 2002, in line with the technological advances that swept the publishing world in the last decade, when the Institute made Al-Raida available online in both English and Arabic, thus allowing researchers and activists worldwide to have easy and instantaneous access to it.

Nearly three decades after its first appearance, Al-Raida is ready, once again, to take another qualitative leap forward. Slightly smaller in size, and with some newly introduced sections (e.g. “young scholars” and an original “book reviews” section), it seeks to go further by offering a tighter selection of research articles and pieces relevant to understanding the condition of women in the Arab world. By giving prominence to quality research over summaries, profiles, reports, and the activities of the Institute, and by practically reversing the priorities exhibited in its initial newsletter format (which was basically meant to highlight the activities of IWSAW), we hope that the message behind the improved Al-Raida is made clear: i.e. that the best way to highlight and promote the work of IWSAW and help it achieve its objective of empowering women is, first and foremost, to promote and prioritize quality research about women in the Arab world. The new section dedicated to research by young scholars is perhaps the best expression of the conviction that IWSAW’s objective cannot be fully achieved without investing in the future: i.e. believing in the intellectual capacity of our youth and encouraging them to join the struggle to create a better world for all of us, men and women.

Dima Dabbous-Sensenig is the director of the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University.
Arab Women Writing in English

Saadi Nikro

As the title indicates, this issue of *Al-Raida* is informed by the theme of Arab Women Writing in English, presenting essays, short stories, personal reflections, and poetry. Accordingly, the File includes mostly creative writing by Arab women living and working either in or outside the region.

In the spirit of many of the contributions, the title should be approached both descriptively and conceptually – as a reference to the identity and work of certain writers, and as variable terms that are creatively and critically explored in respect to the signifying residues and capacities they historically imply, carry, and structure. This is to say that almost none of the following pieces takes for granted or leaves unexamined Arab, English, Writing, and Woman, but rather explore how these terms involve specific contexts implicating certain objectifying/subjectifying constraints and limitations, as well as productive sites engaging acts of resistance, counter definitions, alternative stories, and narratives.

Some of the articles evoke an experience of travel across geographical locations and cultural landscapes. This is explored not only through an existential focus, but also through the way in which languages and cultures are creatively negotiated, practiced, and employed towards an understanding of self and circumstance, very often in the context of how one is constrained to experience their self as Other. Arabness comes to be deflected through a learning and practice of English languages, so that womanhood comes to be foregrounded as sites of containment and emergent articulations of counter-narratives, or else personal and social experiences that can be told and heard. Whether their first, second, or perhaps third language, many of the contributors approach English as a thick texture carrying the momentum of particular cultural and political sites of production.
Thus, it may be more accurate to speak of English languages, as the very tenor, folds, and experiential motivations of both self and language implicate a variable proliferation of difference, very often in tension with the way in which difference is constrained by established forms of practice and signification. In this respect, Arabness is transformed from a symbol of identification to the articulation of narratives that imply not so much knowledge of self and circumstance, but public sites for the telling and sharing of stories.

How, we can ask, does one enter a language and approach a sense of understanding of self and circumstance? How does one translate their experience of Arabness into another language whose signifying capacities will always tend towards distortion? Part of the answer is to realize that it is not so much a question of distortion, but rather an exploration of the capacity of language to enable, as I have said, the telling of one's dilemmas, dispositions, preoccupations, and interests. This is to say that the very rhetoricity (I borrow the term from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) of language does not merely inscribe particular constraints, but also the potential to creatively explore both residual and emergent terms of self – and other – understanding.

It has been particularly encouraging to receive articles from different geographical sites, such as Europe, North America, Australia, Lebanon, and the region – which gives the present issue a comparativist focus. Not only do the contributors juggle different languages as they develop their compositions in English, but also negotiate different genres, such as memoir and travel, poetic prose and verse, or else critical and creative writing. This constitutes a certain richness, I feel, and I have come to regard the issue as a site for an exploration of how English languages can be approached as an experimental engagement with the intensity of form, using parody and allegory, paradox and irony, reflection and expression, as ways in which to develop a more intimate understanding of self and circumstance.

Another interesting aspect of this issue concerns how our contributors translate themselves into sites of reflection, inquiry, and articulation, whereby selfhood is approached as a complex web of influences, experiences, and negotiations that can be valued as historical processes of cultural and intellectual exchange. Very often this can be achieved by thinking or writing in a second or third language, whereby its very conventionality affords a playful engagement with its capacity to work as a network of signification, rather than simply a vehicle for ideological explanation. The political, in other words, comes to have value once it travels through the way in which the personal is articulated in experiential terms.

The relationship between self and language is nicely articulated by one of our contributors, Dima Hilal, in her poem “homecoming”: “/how do I slip back into a language?/ like clothes once familiar,/ a second skin,/ now outgrown and uncomfortable.” And if language is central to belonging, as the poem suggests – “/Arabic still on my tongue/ a dream tangible,/ indelible, real/ spelled out in my mother tongue/... reverberating with the ecstasy of belonging/” – then it is also central to unbelonging, or rather significant for the way in which belonging or unbelonging have always to be somehow processed and articulated. Another contributor, Suheir Hammad (whose work is also addressed by some of the critical articles), constrains English to appreciate how its texture may not well enough translate or bear across: “/bas/ rendering
Or as Loubna Haikal, in her contribution, says about her novel *Seducing Mr Maclean*: “One of the major themes in the book was how language confined the identity of the protagonist to that of a foreigner,” an experience that impels the protagonist to explore the tensions brought about by this confinement. In the process language is politicized, as a site of both power and desire, in terms of confinement brought about by stereotypical terms of reference, and a parodic mimicking that works to foreground the conventionality of such terms, so that subjectifying implications of English and other languages are unraveled. In her contribution, “The Importance of Music in my Writing and ‘Engagement’,” Evelyne Accad poignantly addresses this rhetoricity: “...when I search for authenticity, for the real me... I search for the *mot juste* mixture of many different voices, in various languages... playing a symphony... to recreate the hidden face of the world.”

Mona Takieddine Amyuni captures this rhetoricity, what she calls “intimacy,” in her piece “The Intimacy of Words,” especially in her poem which she presents as an epigraph. To quote only a few lines: “/on the wings of words/ entrust them/ with my secret desires/... I don’t want to carry/ any more/ all alone.” Amyuni carries herself through reading and writing, engaging the Civil War as a variable experience drawn through a language practice that cannot but expose history as messy and incomplete, whereby contingency is valued as an opportunity to hear and tell otherwise. Also included in this issue is an article by Roseanne Khalaf, on her creative writing class at the AUB, on how her female students wrote and negotiated their developing sense of sexuality – attentive to “the transformative power of discourse and personal writing.”

As some of the other articles indicate, the way in which Arabness and womanhood came to be experienced in North America after September 11 involves a variable site of forces that are both different and similar to forces preceding this major event. Ghia Osseiran and Carol Fadda-Conrey, in their respective contributions, address how the work of Arab-American women poets engage the aftermath of September 11, as its symbolic and interpretive implications reverberate across North America and into the Arab region, especially Iraq and Palestine. Both writers demonstrate how essentializing interpretative strategies construed through binary frames of reference narrow identity down to a set of static, symbolic associations – according to the logic of “us and them.” This has some bearing on Zina Alani Mougharbel’s contribution, in which she suggests that western readers of Arab women’s English writing and translation are all too eager to consume stereotypes of oppression, victimization, and violence, rather than engage the more explorative aspects of such writing.

And yet this is not to deny the value of contesting and negotiating constraints and traditional expectations. In her article, titled “A Bracelet on the Wrist of Time,” Ibtisam Barakat, in keeping with our theme, relates this to the practice of language: “A new language must be invented, new letters must be sent between the letters of the alphabet to wake them up to what had gone on.” As language is confronted with its rhetoricity, foregrounded as a site for the production of value and significance, it is constrained to entertain its potential to mark out lines of escape, articulating the variability of Arab women’s agency as a fracturing force for telling otherwise.

Saadi Nikro is assistant professor at the Faculty of Humanities and a researcher at the Lebanese Emigration Research Center at Notre Dame University (NDU), Lebanon. Email: saado33@hotmail.com
Arab Women Writing in English

Evelyne Accad
The Importance of Music in my Writing and ‘Engagement’

Suheir Hammad
Poems

Mona Takieddine Amyuni
The Intimacy of Words

Zina Alani Mougharbel
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Ibtisam Barakat
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Prologue: The Black Day

Dahlia Wasfi
Life Goes On
I started composing songs in 1975 when the war broke out in Lebanon. My grief was so overwhelming I could not sleep or lead a normal existence thinking about what my loved ones and the country I cherished were going through. Songs – music and words – came out of my body like a long plaintive shriek. They helped relieve the pain, anger, frustrations, and communicate my feelings to others. Recently I discovered that mixing songs with my presentation was a powerful tool to better express what I want to say and that I can better capture an audience by using my music.

When did I start to write and why should I search in my memory for that moment? To trace the beginning of the writing experience in my life can help me understand how and why it evolved the way it did in consciousness and in practice, and what meaning it acquired with time.  It is like going into oneself and digging, digging, searching for that bursting point hidden far away in one’s mind and soul, the breaking of all knots and barriers, the crumbling of walls, windows opening wide, letting loose one’s imagination, finding unending freedom, swimming and swimming in a blue Mediterranean sea, sometimes flat and smooth like shining oil, other times with rolling waves, the fury of discovering winds, or running and running towards a horizon filled with expectations and dreams.

At the age of four – my mother told me, but I also have memory glimpses of these moments – excited and wanting to communicate and entertain, I would face audiences, invent stories and songs I loved to tell, sing and act for family and friends. Daring and not shy at the time, what could have happened between now and then to make me withdraw into a corner and only tell the blank page what I used to perform with such audacity? Is this where the writing starting point is located for me? Psychologists tell us that it is a decisive age where every action and reaction is determined for the rest of one’s life. Every experience lived at that age is supposed to have marked one’s future choices and reactions. Am I filled with the same feelings of amazement and marvel at the possibility of seducing audiences when I write now as when I performed as a child? What led my imagination then and what moves it now?

When did I really start to write – i.e., when did I sit down methodically, regularly, and consciously with pages to fill out and the desire to mark my time and environment, the knowledge I had, the important and pressing issues to communicate? When did I “aim at eternity” with my writing, to use Annie Dillard’s (1982, p. 65) words? Adolescent, I lost the spontaneity, freshness, vivaciousness, and enthusiasm I had in my childhood. School – especially and unfortunately the French system, and perhaps even more so in the ex-colonies – often kills a child’s creativity, and society takes care of burying it. Nevertheless, I remember my high-school creative writing classes – a French Protestant high-school in Beirut. They were my favorite courses. The subject to be treated

The Importance of Music in my Writing and ‘Engagement’

Evelyne Accad
having been announced, a feeling of tremendous excitement, nervousness, joy, and anxiety would seize me. I would let my pen travel on paper with the freedom my thoughts led me to, but also with a certain discipline and the need to convey messages my readings had impressed me with and asked me to memorize and to convey. The images, events, stories, proverbs, and philosophies I would relate then took me to far away regions I colored with my dreams and desires to seduce, communicate, and reach original creative thoughts capable of changing the world’s perceptions and notions of reality.

In these moments of intense writing and concentration, I rediscovered the magic moments of my childhood when I would invent stories and songs! I submerged myself into a world of fantasy where I let my imagination wander loose and free, in search of the thread, the elements I suspected might lead me to life’s essentials. I also loved playing with words and ideas. I would carry a small pocketbook in which I would write phrases and thoughts discovered through my readings, or made up through research or discussions with my sister (who read more than I did and kept a secret journal), and sentences and ideas I had found beautiful and interesting. I would introduce them in my essays to make them appear more scholarly, and impress my teachers. Writing was then as present for me as it is today. It was an experience of total immersion into my inner world. I would go into my feelings and moods to try and express the authentic understanding of my existence. I use these Sartrian words because, already, I was moved and influenced by existentialist philosophy, though not yet by feminism, which I only read later. At that time, existentialism to me meant authenticity, being as truthful to oneself as one could be, each human being’s experience being unique and important.

Writing meant telling the world about the uniqueness of my experience, of being born woman, Arab, from a Swiss mother and an Egyptian-Lebanese father, with a strict Protestant religious upbringing – in Beirut, at that time the most cosmopolitan city in the Middle East. The identity expressed here did not come out with as much clarity then, due in part to the education I was receiving in the Beirut French school, where we were told that our ancestors were “les Gaulois” (the inhabitants of ancient France). As incredible as this may seem, or repetitious for some people, it is an experience I actually lived. It is only when I crossed the ocean, went to study in the United States, started reading the literature, politics, and history of that part of the world, when I read about oppression, racism, and colonialism, and more painfully, when the war broke out in Lebanon, that I began to perceive my former experience acutely and with intensity.

Choosing the most appropriate word for me has not been an easy task, since I write in different languages (French, English, and Arabic), and in different genres, according to whether I write a thesis, an article, an academic analysis, a novel, a short story, a letter, a poem, or a song. I have often wondered, and been asked, if one could seriously use different forms and different languages, if it would not be better to seriously work on one, trying to perfect it. Is there not a fundamental difference between reflective – writing, analytic writing of a thesis, and creative – imaginary writing of a novel, for example? Does practicing one hinder the other? Does using several languages lead to confusion, a tower of Babel?

Like the origin of my writing, these questions take me back to the significance of my past, my roots. Unlike many North African writers, such as Driss Chraïbi, Albert Memmi, Abdel-Kebir Khatibi, and Marguerite Taos-Amrouche, who have described how divided they feel about being a mixture of cultures, how torn and unhappy it causes them to be – they use expressions such as “bâtard historique” (historical bastard), “aliénation culturelle” (cultural alienation), “être entre deux chaises” (to be between two chairs, not really sitting), uneasiness – I prefer Andrée Chedid’s vision of the positive aspects of hybridization, of affirming cosmopolitanism, and the enrichment, tolerance, and openness it brings.

Khatibi (1983) describes bilingualism as: “Impregnable love. At each moment, the foreign language can – unlimited power – retire within
itself, beyond any translation.” “I am,” he would say, “between two languages: the more I reach the middle, the farther I move away from it” (pp. 48-49). To such irreconcilable torment, I prefer Chedid’s (1985) “wish to graft all her [Kalya’s] various roots and sensitivities. Hybrid, why not? She [Kalya] liked these crossings, meetings, these composite looks which don’t block the future nor brush aside other worlds” (pp. 79-81). These values are what Lebanon used to represent and what Kalya (the central character of this novel) had come to seek: “Tenderness for this exiguous land that one could cross in one day: this land so tenacious and fragile. For the memory of impetus, hospitality, harmony of voices” (Chedid, 1974, p. 6). This is a picture of Lebanon that Chedid paints in an essay before the war: “Land where opposed voices, confronting each other, do their best to remain harmonious. Centuries have marked it with unalterable signs, yet nothing fixed, set, flatly eternal weighs you down here. Very ancient land of wonders, never ceasing to give birth to itself.” Chedid’s understanding and description of Lebanon, the importance she attributes to pluralism, and the meaning she gives to roots are very much at the core of how I feel towards my past, towards writing, and towards having to do so in different languages and genres. I once told Andrée Chedid it upset me to sometimes use “anglicisms” (words which sound French but are English) when writing in French. She amazingly remarked: “Mais c’est très bien. Tu aères la langue!” (But it’s good. You bring fresh air to the language!). For me, interpreting the world means both learning from the past and expressing new ideas, creating new worlds. All the forms of expression I use help me explore (w)human experience. I use the prefix (w) because the woman in man, and in man’s world, has too often been left out of the analysis, descriptions, and expressions of the human experience. This letter (w) and what it symbolizes is probably at the core of much of my writing. Interpreting the world has meant understanding its pain, suffering, and oppression, digging into my soul, experiences, and observations for the crucial, essential elements of my condition as an Arab woman, feeling an urgency in transmitting the picture I witness and see with as much precision as I can, in all of its complexity. I am overwhelmed with the desire to communicate. Communicating, for me, comes from commitment, as I feel responsibility towards myself and the world. I often feel like Cherrie Moraga (1983): “that my back will break from the pressure I feel to speak for others” (p. v). I try to bring light into my past, into my part of the world with all its tragedy and its beauty, hoping to help reach a more universal vision.

Writing also helped me heal the wounds. It reconciled me with my past. When expressing what upset me, I exorcised the anger, the pain, the suffering, and could move on. When I witnessed how some of the audiences, especially in Lebanon, cried when I sang, I was overcome with the realization I could really move them. And the question came: what if it moved them so much they decided to change the wrongs in Lebanese society? What if it made them see the need for love, tenderness, and the transformation of relationships based on violence and destruction? In these instants, I relived the magic moments of my childhood when, facing audiences with invented songs and stories, I sensed the impact I could have on the listeners and the secret belief I might move mountains and make people happy or sad.

Another event triggered in me great emotions, which marked the development of my writing, a point of fixation or crystallization which would determine the focus and aims of my writing. When I read about excision and infibulation, the cruel practice of sexual mutilations millions of women suffer from all over the world – most specifically in some countries in Africa and in the Gulf – I was very shaken. At the time I was preparing a doctoral thesis at the University of Indiana. It was the first time I had heard about it. I was already aware of many practices of oppression afflicting women, since it was some of them that had motivated me to leave my country of birth, but excision was the height of anything I could have imagined. I was sick for several weeks, my thesis took a different turn, and the title of my first novel, L’Excisée, was already determined.

I decided to include in my thesis, which was about the role of women in the literature of the Mashrek and the Maghreb, a first chapter exposing and developing the sexual and social problems women faced in that part of the world, from a sociological and anthropological point of view. This chapter gave me lots of problems with some of the members of my committee (one Arab male in particular) on the grounds it had nothing to
do with literature. This criticism hid the fear of a subject too emotionally charged and too polemical. But I was determined to keep it, and encouraged by my thesis director, I finished and defended it. Since then, the subject has been written about and discussed at great length inside and outside academia, in the West as well as in the East.

It was 1975, declared International Women’s Year by the United Nations, which mobilized feminists around the globe on this issue, and stirred much controversy, debate, and resentment on the part of some African women who saw European and American interference as reductionist and ethnocentric, representing them in racist, misogynist, backward, inhuman terms, thus reinforcing the stereotypes.

I remember being myself torn apart in this conflict at one meeting of the African Literature Association in Madison, Wisconsin, during those years. I had presented a paper where I used the term mutilation and was immediately attacked by one of my African male colleagues for not using the word tradition. The plenary session was split in a heavy debate bringing in the whole audience, which got divided along race rather than gender lines. I was very depressed to see the African women siding with the African men. But in the evening, I discovered the reasons behind this apparent division. I had sung one of my compositions on genital mutilation and the pain it causes in women. Some of the African women present there had tears in their eyes and came to thank me after the performance. They told me the reason they had sided with their men in the morning was because they had to be loyal to them. In front of the West, loyalty was more important than truth, but I was right in denouncing the practice.

With time, I have become more aware of the issue of loyalty versus truth, and how it causes women to be split when they should be uniting on these crucial issues (see my discussion of these conflicts in Sexuality and Sexual Politics: Conflicts and Contradiction for Contemporary Women). I have also become aware of the importance of music, poetry, testimony, etc. versus strict analysis. As Françoise Lionnet (1991) puts it, talking about El Saadawi’s novel Woman at Point Zero and my novel L’Excisée: “It is a more effective and convincing denunciation than many pragmatic or political treatises because it allows the reader to enter into the subjective processes of the woman, to adopt her stance” (p. 3).

According to Lionnet, differences in ideologies among feminists produce disagreements that threaten dialogue. It is therefore very important to examine the sources of these disagreements, to engage in comparative feminist criticism without necessarily finding solutions but in order to open up dialogues. Ethnocentric value judgements have no place within a diverse, multicultural feminist quest. She uses the debates surrounding the practice of excision to reexamine the debates on universalism and particularism. Two claims emerge from the debates: those who campaign for the abolition of all such practices on the basis of universal ethics and those who favor respect for the cultural autonomy of African societies and criticize all forms of intervention as “acculturation” to Western standards.

Coming from a mixed background gives me a perspective I might not otherwise have. It is the kind of métissage Lionnet (1989) describes as “a dialogical hybrid” which brings together diverse elements. It gave me courage to leave when I felt life was closing in on me, and strength to return when I thought I might be effective in bringing about some necessary changes.

The ideas expressed in my thesis were to compare the role of Arab women in the writings of women and men, in French and in Arabic, and to see if this reflected the “realities” exposed in the first chapter. Some of my conclusions determined how insufficiently those problems were expressed in the literature, due in part to the fact that many of the authors who had escaped those conditions were the ones able to write, but were not concerned with the suffering of others. Along with Marilyn Waring (1985), I wished to tell them that: “The litany of disappointments and distress is not only the justification for our being indignant about woman’s condition, it is also real cause for concern about our world” (p. 59).

It was therefore on a fixation with pain that I wrote my first novel. L’Excisée shows a woman, E., Elle (She in French), Eve (woman everywhere, myself to a certain extent), woman excised symbolically by a fanatic religion in war-torn Lebanon, socially by the tyranny of man, and a witness to the physical mutilation of other women. Where can this woman
go? Is love between a Moslem and a Christian possible? The story of E. is both a protest and a sad, hopeful prayer. Dominated by a stern Protestant father in destroyed Lebanon, the idealistic young woman yearns for peace, harmony, and love. But she is gullible and naïve, as well as innocent; she falls under the domination of her seducer/lover who transports her into his desert world. She is witness to the traditional excisions of the young girls in the women’s quarters. Through all the horror, the story is “sung” in the poetic voice of a young woman who refuses to hate or to act with violence.

“Woman against the wall. Woman who tricks in order to live. Woman who compromises herself to live. Woman who pierces the wall with a pin to see the other side of her prison, the side of liberty, the side of space” (Accad, 1982, p.14). This first novel is the story of my adolescence trapped by a family whose religious system suffocates me, in a country where religion has no tolerance for the other. It is also a love story, which ends in tragedy, for how can a Christian and a Moslem love under a sky of hatred, in a country divided by dogmas and religions? “They risk death, assassination, there in the open road under that sun which crushes and kills” (Accad, 1982, p. 36). And even if they could manage to escape and run away together to another country, how could she bend to his customs, which crush women even more than those of her childhood? Where can this woman go except to suicide, to death?

L’Excisée is also a search in style, writing where the biblical and the Koranic mix, leaving space for song and poetry, a voice in search of itself, in the stifling of a millennial condition, a voice which becomes a shriek when the circle closes in too brutally, a voice which dares confidence in front of a young woman who did not have “her body sliced like her sister’s ... a beautiful young woman of tomorrow, the young woman who will nourish all hopes” (Accad, 1982, p. 85).

And this is how writing in exile can open new horizons, new paths not yet trodden. It helps bear exile. And by a return process, exile, the shock created by the confrontation of different cultures, the suffering of separation, the desire for return feed the breath of writing. The vision of new forms, new ideas, new rhythms takes place thanks to these rubbings, tearings, sufferings calling for fusion, harmony, understanding, love of life and of others beyond the frontiers.

Another event, which turned my life upside down, was my experience with cancer in the summer and spring of 1994. I never thought I would have to go through this hell in my life, the “poison, cut and burn” treatment, which breast cancer patients know only too well. I decided to hold a journal on my journey through cancer. I needed to do it for myself, to exorcise the pain, and to do it for other women, those going through the same calvary, or those who will in the future, and all those who need to be made aware of the dangers we are living in this century: the post-modern era. I feel I have been made to pay the price for modern civilization. Someone has to pay the price for all the pollutants thrown into the atmosphere, all the pesticides sprayed on the fruits and vegetables, all the hormones fed to the animals, all the contaminants dumped into the rivers and seas, all the chemicals destroying the atmosphere, the air we breathe, the water we drink, the sun our skin receives. And I was one of the seven women who gets breast cancer in her life time (these are the latest statistics for the States and Canada, I don’t have those for Lebanon, but from my little experience of talking to people around here, I believe it must also be quite high). Yes, the figures are frightening and cancer is on the increase in all cancers, but especially in breast cancer, and I did ask: “Why me?” Yes, I did ask this question. I was not like one of my friends who reversed it and said: “Why not me?” Later, I learned to ask myself: “What can I learn through this ordeal?” But when it hit me (I was diagnosed with lobular carcinoma on March the 2nd, 1994), I was too shell shocked. I was not prepared to live through that hell. I never thought it would happen to me. I had not been informed, or I had ignored the articles on the topic. I felt that if I could help someone through the lines I was writing, my suffering would not have been in vain. I also composed new songs in the middle of chemotherapy: “Take me to the river going to the sea. Take me towards healing.”

As Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (2003) well expresses in an article titled “Ectomies: A Treasury of Juju Fiction by Africa’s Daughters”:

Cultural determinism becomes the focal point of the politics of ectomy: to cut or not to cut? The mind boggles at Western culture’s playing on
women’s bodies: hysterectomies, oopherectomies
or ovariectomies, salpingestomies, episiotomies,
mastectomies ... I envision ectomy as a trope
to express the excision, the cutting off, the
exclusion attached to woman’s destiny. (pp. 4-5)

Twenty years had passed by since I wrote
L’Excisée. Little did I know at the time that I
would be experiencing mutilation in my own
flesh, as I did last year. I felt the link tying
me to all the women around the world being
reinforced in this tribulation and sorrow.

And this is how my writing goes, in search of the
(w)human experience, in search of what others
did not see, or left out, trying to express the
meaningful moments of my life, and those of others,
to give them new grounds and to move forward.
I am reminded here of Dillard’s (1982) words:

> Art is an instrument ... and with religion the
> only instrument for probing certain materials
> and questions ... When in the art object
> the artist has mastered his own confusion,
> he has gained new ground ... (p.168)

Like in my childhood, when confident and daring,
I faced audiences with invented songs and stories,
like in my difficult adolescence, when I searched for
authenticity, for the real me, and for what caused
the pain I felt inside and all around, I continue
to search for that linking thread, for what might
give meaning to a world I see shrouded in despair,
lack of imagination, and bent on destruction, I
search for the mot juste mixture of many different
voices, in various languages, yet harmonious,
melodious, forming a chorus, playing a symphony,
I search for correspondences and connections
so present in nature, the life which gives hope.
And perhaps, in the end, when all is said and
done, when life’s experiences have given us the
rounder, sharper vision, one is able to see writing,
singing, art, culture as a fuller, more complete
hopeful picture, ways to recreate the hidden face
of the world, the lost image of one’s childhood.

Evelyne Accad is professor at the University of
Illinois, Champaign-Urbana since 1974 in French,
Comparative Literature, African Studies, Women Studies,
Middle-East Studies, and the Honors Program.
Email: evaccad@aol.com

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shifting
gathering formation
to break
dahlias giving ghost
life is sad has beautiful
discordant melody chaotic
harmony a woman giving head
wa heart wa flesh
quantam
in qana eyes exploded wa vehicles wa children wa bisas
bas
rendering wa detention wa rendition wa redemption marginal
scarab
scurred broken arabic bonded trumpet hearted spinning word
bas
baalbek sunset
fairuz through cedar
licorice liquor wa raw meat
sweated mint wa sore hands
war behind wa ahead
in gaza still flesh is ashed
wa smoked wa denied
a woman’s chest caves in
smoke escapes between legs
i was dreaming when i wrote this
habibi’s prayers in my hands
i held his rhythm bi albe
he held me an instrument
an iridescent note
Suheir Hamad is a Lebanese poet.  
Email: butterphoenix@yahoo.com

abu-dis missing sunrise  
abu-dis missing sunset  
ground cipher groundless isis stretch searches pieces  
my body upon cutting open  
look for the broken bits  
the aimless  
leave them as found  
wa finally leave a scar  
trust only stars habibi a mirage a gold tree on chain spark trees on  
lips smoke hawa over sunrise hennessy under pillow batata wa okra  
dawn clave iron clove fist silver oasis oriki bata cinnamon offering  
ana break into language insurgent  
zam zam in desert  
hagar springs isis remembers mary reaps  
woman looking for body i think she is coming  
the feminine in all of it i think she is coming  
rain tears mist seas i think she is coming
What has been the function of writing in my life? I have kept a diary throughout. I have turned to writing at every new threshold. What has it meant for me?

I was twelve when my father was sent on an official mission to Stalin’s Russia. We all went along. I carried with me a lovely notebook and started writing down my impressions on the big boat which took us to Batum on the Black Sea.

The discovery of that huge universe, my beginnings in the world a little later, my confusion, my secret readings of Madame Bovary, Crime and Punishment, and others, the dream of becoming a writer...

I fell in love later. We decided to get married. He became quickly the most precious being in the world. Stunned, I confessed it to my diary. The fight over the impossible marriage, the scandal! I was Druze, he was Christian! Writing handled overwhelming feelings of rebellion, of anger, of love as well. The wedding took place.

Writing continued to reflect my thoughts and feelings. Writing inserted me in a world I cut down to my own measurements. It organized my experience and clarified my vision. Reading and writing were vital for my soul. Words filled my life. I rejoiced. I celebrated the great masters. I went back to college and completed my higher education in a festive state of being. I specialized in Modern Comparative Literature using Arabic, French, and English as my tools. Thirsty for so much I read the classics and resumed writing. I discovered in my adult age the great themes of alienation, oppression, the search for identity, the quest for self-knowledge, and so many other themes that had deep echoes in my being. I started teaching at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and discovered the passion I had for my profession, and the thrill of daily sharing my ideas with my students in English.
gave me the distance I needed to be both reader and actor in the classroom. The war broke out in 1975. We lost our bearings. We lived experiences I had read about under the pen of great writers. I resisted silently the tragic dismemberment of my country. I moved around under heavy shelling, assuming my teaching. I continued to write and do research.

Suddenly, my life stopped with that of my companion, killed in our own home by a stray bullet. In a split second, a lifetime story was abolished. I wrote. Writing allowed me to carry on. André Malraux said once that art humanizes the world. Writing did humanize this harrowing experience. It allowed me to survive.

I worked throughout the Lebanese war (1975-1990) on Lebanese novels written during that violent period. I called my writings “Studies in the literature of Wounded Beirut.” Today, with some distance, I realize that this exercise helped me cope with the prevailing violence, by giving it shape and expression through writing.

Indeed, writing soothed my pain, for my sorrow was that of the whole community as narrated by our foremost authors. Expressions of fear, of anguish and guilt, of the whole range of suffering, of the breakdown of a world that had offered us so many opportunities, were mirrored in the literature of Wounded Beirut. The novelists themselves were coming to age during those very rough years. Following them closely as they published novel after novel I was extremely involved in the maturation of their novelistic skills. My plan was to put together the various essays I had written on those contemporary novelists, in a book that would be entitled The Literature of Wounded Beirut: 1975-1990. I carried within me the book project and felt it was complete in my mind.

Sometime ago, however, as I sat at my desk to start writing, I felt sick and overpowered by deep anguish. The period of mourning in Post-War Lebanon had not yet taken its full course. I was unable to read again those novels which described bombing, killing, kidnapping, and the whole gamut of agony and suffering.

I just couldn’t
I needed to live.
I needed to forget.

I put aside the Lebanese war novels and my papers. Instead, I turned and read Marcel Proust! But the book lived within me. I needed more distance for the memory to record once again the war narrative.

At the same period, I heard Jorge Semprun at UNESCO-Paris in a tribute to André Malraux and was very impressed. I read his brilliant auto-fiction entitled Literature or Life. I turned, later, to the South African novelist J. M. Coetzee, who was awarded, for the second time, the Booker prize for his novel Disgrace. I carried on reading Céline, Malraux, Ann Michaels (Fugitive Pieces), Kressmann Taylor (Address Unknown) and others who turned violent experiences into beautiful artifacts. These writings thrilled me and stimulated my desire to compare our war novels with such world writings around similar experiences. A comparatist study would, I hoped, situate our Lebanese authors at the end of the twentieth century within the universal expression of the very nearly inexpressible.

I am intrigued, indeed, with the issue of the universality of the literature of Wounded Beirut. Our writers’ novels are being translated into many languages. Would a foreign readership appreciate them? Has someone, so far, written the masterpiece of the Lebanese war novel? Has the time of mourning matured? How will the memory accidentally recover the war experience, to use Blanchot’s quote that Semprun puts at the top of his novel? Has anyone taken the risk of “forgetting absolutely,” so that the floods of memory would erupt and be poured down on paper? Would the novel of Wounded Beirut fulfill its promises? Such are the questions that haunted me as I stopped writing on Wounded Beirut.

But the wounds never healed as the July 2006 war suddenly erupted with such violence that many regions of our country were systematically destroyed by the Israelis.
Never in my life had I followed so closely the TV hourly news. The brilliance and the courage of the young reporters who covered the heavy shelling impressed me. The fluent Arabic language they used, their actions and their defiance of all obstacles showed a kind of stamina and commitment that mobilized me fully. Those young reporters incarnated, once again, an oral Arabic tradition which goes far back in our heritage. Is this the reason, I wondered, why the war poetry rather than the novels of *Wounded Beirut* has remained more deeply anchored in my psyche? I end with two examples from Etel Adnan and Adonis’s long war poems to make my position clearer: Adnan’s (1989) *The Arab Apocalypse* is surrealistic with jazz-like rhythms:

*The sun a pool of blood...*
*stop the war...*
... *a sun tattooed with lies spilling your legs.*
... *a yellow sun a blue and purple sun lying in a pool of blood...* (Adnan, 1989)

While Adonis walks on the seashore of his *Wounded Beirut* besieged by the Israelis in 1982 in his “Time” poem, he hears bombs that become deafening words in his head, words burning him up. As he composes his poem, defeat becomes conquest, death rebirth, the end a beginning. The symphonic opening of the poem is:

*Carrying the seeds of time my head a tower of fire what is this blood sinking deep into the sand, what is this decline?*

Then three lines stand out, recur, and become the haunting refrain of the poem:

*The tatters of history in my throat on my face the victim’s scars how unavailing has language become how narrow the alphabet’s door.*

In one long sweep, the poet covers the Arab history then breaks through the “alphabet’s door” and soars high above time and space, he the dissenter, the rebel and the prodigal (from my translation of *Al-Waqt* (Time) in the Journal of Arabic Literature XXI, 1990). Such verses have infinite reverberations within me as they join the universal poetry which functions, to quote Malraux again, as “deep repository of tears and the blood of mankind.”

Indeed, I sit and listen. I write.

Mona Takieddine Amyuni is senior lecturer at the Civilization Sequence Program at the American University of Beirut (AUB), Lebanon.
Email: amyuni@cyberia.net.lb

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Arab Women
Writing in English...
A Prelude to Dialogue

Zina Alani Mougharbel

What is more frightening for a writer than a blank page? Better yet, what is more frightening for a female Arab writer than a blank page: an audience indifferent to the content of that page, once it’s been filled ... or one intently waiting to read what the author has to say? What if the audience is tenfold larger, multicultural and from various parts of the world, instead of being confined to the geography of the Arab world? In a world plagued with controversy – smaller than ever, more complex than ever, where every speech about change and democratization brings up the issue of women, their rights and conditions – can the voice of Arab women writers, endowed with the tools necessary to reach English speaking audiences, be a key element in creating dialogue, or at least providing a more credible “other” point of view?

The June 6th edition of the Los Angeles Times, the leading liberal paper on the West coast of the USA, was unlike any other edition, as it featured in an opening article excerpts from the website of a female Palestinian doctor from the Gaza strip, Dr. Mona Elfarra (For details see http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-elfarra6jul06,1,3315094.story).

At the time the US newspapers were closely following the situation in the Palestinian Territories; where the election of Hamas has led the Western powers to boycott the newly elected government, and the Israelis to launch massive raids on the Gaza strip. A new cycle of violence had erupted between Palestinians and Israelis. In this heavily charged political climate where the terms “terrorist,” “fundamentalist,” or “extremist” seemed the most recurrent across the US newspapers, generally more sympathetic to the Israeli point of view towards any crisis, Elfarra’s insight, in English, quickly appeared first in the Los Angeles Times, then in other newspapers within the same week (For details see http://www.fromgaza.blogspot.com/).

As a physician, human and women’s rights activist, and mother, Elfarra’s firsthand English account of the living conditions in the Gaza strip sparked the readers’ interest, provoking deep sympathy from...
an audience usually distant from the suffering or crisis befalling Arab or Muslim communities. Even though pro-Israeli articles quickly followed in print, none questioned the account of Dr. Elfarra. It simply seemed that a woman’s version of current events, being the traditional victim in History, perhaps even more so in the Middle East (from a Western point of view at least), had more credibility and value than an account perhaps told by a male writer in similar conditions.

The proliferation of books authored in English by Middle Eastern women hitting front shelves in US bookstores, on topics ranging anywhere from sexuality and gender relations, to women’s position in Islam, to the question of the veil, suggests an unparalleled curiosity among readers about the general topic of women in the Arab world, especially when the published works blow whistles and play the favorite cliché tune of the Arab societies oppressing women. This growing interest in hearing the voice of Arab women stems, partly, from genuine curiosity, as well as a subconscious desire to “liberate” the female Arab victim.

This growing interest in hearing the voice of Arab women stems, partly, from genuine curiosity, as well as a subconscious desire to “liberate” the female Arab victim, especially as the war in Iraq along with the entire vision of a new, free, democratic Middle East, is being questioned and rejected by mainstream America. The existence of such a victim, in need of a Western liberator, can at least justify, in the eyes of the Western public, recurrent interference in the Arab region. It also proves Western superiority over a demoted Arab culture.

In this light, can such interest be utilized by Arab women writing in English to address critical issues? Can writing in English, for Arab women, serve as a tool to improve dialogue?

It seems that Western readers today, when reading the work of an Arab woman, are more likely to see its humanity before denouncing its perceived ideology. In other words, they are more likely to consider a female voice, from a humanist point of view, before judging it from their historical beliefs and ideologies. Ahdaf Soueif for example, the prominent Egyptian English writer, political and cultural commentator, has succeeded in weaving classical-like quality fiction into modern political reality. She tackles critical political issues, directly as well as indirectly, giving the reader a flavor of the Arab conscience. In *The Map of Love*, one specific character’s mother is a Palestinian refugee, and in one particular scene the character relates a memory of her mother stopping at a local market and being moved to tears by the presence of a familiar aroma reminiscent of her home town, Nablus in Palestine. Any Arab reader will perfectly understand and feel the emotions of this fictional character, because exile and nostalgia are notions the typical Arab is quite familiar with. Yet rarely does the West look at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the story of a Palestinian Diaspora. Ahdaf Soueif, through her female creative voice, gives the Middle Eastern rhetoric human dimensions, palpable to the Western reader, with feelings and emotions one can only relate to.

The argument can be extended to many other Arab female authors whose works were translated to English, such as Algerian novelist Ahlam Mostaghanemi, Syrian poet and author Ghada Samman, Lebanese novelist Hanan al-Shaykh, Egyptian feminist Nawal El-Saadawi, as well as Emily Nasrallah, Assia Djebar etc... just to mention a few. Yet there’s a difference between writing in English and being translated to English, simply because the author cannot be aware of her audience, who may not be familiar with the themes she chooses to explore or the way she presents herself, or even the invisible barriers she chooses to ignore, within which she perhaps confines herself. Some have been given international scrutiny because of the controversial topics they choose to discuss, and not all are fairly representative of Arab women writers and their culture. The Western interest in authors, who address taboos and
denounce the Arab culture, is of course immense and serves many hidden agendas.

“Baghdad Burning,” is merely a collection from a young Iraqi woman’s blog in Iraq (http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com), published by the Feminist Press at the City University of New York, with a foreword by Ahdaf Soueif, and an introduction by James Ridgeway, author of many political books and the Washington correspondent of the Village Voice. The actual author goes by the name of “Riverbend,” and her identity is still unknown, except for the fact that she is a computer programmer from Baghdad in her mid twenties. These are the details she selected to reveal about her identity. “Riverbend” is simply a female voice from Baghdad. Yet the book was acclaimed by war critics for its candid insight on the Iraqi war, on the current reality, on the insurgency, as well as all the other issues that have made the Iraqi scene far too complex to grasp, despite daily media coverage. Most Western readers, at least in the US, knew little about Iraq before the war.

There is something tangibly human about being a victim, at least in the eyes of the West. Today, more than ever, the rights and living conditions of women in the Arab world is a critical issue, as well as a political card often used for complex purposes. Yet even in the post-September 11 world plagued with intolerance and phobia of the “other,” to the point of dehumanizing that “other,” a victim’s voice is one likely to remain unheard. Can Arab women authors publishing in English rise to the present challenge, and help to liberate not only themselves but also the world from the growing threat of the so-called “clash of civilizations?”

Zina Alani Mougharbel is director of the American Arab Communication and Translation Center, New York, USA.
Email: zina@aactcenter.com
Poems

Dima Hilal

a refugee in the womb
I feel my world shake
every time my mother does
my sky moves
with her every sway

the bombs pound closer each day
and from rooftops
snipers aim Kalashnikovs
at the grocer
a woman’s back
a child clenching her father’s hand

light a candle, mother
for those who’ve lost their way
follow the flicker of its flame
shadow’s pilgrimage across walls
illuminate the way
for those swallowed by the night

I stretch my palm towards light
towards a city fragmenting
before it ignites

light a candle
help me find my way
to flowing milk and lullabies
to turquoise blessings and
freshly opened gardenias
I want to find my way

my mother paces
hands fluttering across her belly
like fallen birds
like a prayer uttered
without words, a hum
resounding against taut skin

may this darkness pass
may new life begin
insha’allah
let this darkness pass
and new life begin

men with stone eyes
rip identities from trembling hands
Muslim, ya allah
Christian, ya rab
wrong turn
(unforgiving)
no return
(sharp staccato)
bathe Beirut in black
the heat reaches me first
before the scent of the tarmac
baking in midday sun
before the sight of a soldier
donned in green,
an ak-47 carelessly slung
in his arms like a child
in the uncertain cradle
of her father’s embrace

the heat reaches me first
and I inhale
wish it into every pore
long for it to overcome me
this is Lebanon
this is home
familiar as the sound
of my mother tongue
lilting and true
and despite ten years of absence
I understand
despite ten years long gone
ten years
long gone
I’m back home

blink and I’m immersed
in the sudden jolt of Arabic
everywhere
thick loops right to left
across every sign
the bakery, pharmacy, bookstore
boardwalk stretching
along the Mediterranean
in a race to the horizon

I’m back home
to swerving cars,
horns blaring, music thumping
cell phones in each ride
on every table
stashed in Gucci bags
and back pockets
ahlan! ca va? oui

home
to the sound of my name
pronounced right	
tablāh beat, tambourine shake
mint tea cascading into cups
ubiquitous kisses on each cheek
a fortune teller pressing destiny

into my palm
and despite ten years of absence
ten years
long gone
I’m back home

yet I stammer
words catch
at the cusp of my throat
the words there
marhaba, aḥlan, akhiran,
yā bahālādi, there
but my tongue
thick and unwieldy
cannot form them
the shift from English
a bridge I can’t cross

words simply evade
my lips not parting
like a kiss denied,
longing suppressed
language fading
in the amnesia of distance
year upon year dust settling
over halting conversations
blasphemous hesitations
the undeniable shame
amercaniye, ajnabiye,
foreigner

how do I slip back into a
language?
like clothes once familiar,
a second skin,
now outgrown and
uncomfortable
although shame always feels
tailed to fit on the first try

I awake every morning
scent of Nescafe,
the humidity on my skin
like a tattoo
visible, present
until one dawn, 
jet lag and disbelief
now a memory, 
I stir from sleep
Arabic still on my tongue
a dream tangible,
indelible, real
spelled out in my mother tongue
my accent flawless
each word effortless
I fling the covers off
reverberating with the ecstasy
of belonging, the relief
of finding my way home

and despite ten years of absence
ten years
long gone
I’m back home

Arabic on my tongue
Beirut beneath my pillow
a key to the Pacific
warming my pocket

in this land where water
once flowed into wine
crimson now stains
the cracked earth
beneath our feet

a reminder of the fine line
between miracle
and misfortune

as water stagnates
beneath rubble
putrid and unholy
we bow our heads
beads spilling through our fingers
a quiet, collective murmur
of words swelling into wants
pouring into prayer

*turn this river of blood*
*into water*

quench our thirst
and extinguish the flames
falling from the cleft sky
the relentless quaking
that shatters heaven
spilling shards below

*turn this blood*
*into a river of water*

drown our agony
and cleanse our dead
splash on rooftops
bicycles and streetlamps
overflow from grape leaves
and gently settle into puddles

*cover us with sheets*
*of flowing water*

tumble off eyelashes
spill into gaping mouths
bathe our bright faces
beacons of light
turned towards the endless sky

Dima Hilal is an Arab American poet and writer.
Email: dimahilal@gmail.com
Loubna Haikal: By Way of an Interview

Interviewed by Saadi Nikro

The following text is based on an email interview with Loubna Haikal, a novelist and playwright living in Sydney. In what follows she responds to some questions and themes Saadi Nikro asked her to consider, in late 2006.

I assume that English is probably your second, or perhaps third, language, and consequently will always have about it a flavor of estrangement – in the sense that the conventional aspects of its representational capacities can never be presupposed or forgotten. I wonder what effect this has on the way in which you approach the language and the themes you explore in your writing, especially in your recent novel Seducing Mr Maclean. This of course has some bearing on a central theme in your writing – that concerning identity. But before getting to this difficult, and no doubt productive issue, do you feel that your writing in English has had some bearing on how you have translated your sense of self-understanding from a predominantly Arabic-language culture to Australia?

English is my third language. Having learnt to speak it in Australia where I migrated at the age of fourteen, that language which represents the dominant culture came to represent my foreignness. I wanted to use the English language to write my novel because I wanted to address the dominant culture. I used it in an unconventional way, not in the way a native speaker would but in a Lebanese way, because in the novel I was addressing the issues that have to do very much with language and identity and culture. And so I wanted English to include the cultural baggage, the cultural history, and other themes to do with culture and language that the characters in the story were dealing with. I did that by using cultural metaphors that were familiar to the Lebanese reader and at the same time addressed the dominant culture. Through metaphors the English language became relevant and inclusive of the thoughts, emotions, experiences, and culture of the Lebanese characters in the story.

One of the major themes in the book was how language confined the identity of the protagonist to that of a foreigner. For a long time she had no tools to express her past self. In practical terms, in every day life, she had to mimic accents, facial expressions, idioms, study what remarks and responses worked and which ones didn’t. That was an important part of playing it safe as a foreigner. She became an impersonator adopting verbal responses that may not have been a true reflection of her inner self and state of mind. She had to fit in, in such a way as to become invisible. Though invisibility was essential, it was also a form of dying, leading to the atrophy of her other identities and other selves. She all along experiences a discordance of voices, a discordance and disconnection between her inner and outer selves, between her inner emotional self and the expressed visible self.
This new constructed outside self, that was the product of the new language and its confines, was a stranger to the inner self that could only be heard away from that new environment, but whose voice became an ever diminishing irrelevant whisper, and at one stage unrecognizable. Language was a major source of conflict for the unnamed protagonist in all her dealings and negotiations with the new world she had migrated to.

My own relationship with the English language had a major influence on my writing initially, and in particular in this novel, *Seducing Mr Maclean*. Initially I felt a certain timidity towards the English language. I felt like an intruder, appropriating a language that wasn’t my own and at the same time using it as a tool for satire: satire, in writing, being the ultimate expression of power. So not only was I appropriating the language but also the right to criticize and be heard, reaching not only my own Lebanese community but the Australian community at large.

That was a very empowering but at the same time risky task. The risk to offend, the risk to speak about the issues that were taboos, that one would not and should not divulge, because they belonged in the private domain of the Lebanese culture. But I felt all along that literature that took no risks was not literature that was worth reading. Literature, fiction, and more specifically satire have to illuminate spaces that may be uncomfortable or awkward to look at in real life. Satire searches for problems and exposes imperfections, intentions, and hidden agendas.

I wanted to tell the story in such a way, using the voice of the exotic and speaking back, addressing the dominant culture. In a nutshell, the book is about the exotic talking back. Through that peculiar voice of a new way of using the English language, I wanted to express to the dominant culture that yes we do understand you, we understand your cultural baggage, and I wanted to reflect back, at times in a politically incorrect way, the gaze of the West towards the East.

I suppose I wrote the book in English with a Lebanese accent. This was a major landmark, a transforming liberating moment, where I could be inclusive of all the identities the protagonist was exploring, whereby her inner and her outer selves would reconnect, and all the other contrived, imposed identifications would be deconstructed and eventually rendered obsolete.

The themes explored in the book were in fact those that had to do with the outsider, the alienating experience of losing one’s language and milieu and having to recreate oneself in a new context. How does one do that? How does one make moral decisions in the new country when there are no books that spell out what is right and what is wrong, and when one has no access to intimacy, to the inner lives of people, the spaces where decision making processes take place? When the protagonist had spent so much time trying to mimic language and facial expressions in order to fit in and get a sense of belonging, how far should she go in mimicking others’ behaviors, values and mores; when should she stop the mimicking process in order to fit in and at the same time feel comfortable and true to herself?

There is an awkward period of transition, a period of trial and error that takes place, before integration of the past self with the new self occurs. I wanted to talk about that in the story and how that affects the forging of the new identity and the shedding of the old one, or perhaps the cohabitation of both. I am not sure if I was able to solve the dilemmas that arose as a result of that, but they certainly are issues that haunted me while writing the story. How does one decide what is right and what is wrong when faced with so many choices, none of which resonate with any past experience of the self?

I also talk about the perception of one’s own image when speaking a language. I talk about the hierarchy of language: the three languages, French, Arabic, and English fighting for supremacy, because in a way language colonizes the mind and imposes its own cultural paradigms, slots the speaker into a certain status allocating a certain image to him/her, from where he/she comes to perceive his/her self as such. Does one become the image? I used to get the feeling whenever I spoke French that I was very sophisticated, and my taste in clothes, food, and
books would adapt to the new sophisticated self. Since the protagonist’s relationship with the English language was that of a foreigner, I wanted the reader, in turn, to experience that foreignness through the language. I included the metaphors that were familiar within the Lebanese culture, but that disconcerted and induced awkwardness for the non-Lebanese reader. For after all, reading is a form of travel or migration.

Writing the book with a Lebanese accent made the editing process quite an interesting one. As whenever the editor tried to correct the syntax or the metaphor, the meaning and the cultural subtext would be lost. For many, the language in which the book is written seems uncomfortable, even incorrect, and they have the urge to ‘give it a good dose of editing.’ The reader is made to experience in that language the same awkwardness and discomfort the protagonist felt inhabiting it.

To me, writing with a Lebanese accent is a form of cultural resistance. It’s keeping something of my identity and forcing the reader to stand with me and experience the story telling from my cultural perspective. Often I wanted to use sentences without verbs – long sentences with associations and references as told in Arabic story telling, the to-ing and fro-ing between the past and present and between characters, giving the taste of what it is like to live emotionally and spiritually in more than one country and in more than one language.

The themes I explore are exactly those that deal with discomfort, the unfamiliar, making sense of the new language, its subtext, and hardest of all in a new country, understanding the new morality, body language, and silences. How does one construct a new self that fits in that language?

How much of the self does one give up, because one doesn’t have the tools in that language to express it, therefore allowing it to atrophy, and what does one replace the old self with?

Language created in a way a new identity that could no longer be translated from Arabic. However using the language in a quasi, unconventional way, a way that could not be slotted into any genre. I have in the book taken the position of the observer, the innocent bystander.

Coming to Australia as a young teenager was extremely difficult for the protagonist. Language was a major obstacle. She had no tools in which she could represent herself to the other. In a lot of ways, many parts of herself atrophied from lack of nurture and recognition. A strange, inadequate self grew instead – it fitted into the language and she had to acquaint herself with that new person that was emerging, that the language constructed. There was a sort of dissociation between what was really felt and what was expressed, what she was capable of feeling and what she was capable of expressing in that language.

The themes in the book explore the impact of migration – loss of language, friends, invisibility, weightlessness, erasure of the self recognized by others, and having to redraw that self – all having both benefits and disadvantages. How freedom and loneliness merge into one and how under such circumstances one is forced to inhabit a strange self until it can be restored and rehabilitated.

I was very excited to discover your novel, especially how your parodic style encourages a questioning of social stereotypes and the restrictive expectations they often structure. Do you feel that your own work, as well as Arab-Australian cultural production more generally, has made and can further make a contribution to rendering stereotypes open for discussion and debate?

The structure of stereotypes within the new environmental boundaries, within which we reconstruct the self we bring with us into a new country, become grotesque and verge on pathos. They become exactly that – irrelevant, fear-driven constructions we can inhabit to recognize something of ourselves. But as a form of human behavior this is quite comical – irrational fear leads to irrational behavior, whether at the personal or political
level. As an outsider this becomes quite comical. I suppose I created a character that was an outsider to Australian society, and to a Lebanese community that fears the loss of identity, confusing loss of national pride with integration. While the girl is innocent, a non-judgmental observer of both, she becomes a reflection, a mirror reflecting these two spaces, reflecting one side and then the other until at the end they become one and the same united by a common humanity.

That really brings the parodic aspect to the story. As each character tries to hang to the illusion of what is their identity, they discover at the end that they had been victims of that illusion. The girl has no name for several reasons, mainly because in a new country one feels anonymous, one becomes known as ‘that migrant’ or ‘that Lebanese girl or boy.’ The name disappears, for it is often too difficult to pronounce or remember. I also felt that remaining nameless gives her the fluidity of disappearing, allowing the reader to take on the narration as the ‘I’ in the story. So there is, I hope, a strong identification in the process of negotiation of the moral cultural and ethical issues within the two cultures, highlighting the difference between shame and honor that affect both cultures equally – loyalty and betrayal, love and friendship. By the end of the story I would hope that traditions and the image of what makes someone Lebanese or Australian would merge into common human endeavors and values.

**Seduction** is a theme that figures strongly in *Seducing Mr Maclean*, and is very much part of a series of tricks foreigners use. Seduction in a way is the tool of countries that are economically weak towards countries that are economically powerful and secure. I suppose for me the girl represents the reliance of Lebanon on the seduction of the powerful in order to be protected and feel secure. The Lebanese seek the approval of the West. Yet I wanted to expose the insecurities of the West we so much want to seduce and mimic. I feel that by the end of the story, both Maclean and the protagonist realize the illusion they created about the Other, and in that way all labels and identities are drawn out of their essentialist associations.

I feel the world in the 21st century is a more polarized, more restrictive world, relying more and more on labels and camps in order to categorize people. It’s a world where metaphors are being eroded and language is becoming two-dimensional, losing fluidity and the poetics of ambiguity.

Literature in general plays a strong part in inventing the metaphors, and therefore opening up possibilities, questioning what seems to be defined and circumscribed, and blurring the margins and certainties. Literature should question definitions, labels, and the security of belonging to a camp; it should illuminate the discomfort of a seemingly comfortable setting. Literature thrives when it takes risks, when it speaks about the unspeakable, when it defies political correctness and questions and examines areas that may seem to be taboos. Good literature cannot play it safe, but rather defies and questions stereotypes, values, and labels.

While writing *Seducing Mr Maclean* I was very much aware of the reader’s reaction, the Lebanese, Arab, or migrant reader versus the Australian or western reader. I wanted to look at identity and stereotypes and reflect them to both sides of the equation. I wanted to reflect on what makes a Lebanese respectable in the eyes of her own society, thus dissecting our own Lebanese restrictive boundaries and labels. I am not sure how much my writing contributes to the debate about stereotypes. But we need more literature that challenges the stereotypical representation of Arab characters, allowing them to be good and bad without ever becoming anything but normal human beings with the full range and potential for good and bad, without allowing them to become anything less than human. I feel that this was one thing my fellow Lebanese were uncomfortable with: the fact that our image in the West was so vulnerable and so tarnished that anything other than a glowing report about Lebanese characters – heroic, honest, beyond criticism – was yet another betrayal of our Lebanese identity. Stereotyping someone as good can be just as restrictive and comical as stereotyping someone as a criminal or drug dealer.

Saadi Nikro is assistant professor at the Faculty
A Bracelet on the Wrist of Time

Ibtisam Barakat

Bead # 1 - Arabic

On my way out of Ramallah, out of Amman, across the Atlantic and into Manhattan, New York, in the summer of 1986, I was crying. It was not because I was leaving behind my mother, my father, my brothers, thousands of olive and fig trees that I loved, and an endless number of jasmine bushes that had become the fragrance of my life. It was because I was going to stop hearing Arabic being spoken around me. For years before this day I had taken great pride in speaking English in Ramallah, a sign of education and prestige. But now it all felt like a pretense. I loved Arabic. I loved it with all of me. If I loved all languages of the world, it would be because, on the inside, Arabic had made me its lover.

But it has not been an easy love as questions often interrupt it. Can Arabic love its girls and women? Can it allow girls and women to speak their hearts and listen to them with all of its 28 ears? Can it untie the ta marboothah, cut the rope and set it free forever? Can it allow girls and women to inherit an equal share of meaning when a parent word dies and earn the same amount of joy when a word works all day? Endless questions, beads in a bracelet – black, purple, gold, pink, and yellow – that jingle daily, on the wrist of time.

Bead # 2 - Mother tongue

In my mother’s presence, I was wordless. It was her tongue that told me that girls should be always quiet, should never open their legs wide as they stride in the wind, and should never laugh in gigantic gulps, never eat a lot, never say no to anyone, never fight and show anger that makes the veins in their necks pop out like highways, carrying loud and big words that demand a change in the direction of history. My mother’s tongue misspelled and mispronounced the truth about girls and women. In my mother’s presence, I felt motherless.

Bead # 3 - What others who had lived a thousand years ago said about me

A proverb, mathal, is something that at first was said by someone a long time ago. I don’t even know who said any of the amthal. He might have been an unhappy person, foolish, and did not like girls at all. She might have not known any girls or women, including herself.

But people around me seemed to have endless proverbs to describe to me how a girl is less than a boy in value, how a girl is never to be trusted because she is “weak,” and how controlling the lives of girls would lead to social good and to preserving honor. They saw no honor in freedom for me.
Please I want to dance with all of my body and passion... I want to sing... I want to go for a walk all by myself and I do not know when I will be back... the road will determine that... I want to smile at boys that I like and tell you all about them because I do not wish to keep my love a secret... I want to think differently from the way you do and have that be accepted. And I want to read books written by women about women’s lives... where are those books?

“If you were a boy, you would have had the right...” he, she, and they said. But... ham el-banat lalmamat, they quoted that foolish somebody who had died a thousand years ago and could not have known a thing about the real ham of girls facing such words.

Bead # 4 - Private

So I grew up not able to name my private parts that were considered so private I myself was not allowed to touch them. The sex urge proved forbidden, and my life depended on hiding what I had truly felt as though it were stolen jewels.

I found myself loving language. But I discovered that much of language, Arabic, English, and otherwise, was not made by women, and much of it took the shape of chains that were put on the minds of young girls. As the girls grew, often the chains grew with them.

A new language must be invented, new letters must be sent between the letters of the alphabet to wake them up to what had gone on. A new and endless conversation punctuated with girl giggles, tossing of curls, and the tossing away of all the chains on the mind. Some day on the shelves of bookstores in Tunis, Sidon, Cairo, Ramallah, and St. Louis, there will be the Unabridged and Unlimited Arab Woman’s Encyclopedia of New Expressions of Freedom. We would give that to our men on the New Year.

We would change the inner thoughts of all libraries that had stood for more than 1900 years thoughtless of women. For such centuries, most of what a woman had thought, felt, discovered, and wished to say was flicked off the record, and so girls had to walk through the generations carrying the wound of discontinuity of women’s knowing. We had no page that we could stand on, and from it leap forth into life. Many said that it was God’s word to silence women.

Bead # 5 - Religion

Exactly,” I questioned the religion teacher in my high school, “if Allah meant for women to be led but not to lead, to stay at home and not take on the entire world as their home, why would He among ninety nine magnificent names choose Al-rahman and Al-raheem to top all other names?” “Because He is compassionate and merciful,” she said, “Don’t you know that?” “No. No. I mean both words, both names, chosen by the divine, share the word rahem, womb, to the root of their meanings. And the womb is the most defining part of a woman’s body.” “There is a place in Hell that is reserved for people who ask such questions,” she said. “We are already in Hell, teacher. This is Palestine. I am only asking you a question,” I laughed. She and I stared at each other like two stars against a dark night. Neither of us moved closer to the other.

Bead # 6 - Sex, men, and marriage

In my mind I see a man who speaks of feelings with the excitement he speaks of football, and who will cry and not imprison himself in silence behind the mask of strength, and will pick all the figs and pears from trees of beauty and creation, as his woman picks apples from trees of knowledge, and feeds them to Arabian horses.
Bead # 7 - Zataar

Life tells me that a language has in it the heart, hurts, healing, hopes, humor, and history of a people. It says that even when a language is silent in our days, it continues to speak through us. And a language has its own taste that a lover craves. Arabic is zataar for me. When I don't hear people speak it around me, I skip the olive oil and the bread. I eat zataar by the spoonful.

Bead # 8 - America

In America, my second home, I wish to secure words of love, respect, and equality for all that is Arabic and Arab. I feel my love for Arabic and pride in being Arab fill me. I want an Arab to be equal to her dreams, and to everyone who walks the Earth because I am a woman whose heart has seen the two sides of hope – where the sun rises with ease, and where it must dare to rise if there is to be the faintest light.

Bead # 9 - Personal Palestine

On my way out of Ramallah, out of Amman, across the Atlantic and into Manhattan, New York, in the summer of 1986, I was crying. I was recalling that my family members threatened to kill me if I went to America alone, unmarried. They said a woman must never be in charge of herself in the absence of a man to oversee her actions. They brandished knives. I thought I had to say my final words before meeting my fate. “Many men die for the freedom of Palestine,” I said. “Now I know that a woman’s body is her Palestine.” There was silence. Then a new language was born. They could hear me now.

Bead # 10 - Road signs

They watched me leave for life. They watched me walk away and stay away from them for months. Then they watched me disappear into the years of ghurbah and become the first woman in my family to leave alone, and go beyond the ocean of the unknown because she wanted to be free. Eleven years later, I returned. Those who were still home cheered to see me.

“The moment you left, we thought you would be gone only for the day and run back in fear,” they said. “You only knew the street from the house to the school; how did you find your way to America?”

“There were road signs,” I replied. “Road signs inside of me.”

Ibtisam Barakat is a Palestinian American writer, poet, and educator.
Email: i_barakat@yahoo.com
the coffin maker speaks

Lisa Suheir Majaj

At first it was shocking – orders flooding in faster than I could meet. I worked through the nights, tried to ignore the sound of planes overhead, reverberations shaking my bones, acid fear, the jagged weeping of those who came to plead my services. I focused on the saw in my hands, burn of blisters, sweet smell of sawdust; hoped that fatigue would push aside my labor’s purpose. Wood fell scarce as the pile of coffins grew. I sent my oldest son to scavenge more, but there was scant passage on the bombed out roads. And those who could make it through brought food for the living, not planks for the dead. So I economized, cut more carefully than ever, reworked the extra scraps. It helped that so many coffins were child-sized. I built the boxes well, nailed them strong, loaded them on the waiting trucks, did my job but could do no more. When they urged me to the gravesite – that long grieving gash in earth echoing the sky’s torn warplane wound – I turned away, busied myself with my tools. Let others lay the shrouded forms in new-cut wood, lower the lidded boxes one by one: stilled row of toppled dominos, long line of broken teeth. Let those who can bear it read the Fatiha over the crushed and broken dead.

If I am to go on making coffins, let me sleep without knowledge. But what sleep have we in this flattened city? My neighbors hung white flags on their cars as they fled. Now they lie still and cold, waiting to occupy my boxes. Tonight I’ll pull the white sheet from my window. Better to save it for my shroud. One day, insha’allah, I’ll return to woodwork for the living. I’ll build doors for every home in town, smooth and strong and solid, doors that will open quickly in times of danger, let the desperate in for shelter. I’ll use oak, cherry, anything but pine. For now, I do my work. Come to me and I’ll build you what you need. Tell me the dimensions, the height or weight, and I’ll meet your specifications. But keep the names and ages to yourself. Already my dreams are jagged. Let me not wake splintered from my sleep crying for Fatima, Rafik, Soha, Hassan, Dalia, or smoothing a newborn newdead infant’s face. Later I too will weep. But if you wish me to house the homeless dead, let me keep my nightmares nameless.

South Lebanon, 2006
Who knew the past would follow us so far, years collapsing like an ancient accordion, scraps of memory tucked like torn photographs into the sockets of our eyes.

Remember the gray Beirut seafront, car pulling up, men ordering, “Get in,” our hearts thudding against bone as we broke and ran? Remember the splintered staccato of bullets against rock, the way dust rose, stunned, in the aftermath of silence.

Our days were punctuated by static and news, our nights by the brilliance of tracer bullets in flight. We huddled on campus steps, transistors pressed to our ears, straining for some echo of the future.

The day we finally fled the beleaguered city - tanks closing in, danger a promise waiting patiently - the sun sank blazing behind us into the sea, marking a trail of blood-red light: a path promising return.

But return was a story scribbled in a notebook misplaced during flight. We journeyed far, exchanged one country for another, fled one war to live a lifetime within others; learned to let our faces hide our selves, to speak our story in a private tongue, the past a shadow in our bones.

Salt water and sojourns leave their traces. Decades later we still hoard echoes, find ourselves breathing the dust of that place where banyan trees tangle in the earth, twisted limbs gesticulating toward light. Fragments of memory welter in our flesh, fierce and penetrating as shrapnel.

Lisa Suheir Majaj is a Palestinian American poet and scholar.
Email: lmajaj@cytanet.com.cy
It’s December, and I’m spending a few days at my parents’ place in Mannheim. Today, I’m meeting with Ben for coffee. We always meet when I’m in Mannheim.

I call him to make sure he got my email. “Usual time, at our usual place,” he says, even though he doesn’t need to. Ben is very predictable, and we’ve been going to the same place for five years. He always orders Seltzer, and I always have a cup of tea. Even our conversations have a certain pattern. After the regular small talk, we talk about my family, about his son, about relationships, and in the end, we talk about my future. This time, I have something else on my mind though. Ben is a novelist, and I need his advice on an issue that has kept me busy lately: for weeks, I haven’t been able to write a single poem. Even when I want to write emails, words don’t come easily, and I find myself postponing the task. I start looking for excuses and I welcome every form of distraction that keeps me from writing.

“Writer’s block,” Ben says. “It’s just writer’s block, even though you haven’t really published anything yet, have you?”

I just give him a shrug and listen lethargically. “Lock yourself up in a room and try to write for two hours. This is what Amos Oz used to do,” he says. “If you were on an island, with nothing but paper and ink, wouldn’t you write? You have two choices, either you write, or you do nothing. I’m sure the first option sounds more tempting.”

I nod in agreement, even though I’m actually thinking that I would do nothing. I’d probably lie on my back and look at the clouds in the sky, or maybe I’d just throw stones into the water and watch the ripples that form. But I’m too embarrassed to admit that. Ben has a rather high opinion of me, and I don’t want to ruin this illusion just yet. I tell him I lack inspiration. “Inspiration is for amateurs,” he insists. “Professionals simply sit down and write. Do you like cafés?”
“I practically live in cafés,” I say and laugh. “Well, that’s a good start! You might as well sit in a café and jot down people’s conversations. You can turn them into stories later on. Some of the things people say are actually very interesting!” Ben gives me a big grin, showing almost all his teeth. I nod, mumble something incomprehensible and decide to think about the issue later. I tell him I’d like to try something new, because so far I have written poems only.

“Mona. The form chooses you,” he says in a warm, reassuring voice. He takes off his hat because it’s getting a little warm inside the café, and I notice that his hair has grown. He has long, white hair now; which reminds me of the Moses figure in the Biblical cartoons that were broadcasted on TV when I was a child. I used to think God looks like that. I wonder if that’s a heavenly sign.

Ben’s words ring through my ears. “The form chooses you.” I feel that it’s my destiny to write poems. I realize it’s late, so I give him a hug and walk home with a big smile. I feel a strong urge to scribble something down on a scrap of paper, and I’m terribly excited because I’m confident I will be able to write again; poems, short stories, even entire novels!

Before going home, I make sure I have all the things I need to be motivated to write. I find a little oriental store and there I choose a lovely handmade notebook with a Chinese silk cover and recycled paper. It is virtually impossible to write on that paper, but never mind. Ben says he never uses a computer for writing, so maybe the slightly old fashioned trick will work for me too. I also get myself a Moleskin notebook from a stationary store, just in case the recycled paper gets in the way of writing. After all, Hemingway used Moleskin notebooks and became one of the most influential writers of the last century.

At home, I take all the unnecessary things away from my desk. I play my Górecki CD, which, I am convinced, can make the most untalented people write heavenly poetry. I close the door so that my very spirited Bulgarian roommate does not interfere with the peace I created, and then I sit down with my newly purchased notebooks and my fountain pen.

Two hours pass, and I just sit there puffing smoke circles into the air. My eyes glaze over, and when I become aware of my surroundings again, the ashtray is already full, the room is foggy, but the sheet of paper in front of me is still empty. I realize that I’m facing a problem I have had for years: the thoughts form readily in my head, but as soon as I want to transform them into words, I lose them. I don’t know which language to write in.

For a very long time, I used to write poems in English. As a teenager, I felt I couldn’t identify with any of the languages I grew up with. German was not the language of my heart, even though we always spoke German at home. At the same time, Arabic seemed too intimidating and I realized I would never be able to write anything serious in Arabic. I grew up on the idea that the language of the Koran is the ideal language, and at an early age I also learned that classical Arabic poetry has a very high prestige in the Arab world. I knew it would be a tiresome, fruitless endeavor to try to write anything remotely similar to that language, and thus I felt that anything I wrote in Arabic was doomed to fall on deaf ears.

When I was 16, I went to an international school in Italy. English was the language of instruction, and since the instructors and the pupils all came from different parts of the world, it was the only language we were able to communicate in, although the English we spoke soon had a life of its own. It grew, developed, and at some point, it contained elements of French, German, Arabic, Italian, Norwegian – we even invented new words! But it was English nevertheless. I shared a room with an
Albanian girl and a girl from Hong Kong, and I had an Alaskan boyfriend. Naturally, I spoke English all the time, and at some point I even started dreaming in English. This is how I began writing in English. I started working for the college magazine, and I published some of my poems. It was a great sensation to be addressed by pupils from the Netherlands, from China, even from Israel, who told me they liked what I wrote. Once, on a trip to Padua, the Director of Studies sat close to me. Sandy was British, in her fifties, and so I was surprised when she told me she read one of the poems I had published and that she liked the imagery I used even though it was foreign to her. Maybe she was only trying to flatter the then 17 year old Palestinian girl, but I definitely felt I had found the key to universal poetry.

As I got older, writing got more difficult for me. My thoughts became more complex, and I became more aware of my origins and my identity. In Germany, where I moved after finishing high school, I became particularly aware of my minority status. People always asked me many questions about my background and what it is like to be an Arab woman. The more questions they asked, the more I felt I had been robbed of a language I can call my own. I opened my throat, but nothing came out. I wanted to express my alienation in poetry, but English was no longer suitable for my needs. The message I needed to carry to the world was no longer universal; it was about who I am, about my roots, my childhood memories and my homeland. For some time I thought I would only find the cure in the Arabic alphabet, but I soon realized that rediscovering Arabic was a rather internal healing process, and that I still hadn’t found the right language to write in.

I stopped writing altogether at that point. Every now and then I produced a short poem in English, and I started experimenting with the German language too, but I was mainly trying to get in touch with my “Arab” self at that time. I started listening to Arabic music, I bought various Fairouz records – music which I found absolutely dreadful during my childhood – I tried to talk to my siblings in Arabic, and I devoured volumes of Arabic literature. The voice I found inside of me seemed primitive, and I realized I either had to tame it or to find a new way of expressing myself.

Today, this phase is over, and I finally accepted the fact that, like many Palestinians who are dispersed in this world, I have a mixed identity, I speak more than one language, and I have more than one voice. Many months have passed since the talk with Ben, and I still sit here with the same questions going through my head. But my attitude towards them changed. When I write these days, I don’t rack my brains about the language I write in. My poems are mostly in German, sometimes in English, and I also wrote a few poems in Arabic. The step I want to achieve next is mixing more than one language in a single poem. Like many people, I use more than one language when I talk, and I would like to reflect that in my poetry. After all, mixing genres in Art has become legitimate in our postmodern world. In literature, mixing genres is also legitimate. Why shouldn’t mixing languages be?

Mona Katawi is currently working as an editor for Media in Cooperation and Transition (MICT) International, Berlin, Germany. Email: Mona.Katawi@web.de
Poems

Nathalie Handal

Blue Hours

In the blue hour, 
the negrita cries, I hide 
not to deceive the darkness 
or myself...

La negrita is not far 
from where I stand 
her eyebrows 
her one hand... 
I too am visible now, behind the tree 
behind the night, behind the cry 
and all I want to know 
is her name 
and ask her: 
have you ever heard 
your heart undressing, 
seen a stray dog at midnight, 
realize he understands this hour 
better than we will understand any hour? 
have you seen yourself in every woman 
with your eyes or in women with eyes 
more difficult than yours? 
have you ever really heard your voice, 
echoing in your nipples?

She offers me tea, 
we end up drinking coffee, 
trying to reach the bottom of the cup 
unafraid...

Now, my teeth are stained, my English 
failing me, my Arabic fading 
my Spanish starting to make sense... 
we are in a finca now— 
perhaps we are safe, 
perhaps we desire nothing else, 
but I can’t stop bowing in prayer 
five times a day, 
my country comes to me, tells me: 
Compatriota- I will always find you 
no matter what language you are speaking.

Nathalie Handal is a poet, writer, playwright, director, 
and producer. 
Email: Natalyahandal@aol.com
Prologue: The Black Day

Anaheed Al-Hardan

Come here grandmother, take a seat next to me, and let us be very clear. Tell me about those lines that crease your olive skin, leaving behind them endless trails of a thousand silent sorrows. Of the lost world in which only comfortable familiarity arose on the edge of the eastern sun towards the lands of the Prophet and dutifully set in the west towards the lands of those people who they told you were the Crusaders. Those days in which your friends were the laurel and the carob trees, and in which your lives were named with vivid events. The seasons that you marked with the harvests, and the harvests that marked your children’s births. And what of the feelings that overtook you when you walked in your own orchards and vineyards? Tell me of that time that was pulled from underneath your feet, grandmother, leaving you to float in the eternal abyss of timeless loss.

What of the Black Day in which the whole world was usurped, in which you found yourself pushed out of your own existence? Tell me, grandmother, was it the smoke of the flames that engulfed our village above that forever signified Black Day? Or was it awaking in the darkness of the night, to the sounds of the bullets that shook the sky, and embarking upon those familiar paths that were suddenly swollen by the strange and sinister darkness ... The night in which your whole world fell prey to the hyenas and in which the little ones’ cries for water were hushed with drops of dew. That same night in which it was your mother instincts, I’m sure, that pushed you on those paths, from one village to another, until you found yourself sleeping under another’s almond trees, with only the sky as your cover.

Let me touch your sun beaten skin, grandmother, and look in those brown eyes that spent half a century in an unknown world, condemned to exile under the harsh sun of the eastern desert. What of that silent suffering to which your dignity refused to even let the tears of the refugee flow? Did you find the sweetness of the dates that you came to collect from underneath the palm trees for a living, grandmother, or was sweetness too left behind in the homeland, along with all the joyful colours of the greenery that surrounded us? And what of your children who opened their eyes only to tales of another landscape, dotted with mountains and chains of stone-wall terraces, to find themselves in a land whose yellow sand stretched to infinity...

Did you only then look back at those people, the same unfamiliar people of the Crusaders’ lands, who you thought had arrived at the edges of our village to live alongside us? Was it only when the rattles of those unfamiliar words, of *kadima, kadima* (advance
in Hebrew), rang in your ears that it all became clear? What of those people you told me about, the Jews of our homeland, grandmother, who warned you of the unfamiliar Jews who hadn’t arrived to just live with us...? The ones you met in the fields, grandmother, the ones you spoke to, the ones who were as alien to the ruggedness of our homeland as we would later become amidst the never-setting sun and the desert of the east.

And what of your grandchildren? What of this prologue that I carry on my shoulders, which half a century later, still finds me revisiting that beginning, the beginning of the dream that would become barren of all meaning and of all time...? How can I undo the Black Day, and the burning injustice which poignantly torments the depth of my soul? An injustice which I can define and calculate, grandmother, because I opened my eyes to the city and the concrete, to books and words that you cannot read, books and words that did not need to be read in a homeland of rocks and of olive trees, of buried tablets and hidden scrolls that existed on the edge of your world. How can I explain our dispossession, grandmother, to people who deny your existence; to articulate, to reason - and how much of your sadness will it extinguish?

Forgive me grandmother, if I speak with a different language while running my hands through your white hair. For I opened my eyes in the shade of your world, a world that was denied to me, yearning for those places you describe and knowing that the scattered rocks of your homes is all that remains of our village. They even destroyed our cemetery, grandmother, the final resting place of our dead, of our forefathers. And I am still here, breathing and feeling, as rootless as a floating feather, denied a homeland and our ancestors. And you, grandmother, you spent your final days calling out for that lost world, overtaken by the same confusion that overwhelmed you on the Black Day, before they lay you down into your final sleep, somewhere underneath the desert sand of that cruel eastern sun.

Anaheed Al-Hardan is a PhD student in the Sociology Department at Trinity College, University of Dublin, and a researcher on the Global Networks Project at the Institute for International Integration Studies at the same university.

Email: alhardaa@tcd.ie

A New Section in al-raida

A new section has been introduced titled ‘Letters to the Editor’

Please send your comments to al-raida@lau.edu.lb
Life Goes On

Dahlia Wasfi

“Dahlia, come here,” my father called.

I was upstairs in my parents’ house, during the winter break of my sophomore year at Swarthmore College. On the East Coast it was 5 p.m., Jan. 16, 1991. In Iraq – my father’s birthplace and homeland of my paternal family – it was 1 a.m., Jan. 17. I went to the balcony overlooking the family room.

“They started bombing,” he said.

Fear and sadness came over me because my relatives were among the millions of Iraqis who had no say in their government’s actions, but would pay dearly at the hands of the most powerful military force in the world. Once the initial shock of the news passed, I found myself nervously humming. I soon realized the song was R.E.M.’s “It’s the End of the World as We Know It.” And it was.

My father was born in Basrah, Iraq. He earned a government scholarship to study in the United States and completed graduate work at Georgetown University. While in DC, he met and married my mom, a nice Jewish girl from New York. Her parents had fled their Austrian homeland during Hitler’s Anschluss, emigrating to the United States. Was it love at first sight? I don’t know, but my sister was born in 1969, and I arrived in 1971. To pay back his scholarship, my father taught at Basrah University from 1972 to 1977; thus, my early childhood was in both Iraq and the United States. For me, the bombing of Basrah was equivalent to bombing Yonkers.

Upon returning to campus for the spring semester, I was dumbstruck by the pro-war atmosphere. Sports teams sewed American flags onto their uniforms. More flags and pro-military banners hung from Parrish Hall. What was going on? Why didn’t the best and brightest understand that war is unacceptable, no matter who is directing the tanks? Why was the anti-war sentiment drowned out at this “liberal” institution? I condemned the hypocrisy of militancy on a campus that purported to reflect Quaker traditions. But the hypocrisy I truly despised was within me, for I was continuing my life, business as usual, while bombs rained down on my family.

Although more than 100,000 Iraqis perished during the 42 days of Gulf War I, my blood relatives survived. The worst was yet to come, however, because our aerial assaults had purposely targeted Iraq’s electricity plants, telecommunication centers, and water treatment facilities. In a matter of days, life became desperate. There was no potable water; no electricity; and, with draconian economic sanctions in place, no means of rebuilding. And it was summer: heat of 115 to 140 degrees as well as

“It is better to die standing than to live on your knees.”
- Ernesto “Che” Guevara
humidity, with neither fans nor air-conditioning. I knew I had many relatives suffering under these conditions. But I had only faint memories of aunts and uncles, and most of my cousins were born after we left in 1977. I condemned the hypocrisy of my government for starving the Iraqi people while claiming to punish Saddam Hussein. But the hypocrisy I despised was within me. I continued my life, business as usual, graduating in 1993, and moving on to medical school, with a sadness I couldn’t explain.

After medical school at the University of Pennsylvania, I began a surgical residency, first at the University of Maryland, then back at Penn. After 3 grueling years – unconscious of the contradiction fueling my unhappiness from within – I believed that changing fields would bring me contentment. I switched to a training program in anesthesiology at Georgetown University Hospital, where I began working in June 2000. My experiences there would be the final straw.

Most residencies are abusive, and this one was no different. But the environment became even more hostile following Sept. 11, 2001.

“I don't want to operate on any Middle Eastern people,” one attending physician said.

“We should blow up the countries of each of the hijackers,” another said.

These were my supervisors — medical professionals who had taken the Hippocratic oath. But I continued to work under them, business as usual.

By early 2002, we had invaded Afghanistan, and our administration was telling lies to build support for invading Iraq. My relatives, from whom I was still separated, had been starving under sanctions for more than 12 years. Now, we were going to shock and awe them. My tax dollars would help foot the bill. “We should just nuke ‘em,” my attending physician said.

In September 2002, overwhelmed by the hypocrisy without and the painful conflict within, I couldn’t continue business as usual. I burned out. I was hospitalized.

From that time on, there was no room for anything but honesty in my life. After rest and recuperation, I understood what my heart had been saying for years. I needed to know my family.

In February 2004, I made a 19-day journey to Iraq. I flew to Jordan and made the 10-hour car ride to Baghdad, whose airport was (and is) controlled by our military. In Iraq’s capital, a year after the invasion, damage from bombing raids was omnipresent. Iraq had been liberated from electricity, security, and potable water. “Democracy” meant sewage in the streets, rolling blackouts, shooting, and explosions. Basrah was much the same, except that the damage appeared to be more extensive; this city had been destroyed during the Iran-Iraq and Gulf wars, and sanctions and neglect had thwarted rebuilding.

Despite the desperation, the novelty of a visit from an American cousin brought us all joy. Getting to know each other for the first time, my cousins and I were like little kids, giggling and joking, whether the electricity was working or not. My stay was short because of the unpredictability of a country without law and order. I had to return to Amman via Baghdad to make my flight home, but I promised my cousins I would return for a longer stay soon, we hoped, when things were better.

But conditions continued to deteriorate. Electricity and water became scarcer, as did jobs. Then, the horrors of Abu Ghraib came to light. Then, came the April 2004 siege, October 2004 assault, and November 2004 massacre in Fallujah. At that point, fearing for my safety amid the widespread anti-American sentiment, my family said, “Don’t come.” But after another year, with no end to the chaos in sight, we decided I would visit again, before the situation worsened.

On December 11, 2005, because the road from Amman to Baghdad was now exceedingly dangerous, I planned to fly to Kuwait and take a taxi to the border. However, elections were only
days away, and Iraq had so much freedom that occupation forces had to close the borders to contain it. I arrived in Kuwait City on Christmas morning, and although the landscape was clear on the drive to the border, Iraq’s road to Basrah was still littered with bombed-out civilian cars and tanks.

On my first day in Basrah, we lost electricity completely. On the second day, we lost water. On the third day, we lost telephone service. “I think tomorrow, we lose air,” one cousin said. Despite suffering the hardships of war and occupation their entire lives, my cousins still have a sense of humor. “Do you have electricity in the United States? Can you drink water from the sink without throwing up?” Iraq was a First-World country reduced to Third-World status by American foreign policy. But upon seeing “advancements” like Pepto-Bismol and space-saver travel bags, another cousin said, “I’m in the 15th World!”

Electrical service is now so poor that most families own a generator (which requires gasoline). Water must be pumped to most homes from a reservoir, so when the electricity cuts out, so does water. In one phone conversation, my mom tried to distract me from this ridiculousness with news that basketball star Kobe Bryant scored 81 points in a game. “I don’t care! There’s no water!” I responded, with little calm. Even when available, this water is not potable. RO (reverse osmosis) stations exist around the city, where drinkable water can be purchased. Although it won’t make you sick, this water is hard, with a metallic taste, and probably contaminated with depleted uranium. My cousins rely on bottled water for their young children, predominantly imported from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Speaking of children, epidurals for childbirth are simply not available in Iraq, and many women choose to deliver at home because the hospitals are dirty. Life goes on in the hope that, one day, circumstances will improve. For now, however, they struggle. One cousin with an economics degree changes oil. Another with a degree in education stays at home. Still another with a biology degree is considering joining the police force.

Iraq is a country that my tax dollars have helped to destroy. Government officials reap profits from war. For example, nine out of thirty members of the Defense Policy Board, a Pentagon advisory group, had ties to companies that won more than $70 billion in defense contracts in 2001 and 2002. Meanwhile, ordinary families pay the price, from Iraq to Palestine to Southeast Asia to Latin America to the United States. My life has directed me to know my family; I would do anything for them. My medical career is on hold, so I can speak out on the realities of war and occupation. I have family in Iraq. You have family in Iraq. And Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Arlington Cemetery. New Orleans. Planet Earth.

What would you do for your family? What will you do?

Dahlia Wasfi is an Iraqi anti-war activist.
Email: dahliaswasfi@yahoo.com
Living with Dissonance: Women Students Speak Out about Sex

Roseanne Saad Khalaf

This essay focuses exclusively on the views of women students at the American University of Beirut (AUB). The initial study examined the personal texts and discourse of forty-three students, men and women, enrolled in three creative writing sections over the course of one academic semester. Participants crafted personal texts in order to explore their views, feelings, and lived experiences regarding sex. Emotional narrative engagement allowed them to navigate the terrain of sexuality by reflecting on its significance in their lives. Discourse immediately took a spontaneous turn as the majority of students proved highly adept at engaging with and work-shopping texts. Clearly I was not dealing with passive individuals; they were as interested in my views as I was in theirs. Queries ranging from why I had chosen to examine the issue of sexuality to the goals and scope of my research, and more importantly, what I would do with the findings began to surface. Students were keenly aware that sex texts would provide an intimate glimpse into their lives, but once assured that real names would not appear in any published material, all were disarmingly eager to participate.

When I informed my Creative Writing class that a number of our seminars would focus on the topic of sex, the reaction was silence followed by utter disbelief. Next a rather amusing incident occurred when two animated young women attempted to speak at the same time but managed only to produce strange, inaudible sounds. Later that afternoon, in the quiet calm of my office, Layla let drop the white veil that covered her mouth while Samar adjusted her tongue rings. As they engaged in articulate conversation I marveled at how two female students, one traditional the other post modern, had been hindered from expressing their views by contrasting differences in attire and adornment that ultimately rendered them silent. Ironically, they have been made speechless by the very values they adhere to. In many ways, they epitomize the dissonant normative expectations and life styles that so visibly polarize certain segments of Lebanese society. That both are seeking an “American” liberal education and happen to be in the same “creative writing” seminar makes the setting all the more compelling. The outwardly timid and reserved veiled student, along with her dauntless and liberated cohort, who flaunts the rings on her tongue and other parts of her skimpily dressed body, as “emblems of honor” and daring, represent extreme modes of adaptation which are manifest elsewhere in the Arab world.

Contrived as it may seem, a classroom setting devoted to creative writing offers a unique and discerning opportunity to explore sensitive issues related to sexuality, and allows a better
understanding of how a group of intelligent women students forge a meaningful and coherent sexual ideology. However, working critically with the writer’s personal experience to relocate it to the classroom in meaningful ways can be immensely challenging, particularly when venturing into sensitive, often forbidden territory. In the crafting of sex narratives, students had to enter unmapped terrain that required stretching language way beyond neutral communication. Because the use of sexually explicit language was often necessary, we ran the risk of exceeding the comfort zone of many female students. At times we even faced a ‘linguistic void’, ostensibly because students had not yet developed an adequate way of expressing their sexual views, or an acceptable language to do so. In the beginning, natural rapport was somewhat difficult as language had to be carefully negotiated. But all were quick to overcome obstacles and, to my delight, out of the closet tumbled amazing stories.

Creating a space where issues regarding sex can be openly debated and written about freely offered women students more than an opportunity to delve into seemingly private zones of personal autonomy. They acquired an expansive sense of control and empowerment, assuming some of the enabling attributes of a diminutive “public sphere” and/or “third spaces” (For an elaboration of these concepts, see Habermas, 2001; Hall, 1991; Bhabba, 1990; Hannerz, 1996). This was only possible because our contact zone remained protected from threatening outside gazes – by the safety net of a classroom setting where critical exchanges that deal with difference served primarily to deepen and broaden awareness. The transformative power of discourse and personal writing was evident right from the beginning, as students repeatedly expressed a desire to be agents of change, yet remained acutely aware that the acceptance of diversity in our created “third space” was a distant cry from their real environment. Here there was no posturing, for diverse practices and attitudes were not being judged in any way. Furthermore, the ability to engage in text creation under a safety net unsettled and transformed fixed, often rigid ways of seeing, both in and beyond the classroom. In the end, the acceptance of difference gave new shape and meaning to unchallenged views on sexuality that developed into a sense, real or imagined, of empowerment and control.

Thematic Categories

For the sake of clarity I have divided the recurring and salient ideas in the sex narratives and discourse into six thematic categories and given each an appropriate title: “Breaking Away: Parent/Child Dualism,” “Writing from the Margins,” “Sexual Identity in Flux,” “The Exhibitionist: Indecent Exposure,” “Male/Female Sex Language,” and “The Freedom to Choose and Imagine.”

Parent/Child Dualism

Conflicts over sexuality between the majority of women students and their parents have to do with divergent attitudes – a struggle between two opposing sexual ideologies, with students viewing sex as a positive form of self-fulfillment, an opportunity for open experimentation. As such, sexual expression is given legitimacy in all consensual relations, regardless of romantic or enduring bonds. Parents, on the other hand, emphasize the dangers involved in “free sex” outside the secure confines of love and marriage. Physical intimacies, they argue, must act as a prelude to enduring relationships. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that differences between the two generations are hugely polarized with each group attributing meaning and purpose to their particular view points as they dip into an entirely different set of values.

For this group of women, an awareness of the attitudes assumed by parents is essential in order to negotiate and reinvent their sexual identity inside the parent/child dualism. Only when they have labeled and “othered” the views of their parents can they forge entirely new visions and approaches. Rejecting ideas embraced by parents creates alternatives that challenge the existing, taken-for-granted values, offering limitless possibilities.

As for myself, I believe in sexual experimentation. Most of the older people I know, including my parents, are disgusted by gays, but I have nothing against them. Actually, I admire their honesty. I believe every individual should have the freedom to choose same sex partners if they so wish. (Maya)

They are surprisingly quick to expose the problematic nature of their parents’ traditional approaches to sexuality.

My parents allow me to have a relationship as long as no sex is involved. No sex at all. No
kisses, no hugs, and no nothing. Of course I know that what they are asking is impossible, so I can never be open and honest with them on this issue. (Manal)

If my parents know about my sex life they will definitely have heart attacks. To avoid all the pain and fighting, I pretend to be completely uninterested and even embarrassed by matters of sex. (Mounira)

In assuming a more liberal stance as they react to the views of their parents, some totally disregard or ridicule what their parents have to say; while others attempt to come to terms with feelings of resentment and defiance as they search for new directions capable of challenging what are perceived to be outdated ideas.

At a young age I developed a morbid fascination with sex because it was a forbidden word in our household. (Hiam)

My parents are convinced that by returning to Lebanon they will no longer need to worry about their children growing up in a promiscuous society. Now I will be able to catch a decent, rich guy from a good family who comes from a similar background, and we will live happily ever after in total boredom. Naturally, I have no intention of living out their fantasies. My career will be the most important thing in my life. I certainly am not going to be bossed around by any guy. If I fall in love, I plan to live with my boyfriend so I can maintain my freedom. (Nour)

A girl’s virginity, my parents insist, guarantees the right and the ability to trap a worthy spouse (meaning rich and from a good family). I find the whole thing abhorrent. (Nadia)

The focus is on new ways of seeing and living outside the parent/child dualism through the forging of themes not only against but also outside and beyond old attitudes, in an attempt to offer fresh incentives and perspectives. Seidman (1992) has attributed this dissonance or moral divide between the two generations with respect to love, sex, and intimacy to opposing schools of thought: sexual romantics versus libertarians. The romantics view sex as a way of expressing intimate feelings that have to do with bonds of affection and love: feelings that should never be taken lightly because they involve reciprocal obligations. By contrast, a libertarian sexual ethic defines sex as a mode of bodily sensual pleasures. “Libertarians intend to free individuals of the excessive social controls that inhibit sexual expression and stigmatize transgressive desires and acts” (p.188). They challenge sexual orthodoxies by aiming to free sex from excessive strictures, concentrating more on its pleasures and expressive possibilities.

Although a large number of women students agree that parents are romantics when it comes to sex, there are some who do not fit neatly into the libertarian category. Instead they harbor serious ambivalence and uncertainty when it comes to liberal sexual practices and are more inclined to favor the views of their parents, seeing absolutely no reason to reject the values they grew up with.

I was brought up by strict parents who do not believe in sex before marriage. However, by the time I entered university, I formed my own ideas that are not very different from those of my parents. I believe that when a girl looses her virginity before marriage, she loses the respect of her future husband as well as the people around her. (Maha)

I respect the sexual values I was brought up with and agree with my parents that sex should take place only in a marital relationship. (Roula)

A highly sensitive and rather embarrassing issue – namely, the double standards, cynicism and social hypocrisy of parents – became a central issue. Goffman’s (1971) metaphors of front stage and backstage appropriately exemplify the contradictions students observed and criticized in the behavior of their parents. Backstage parents often relinquish their nice scripts by acting in ways that contradict the polite, moral front they maintain in public or in front stage situations. When parents uphold strict moral values that are not in step with their actual behavior, their children are the first to notice.

The jarring dissonance between overt righteousness and covert misconduct is to my students a microcosm of the deepening malaise they see elsewhere in Lebanese society. Such aberrant symptoms, particularly when parents are presumably moral arbiters and role models, are not lightly dismissed.

My parents lead separate lives. I know they both have lovers. Well, to be perfectly honest, my
father fools around with many women. At first my mother was angry, but now she does her own thing. Of course, in front of their kids they act like a normal and happy couple. (Reem)

It’s weird that my parents uphold strict moral standards when it comes to sex, because I know they have no feelings for each other, and even though they live under the same roof, they are not really a couple. (Karma)

Clearly the insincerity of parents compounds the sense of moral outrage. Students are, after all, trapped in a socio-cultural setting that demands they pay deference to parents whose values and conduct are no longer relevant or meaningful to their own situations. What is even more telling about views of parental hypocrisy is that the group of women students who reject romantic values subconsciously embrace another set of romantic values when they assume relationships should be honest and not sexually dead. Curiously all were unable to imagine that parents could have had more liberal views when they were young.

I’m sure that my liberal views on sex will never become conservative like the views of my parents. I plan to keep an open mind, especially with my future children. (Randa)

Writing from the Margins
For some, their views on sexuality remain worlds apart from mainstream groups. The very act of challenging and ultimately rejecting narratives of essentialism and fixity moves these women students to the margins where they speak from alternative places to register disapproval. Here the self/other distinctions not only raise critical questions but produce narrative subjectivities that “other” those they feel have “othered” them by attempting to impose sexual practices and attitudes. Crafting sex texts renders the invisible visible, and is in and of itself an enabling act: a bold attempt to gain control of one important aspect of their lives.

I resent having people with conservative ideas about sex tell me what I should do. Most of the time they talk about the importance of preserving my virginity, as if sex should be placed in a freezer until a girl gets married. I have been having sex for two years and do not intend to stop just because bossy people with outdated ideas tell me to do so. (Hind)

Sometimes I think I’m surrounded by people who still live in the stone ages when it comes to matters of sex. They are so completely out of it that I have a hard time being polite. Why should I not have sex before marriage? To make matters worse, older people usually think it’s alright for a man to do it in order to gain experience. I despise irrational double standards. (Lara)

Sexual Identity in Flux
Narratives prod women students to examine and redraw the boundaries that categorize them as different. Positions and stories that create established parameters are rejected in much the same way that notions having to do with fixed ideas are quickly examined and dismissed. The formation of their positionings are not situated within some established public ideal but formed through diversity derived from competing ideas. Narrative voices are the outcome of shifting and conflicting tensions brought into play when sexual codes are viewed with apprehension and suspicion. Hence they are clearly inclined to favor more situational and constructed normative standards and actual modes of conduct. New choices and endless possibilities start to take shape providing more open ended multiple models. There is an eagerness to move beyond invisible barriers, to resist the pressure to conform to rigid and absolute forms of sexual identity that translate into established and predetermined positions.

By challenging the views of mainstream groups, students create a fluid space (Bauman, 2005), in which on-going experimentation leaves room to construct new views, setting into motion a struggle against definition by others, against the fixity of what is considered normal sexuality as opposed to diversity in sexual patterns. Sex becomes shaped by difference, and labels are considered mere fictions serving primarily as a means of social control because they inevitably block out the many subcultures and sexualities.

Labels limit people in ways they aren’t even conscious of. Nothing is set in stone and I hate how the sexual complexities of our lives become diluted into one defining category: The rape victim, the heterosexual, the homo, the lesbian, the pervert, etc. Ironically, it was only when I stopped feeling the need to be labeled that I was able to be in a healthy relationship. (Hind)
Simplistic, fixed labels are dismissed. Sexual identities exist on uncertain ground and are constantly subjected to displacements. Sexual normality remains impossible in an ever-shifting terrain. In this sense, women students are more inclined to veer in the direction of situational rather than absolutist ethical yardsticks. Morality becomes, as it were, how one feels afterwards.

Although I was also attracted to men, my experiences with them were never fulfilling. At one point in my life, I decided to explore my attraction to women. After a year I became completely disillusioned with the lesbian community but I also knew that if I disclosed my feelings for men I would be shunned and called a traitor. Slowly I drifted away from the gay scene realizing that if there is no place for someone like me there I must create my own place. Now my friends are people like me who have rejected the term normal when it comes to sexual identity. (Fayrouz)

Like Fayrouz, a substantial number of women students reshape and reinvent their sexual identity through experimentation with alternative frameworks, seeking to define themselves against a shifting landscape of possibilities. It is hardly surprising that within such a fluid and negotiable setting virtually everything becomes charged with sensual, erotic undertones and, hence, highly contested. Seemingly mundane and prosaic matters – i.e. dress codes, speech styles and the freedom to imagine alternate sexual attributes and practices – begin to assume primacy. Students are often in danger of viewing everyone as “other” and having their individual tastes become so “selved” that they will never match up with the tastes of others. The question that springs to mind is how many of these individualized alternatives can be enacted in a world of others who are also equally individualized?

The Exhibitionist: Indecent Exposure

AUB campus is densely populated with women students wearing suggestive clothing that reveals tattooed and pierced bodies among other more lurid and sultry manifestations of eroticization. Why female students conform to a highly fashionable, exaggerated dress code that serves to exhibit the body in provocative ways initiated a lively and rather humorous class debate. To some (and Siham is a typical example), this investment in body image is not only seen as an intrinsic, natural desire to embellish femininity and enhance feelings of self-worth, it is also readily recognized for its extrinsic, instrumental value: a means to seduce and attract men. Furthermore, as Rima candidly admits, the competition for this scarce commodity (men) is so intense that many women on campus are engaged in a fierce game of “outdoing” each other.

It is a natural and innate desire to wear sexy clothes in order to attract men. I know that my body is appealing and so it feels good to wear short skirts and low cut tops. It’s a way of seducing men visually. (Siham)

Those who wear suggestive attire use their sex appeal to tempt men but also to keep them at a safe distance. They exhibit their bodies to feel attractive and desirable while simultaneously sending a clear message that men can look but not touch. It is immediately evident that playing the role of a seductive temptress is fully exploited and thoroughly enjoyed.

I wear sexy clothes to tease men. It’s fun because that’s as far as I’m willing to go. (Raya)

My friends and I try to outdo each other when it comes to wearing sexy clothes. One of my friends comes from a very religious family that thinks she should dress in a modest and conservative way. Instead of fighting with them, she hides her clothes in my car and changes into tight jeans at my house before going to her classes at AUB. It’s worth the inconvenience because we both enjoy looking cool in order to attract men. (Rima)

The abandon with which young women students eroticize their bodies should not be dismissed as merely a trendy and fashionable craze. It is a reflection of a deeper and more nagging societal conflict, almost a textbook instance of anomie: i.e., a disjunction between normative expectations which condone, indeed cajole, young women to be sexually attractive but condemns them if they become sexually active. Many young women, even the most adept at reconciling these inconsistent societal expectations, are the ones, as therapists have insisted, to bear the psychological toll. They are the surrogate victims of such cognitive dissonance, but dissonance, after all, is the price of individuality, as is anomie (see Durkheim, 1951). If students want to be “different” or “individual”, the
price is psychic dislocation. In scripting terms the intra-psychic is more important since it is the place where dissonance is negotiated.

This problem, incidentally, has been recently compounded by a disheartening demographic reality. Because of the disproportionate out-migration of young Lebanese men in pursuit of more promising career options, the sex ratio is visibly skewed. Demographers put the estimate at approximately four to one; i.e., one male for every four females in eligible age brackets. Once again, it is the growing pool of single women who must, in one way or another, deal with the scarcity of eligible men. The eroticization of the female body and other associated ploys to embellish sex appeal seem like an appropriate strategy to gain a competitive edge over their cohorts when it comes to soliciting the attention of the scarce and coveted male. In the language of Bourdieu (1993), this eroticization becomes a judicious resource in the “social capital” that single women need to cultivate and jealously guard.

Male/Female Sex Language
Linguistic approaches are often used in discourse to provide evidence of gender differentiation. An analysis of men’s and women’s speech styles reveals that they are mostly organized around a series of global oppositions. For example, men’s talk is “competitive”, whereas women’s is “cooperative”; men talk to gain “status”, whereas women talk to achieve “intimacy” and “connection” (Cameron, 2002; Coates, 1996; Tannen, 1991). These stereotypical notions or conventional language distinctions proved problematic among my students, as women students did not form a homogeneous group. Many positioned themselves along-side male students by assuming dominant discourses that conjured up a liberal sexual environment. Like their male counterparts, they adhere to the opportunity-taking narrative pattern in which they see themselves as the initiators, the “doers,” of sexual activity.

In the context of our previous remarks this too becomes part of the “social capital” women need to skillfully cultivate. Here, as well, women can no longer afford to remain passive and resigned victims. Instead they depict themselves as active agents directly involved in either resisting or accepting the circumstances that undermine their autonomy and wellbeing. As decision makers they assume complete control over their sexual activities. Moreover, within this group, sex is considered autonomous from love or intimacy. Subsequently, as modern liberated individuals they initiate, engage in, and enjoy sex outside the confines of love and marriage. In texts and discourse they break with and undermine the stereotypical notions and conventions that resort to restrictive language and behavior. Sexual encounters are disclosed in language that is explicit and direct, with a surprising degree of distance and control.

Dalia is so unabashedly explicit in this regard that her sexual encounters are completely divorced from any ethical stance or intimate feelings. Indulgence becomes an unalloyed libidinal resource to be fully exploited. If her younger boyfriends fall short (because of their premature ejaculation) of fulfilling her expectations, she readily seeks older and more experienced men.

Lately I have been having sex with older men because I got pissed off with guys my age who come quickly leaving me dissatisfied. Now that I have taken matters into my own hands, sex is pleasurable. I am beginning to enjoy multiple orgasms with mature men who know how to fulfill my sexual needs. (Dalia)

Female students also differ through the inclusion of resistant or emancipatory discourses that incorporate feminist rhetoric laced with fierce criticism of misogyny and prejudice. There is a strong determination to defend their rights.

My father lectures me about the dangers of premarital sex because he wants me to be a chaste, ignorant virgin when I get married. My brother, on the other hand, is encouraged to indulge in sex, even with prostitutes. You might think my father is an illiterate, old man but actually he is an AUB graduate. When I tell him that I reject his double standards he threatens to cut off financial support. He considers me disobedient and says he is no longer proud of me. The truth is that I am not proud of him either. This is my life and I alone decide when, with whom, and how often to have sex. (Nayla)

In sharp contrast, a more conservative group of women have developed strategies which enable them to approach the topic of sex alternately, from a more inhibited discourse rooted in polite, acceptable language. They are careful to avoid explicit terminology, adhering instead to
expressions of a traditional and patriarchal kind. To be happy, they argue, a woman should seek a long-term heterosexual relationship. The rhetoric of love, intimacy, chastity, romance, marriage, and motherhood are invoked.

Sex should be shared only with the person you marry. My virginity and faithfulness is a special gift I will offer to my husband because I want to be perfect and beautiful for him. (Suha)

Sexuality, as their texts demonstrated, is accompanied by a discourse of distaste and fear. Premarital sex is not only wrong and dangerous, but transgressive pleasure is closely linked to morality and social punishment.

I believe it is immoral and unacceptable to have premarital sex. Our society is correct in punishing women who are promiscuous. In the past, Americans were moral and strict when it came to sex. Now it is as simple as eating or drinking. I do not mean to offend Americans, but their values are not acceptable in our culture. I, like most of my friends, cannot take sex lightly. (Manal)

If I have sex before getting married I will live in fear that my family might find out and punish me severely. I really don't think it's worth the risk. (Youmna)

In general, these women students seem comfortable acting in accordance with prescribed essentialist social rules: the sexually attractive woman is the beautiful one who, to please men and her family, must guard her virtue. They favor the passive as opposed to the proactive narrative pattern, but in restrictive and tentative ways, since options remain closely tied to gaining acceptance through the male gaze. Because they long to be the objects of male desire, one overriding concern is the need to remain feminine, to be a real woman in the eyes of men. Once the centrality of men is established and confirmed in the narratives and discourse of this group, they immediately focus on the need to achieve and maintain femininity presumably to remain objects of desire. Yet ironically, the notion of femininity seems to create extreme feelings of anxiety and competition.

It is very important for a woman to remain attractive, especially if she wants to find a suitable husband. Some girls are lucky because they are naturally good looking. I have to work hard at it and I am sometimes afraid that men will go after more beautiful girls. (Amina)

The sharp divide between the conservative female discourse of passivity that coexisted with one that assumed a far more liberal stance, constructing sex as autonomous from traditional relationships, assumed striking proportions and instigated heated class debates. However, it is the liberal stance and terminology towards sex-related issues, so boldly adopted by a considerable number of women students, that blurs the conventional distinctions between male/female sex texts. It is rather curious that none of my students raised the possibility of being interesting to men or even happy with them in non-sexual ways.

The Freedom to Imagine and Choose
Given the ambivalence, fluidity, and inconsistent expectations young students in Lebanon are subjected to, it is little wonder that a prosaic academic elective (a seminar in creative writing) should become an accessible and meaningful vector for the expression and mobilization of pent up emotions. Sheltered in the sanctuary of a classroom, students are released from the constraints of the outside world and the opportunity to write becomes both an outcome of, and direct agency for, the articulation of new found freedom.

Of course writing itself can be viewed as a practice of freedom. Texts focus on the personal, and as such they allow the freedom to imagine while blocking out the freedom from interference. The freedom to imagine is essential if students are to envision sexuality in ways that permit alternative possibilities, through identifying the existing gap between what is, as opposed to what is longed for. By creating diverse themes and navigating forbidden territory they are able to explore “hidden transcripts” that may eventually counteract the cultural givens that define sexual identity. As Weeks (1995) has correctly argued: “The radical oppositional identities which arise against hegemonic ones offer narratives of imagined alternatives which can provide the motivation for inspiration and change” (p. 99). Pushing beyond normalizing and imposing sexual strictures allows students to map possibilities that widen their vision. They think and write boldly about unarticulated expectations, about what could or should be when it comes to sex-related issues and control of their
bodies. Imbedded in these narratives are themes that demand a collective awareness of the need to respect diversity, a call for the celebration of difference, including the right of each and every individual to choose. Most striking among women students is an approach to sex that is at once open and expansive, rather than moral and judgmental, with images of diversity, daring, and experimentation.

I do not believe that one should be restricted to a single partner for life because it is possible and important to have sex with many people over time. (Serene)

I like guys, but I'm not sure I don't like girls too. Sometimes I check them out and declare which is sexy, pretty, etc. I examine them like a guy would. Is this normal? If I lived abroad I might have sex with a girl just to see how it feels. Also because virginity is such a big deal here, I'm determined to lose it. (Ibtihaj)

My parents are divorced and I can't really remember a time when I saw them together in a loving relationship. This is probably why I hold my current view on the uselessness of marriage. I would like to experiment with different kinds of relationships and arrangements with the opposite sex before I decide how best to live my private life. (Joumana)

Religion, race, age, and social class will never be a hindrance if I am attached to a person. Before I came to AUB I never thought this way. However, I have to admit that after watching a lot of love-making on campus, I have changed my views and become much more liberal. (Dana)

Concluding Remarks

In undertaking this exploratory case study I was fully aware of the unusual nature of the sample and its rather contrived classroom setting; more so since it focused on textual material and discourse rather than actual sexual behavior. Given, however, the resilient cultural taboos in Lebanon that continue to impose formidable constraints on free and candid discussion of sexuality, the classroom became an expedient and "natural" sanctuary in which to explore such forbidden and censored issues. Judging by the positive reactions of students, the experience was more than just an expressive outlet of repressed desires and hidden fantasies. It proved also cathartic and didactic, thereby revealing the importance of providing neutral settings and diminutive "public spheres" where the young can freely communicate and share common concerns away from the public gaze.

Students persistently and repeatedly argued for a liberalized conception of sex, stressing the need to move it into an arena where rational and experimental approaches rather than moral thinking and behavior can, and indeed should, occur. In fact, if I am to invoke a common conceptual distinction, one can discern a shift from an essentialist to a constructionist perspective.

All recognized the urgent need for a new language in the absence of adequate vocabulary to articulate expanding possibilities in the intimate sphere of sexual experiences. Even though a healthy, open attitude towards sex allowed students to explore the vital role it plays in their lives with little or no inhibition, language remains a constraining factor.

Finally, I would like to extract a few broad and unanticipated inferences from the study, particularly as they prefigure the need for a decentered and more public debate on such sensitive and contested issues. Although the findings represent no more
than the cloistered views of students sheltered in the comfort zone of a classroom, the significance of the results, marginal or sketchy as they may seem, should not be belittled or undermined. Pinar (1997), among others, has argued that when given voice, marginal views begin to circulate in the mainstream, where they are invariably taken into account and recorded. Though in danger of being controlled or greatly modified by a regulatory regime (Foucault, 1980), they still possess the power to disrupt and discredit those at the center, once they form a space capable of being analyzed in articulation with others. Judith Butler (1990) recognizes the need “both to theorize essential spaces from which to speak while simultaneously deconstructing them to prevent solidifying” (p.118). Keeping sexual identities fluid leaves room for diversity, which will open up yet more spaces from which to speak.

Judging by subsequent conversations I have had with my female students outside the classroom, they seem determined to continue exploring the changing shape of sexual differences. Furthermore, they remain acutely aware that crossing boundaries only sets up new boundaries that must be continuously transgressed in order to avoid the strictures that accompany the static nature of rigid, inflexible views. Once again, in other words, seemingly private emotional narrative engagement had the potential to expand further than the confines of our classroom setting. It provided the opportunity to move beyond situated literacy and the mere crafting of sex texts. In telling their stories, students ventured out of the margins to negotiate public and private positionings, and by externalizing views they formed a realm capable of being analyzed in articulation with others. The autonomous comfort zone was transformed into a participatory contact zone, where diverse ideas could be openly debated against a shifting landscape of possibilities and alternative frameworks. Awareness was refined and heightened through imaginative text creation, open and critical discourse. In our shared space, diverse perceptions concerning sexual identity served to increase and sharpen awareness in ways that ultimately unsettled and transformed rigid ways of seeing, both in and beyond the classroom.

Roseanne Saad Khalaf is assistant professor of English and Creative Writing at the American University of Beirut (AUB).
Email: rk04@aub.edu.lb

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Writing Um Said: Representation of Motherhood in Edward Said’s *Out of Place*

Rana Issa

I chose to read Edward Said’s memoir *Out of Place* expecting to find an alternative history of Palestine from one of the most ferocious fighters for the Palestinian cause. I did not find much of Palestine, but I did read an intimate narrative of an Arab boy’s coming of age. Said’s focus on his family was a deliberate opening up of the structure of the Arab household, as he attests in the preface to the Arabic translation of the book. This gesture resonated deeply with my own feminist political position on existing family structures as oppressive units that attempt to control and undermine women’s roles in society. Said’s focus on his gendered identity in *Out of Place* nuanced my understanding of the hegemonic structure of the institutions of patriarchy, and I came to see that patriarchy could be equally dislocating to its male subjects as it is for women. In this paper, I will limit my analysis of Said’s attack on patriarchy by discussing his representation of his mother. Through such an examination of the character of Hilda, I attempt to delineate Said’s ambivalent relationship towards feminist politics. Such ambivalence is well documented by many feminist readers of Said, such as Gayatri Spivak (1982), Leela Gandhi (1998), and Susan Fraiman (1995), among others. This memoir marks the only serious and detailed examination of gender issues by Said in his entire oeuvre; it thus provides the reader with an opportunity to analyze in detail Said’s position vis-à-vis feminism. His representation of his mother reveals the deep paradoxes and troubled relationship that Said has primarily with her but also with feminism. In the following reading, I aim to argue that although Said inches close to an understanding of the otherness of his mother in the household, this closeness fails to translate into political alliance with her against patriarchal authority.

As the memoir clearly articulates, Hilda’s lonely struggle within a household and society forbade her any role but that of mother and wife. She pours all her energies and love into her children (especially Edward), who become her mode of expression. The memoir is in some sense a way for Said to communicate with his mother, to fuse with her, to understand her motives, to re-emphasize the impact she had on his life, as well as to rid himself of her destructive force; in other words, to start a dialogic relationship with her. Said’s presentation of Hilda’s confinement in her assigned roles does not neglect to locate her own utterances within the memoir. The boundaries of identity within which she moves, be it as wife or mother, do not fully succeed in muting her voice. The
strong ties she forms with Edward, despite the father’s disapproval, interfere with the construction of a hyper masculine identity that his father aimed at. Hilda’s lack of interest in Edward’s sports activities, coupled to her discomfort with her son’s sexuality, contradict her husband’s motivations, even if at times there seems to be an intersection in the method of execution. The masturbation scene, where Edward finds his secret sexual life exposed by his parents, takes on different meanings for his father and mother. Wadie, barging into Edward’s room with pajamas in his hand, and his mother following closely at his heel is described by Said in the following way:

When he was half way into the room, just as he began to speak, I saw my mother’s drawn face framed in the doorway several feet behind him. She said nothing but was present to give emotional weight to his prosecution of the case. “Your mother and I have noticed” – here he waved the pajama – “that you haven’t had any wet dreams. That means you are abusing yourself …” Although I knew in my heart that she sympathized with me most of the time, she rarely broke ranks with him. Now I couldn’t detect any support at all; just a shyly questioning look, as if to say: “Yes, Edward, what are you doing?” Plus a little bit of “Why do you do nasty things to hurt us?” (Said, 1999, pp. 72-73)

That both parents found the act repulsive and requiring immediate action looks on the surface as stemming from a unified patriarchal discourse. But on the contrary, father and mother are motivated by different and opposing ideologies. The father’s motivation is the belief that if his son does not “abuse” himself, his sexual prowess will increase, and his virility will become more prominent. Hilda, on the other hand, finds in the act a threat to her sexuality, where the confrontation with her son’s phallus requires her intervention to mute the masculinity of the act. Her husband’s obliteration of her sexual pleasure triggers in her a disgust of sexual activity of any kind. Sexual desire, for Hilda, is masculine through and through, never to be discussed, but silently endured in a marriage. Hilda finds in motherhood a space to resist the imposed sexuality of her husband. Her realization that she needed to keep her intelligence hidden (Said, 1999, p. 173), forced Hilda to subvert her position as mother by expressing her dissatisfaction through Edward – “I became her instrument for self-expression and self-elaboration as she struggled against my father’s unbending, mostly silent iron will” (p. 222). Her biggest feminist achievement was her construction of an idiosyncratic masculinity in her son – a marginal masculinity that is unsure of itself, that repeatedly questions itself and is hitherto dialogic – which resulted in the exile of Edward from his own skin. Said’s adoption of a dislocated masculine voice (a voice that does not conform to ideals of heteronormativity) is a celebration of her efforts, where he attempts to comprehend and empathize with her historical moment. However, Said’s alliance with his mother is ultimately limited and confined within a patriarchal discourse on motherhood that attempts to contain Hilda within its representational boundaries.

Said (1999) describes the relationships that Hilda fostered with her children as “bilateral relationships ... as colony to metropole, a constellation only she could see as a whole” (p.60) (my emphasis). Considering Said’s life work and his relationship to the metropole, this kind of statement reveals the latent, but ambivalent aggression Said felt toward his mother. The historical context of Hilda that Said supplied us with portrays a strong willed and gifted woman whose life was violently reduced to the role of housewife and
mother as a result of social and historical constructions of womanhood at the time. As I have been claiming so far, this memoir is a celebration of Hilda’s efforts to fight back to better her lot, an attempt to rescue herself from the clutches of the patriarch and to open up a space to assert her voice – a gesture that is nostalgic in its attempt to relive those moments of bliss that Edward felt in the presence of his mother. A month after Said was diagnosed with leukemia he found himself “in the middle of a letter [he] was writing to [his] mother, who had been dead for a year and a half.” Said (1999) writes: “the urge to communicate with her overcame the factual reality of her death, which in mid sentence stopped my fanciful urge, leaving me slightly disoriented, even embarrassed. A vague narrative impulse seemed to be stirring inside me” (p. 215). The threat of cancer that forces Said to confront the frailty of his physicality and the base materialism of his body triggers in him this nostalgia for the soothing embrace of his mother. The act of narration is Said’s way to contain the invasion of cancer that has taken over his body, by returning to the moment when he felt a similar bodily invasion in the form of parental surveillance and control. His longing for his mother is in fact a longing for a stable selfhood that can be traced back to the symbiotic state he had with her. The ideal that his mother set for Edward was Eduardo Bianco, the perfect son whose “purity” of character she desired. The impossibility of this longing for a stable self is compensated for in the narrative through Said’s assertion of an autobiographical self, of his own construction, that somehow redeems Edward through the writer’s own exercise of agency. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Said finds himself writing a letter to his mother at his discovery of cancer – an incident that instigates the writing of this memoir – for only through his conscious and selective representation of the mother can he control the outcomes of the autobiographical self that ensues.

From the outset of the book, Hilda serves as a narrative setting for the development of young Edward. Hilda’s “infinitely maternal atmosphere” translated the intimacy that he shared with her into soft spoken Arabic idioms that she delivered, like a “dreamily seductive” siren that could as easily withhold her charms (Said, 1999, p. 4). Even when she spoke to him – more formally and objectively – in English her atmospheric quality was unchanged, her voice continuing to haunt Said as he writes his memoir. “Edward, the word wafting through the dusk air ... and of myself ... enjoying the pleasure of being called, being wanted, the non-Edward part of myself taking luxurious respite by not answering until the silence of my being became unendurable” (Said, 1999, p. 4). Said sets the parameters of representation of his mother: where on the one hand she is intertwined with the dusk air of a café in Cairo, and on the other hand she defines who Edward is and who he should become. Said’s (1999) description of his mother as not “a simple refuge, or a kind of intermittent safe haven” (p. 13), because of the paradoxical nature of her character, creates an ambivalent reality for Edward, where his need to contain his mother within the metaphor of space is continuously challenged by the force of her subjecthood. The contingency of the spatial metaphor as a necessary component for the development of the persona of that non-Edward part of himself is a compulsory attempt to contain the extremely volatile and complex relationship he has with her. The extravagant brush strokes that are used to paint Hilda pour forth their excesses to portray a character whose awful beauty inches closer to Shakespeare’s Gertrude, where Said attempts to mute the socio-historical frame of his mother’s moment. This baroque portrayal reiterates the oscillating representation of Hilda from the possessor of a “sun-like smile,” whose “uncomplicated,” “gifted,” and “loving” character is contrasted
with the deepest ambivalence and frugality of affection that produced in Edward a "metaphysical panic" and "even terror" (Said, 1999, p. 13). As Noha Bayoumi (2003) observes, Said uses the memoir as a method to deconstruct their complicated relationship and liberate himself of her clutches. Yet, at her most loving, Hilda becomes a refuge where her subjecthood is replaced by the spatial metaphor. Only through her awfulness and manipulations can Hilda rise above this metaphor and assert her own personhood. Thus the ideal of the mother – the infinitely giving, loving shelter – that Edward expects Hilda to live up to and that she constantly undermines by the force of her character, is no more than Said’s attempted strategy of containment.

The spatial metaphor of the mother that Said longingly refers to thus remains within a patriarchal discourse, where the mother is not simply the primary figure in the household. As Gilbert and Gubar (1979) observe on the representation of women by male authors, she has also “been described or imagined as [a] house” (p. 88). Hilda’s “unimpeded, extremely sudden, and unannounced entrances into [Edward’s] room” (Said, 1999, p. 31), are a manifestation of her access and domination of her son’s selfhood. That he is male (and therefore of an opposite sex to the mother), however, inhibited any sense of symbiotic relationship that is emblematic of mother-daughter relationships. Hilda’s access into Said’s interiority can be read precisely in the metaphor of metropole that he uses to describe her: a dominating power that invades and others the colonized son. Thus, the spatial metaphor is a necessary survival tactic for the development of Edward’s identity because it empties his internal space from the mother and pushes her back into the external foundations of the household. In other words, it bars the mother from the sudden access into the room, and hence the private self, by transforming her into the room itself, then masking the whole metaphorical construction by characterizing the ideal mother as a safe haven. The configuration of this battle to reclaim a space and sense of self organizes the structure of the narrative in such a way that Said writes Edward as an exile within the household.

Edward’s banishment to the United States at the hands of his father exiled him from his mother’s nest. Said clearly blames, and does not fully forgive, his father for this act. The recuperation of their bond – as Said attempts to persuade the reader – conquers the father’s severe scheme of separating them. Paradoxically, Said also places his mother at the center of the text in order to render himself exilic in the Saidian sense of the word. The process of fragmentation that Edward’s body was subjected to at the hands of his mother and that undermined his sense of self was the earlier, and more dislocating, banishment that he underwent, where Said’s narrative persona attempts to transform Edward’s desolate loneliness into an exilic position of resistance and containment of the mother’s effects on him. “It was through my mother that my awareness of my body as incredibly fraught and problematic developed” (Said, 1999, p. 61) And as Said (1999) continues, his mother’s relationship to his body was characterized by a “radical ambivalence [that] expressed itself in her extraordinary physical embrace ... and at the same time offering a great deal of negative commentary on [his] appearance” (p. 61). The process of fragmentation that Edward underwent due to Hilda’s intimate surveillance of her son’s body (manifesting itself in words of praise and condemnation) had devastating effects on Edward’s acquisition of heteronormative masculinity. The narrative repetition of the scrutiny he was subjected to in all its excruciating detail for the benefit of the reader brings to mind women’s perceptions of their own bodies as controlled and

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2. See for example Grosz’s (1994) observations on the almost maniacal surveillance of their bodies that women endure and its relation to gender identity.
inscribed within the defining paradigm of authority. Edward's wish to be disembodied and turn into a book is a profoundly evocative remark on the power of narration in countering the devastation of a fragmented and imprisoned body. Thus, Said turns this power against his mother's corrective approach by maintaining the autobiographical self at the margins of the memoir, where, as Anne Bernard (2005) observed, Hilda is located at the center of the narrative (p. 18). Said struggles for a definitive separation from his mother who occupies the center of the narrative by reassembling a sense of self through his marginalization in his autobiography. Said's assertion of an effeminate Edward is a method that transforms his weakness not only to challenge his father's authority but also, and perhaps more importantly, to usurp the authority of his mother.

Hilda's power to design the parameters of Edward's identity in order to appropriate his voice and speak through him exiled him from his own body. This aspect of their relationship is further compounded by the instrumental role Hilda played in mediating Edward's relationship to his father by "supplying the justifying gloss on [Wadie's] unyielding and cold exterior" (Said, 1999, p. 73). Consequently, her key role in reproducing Edward as a heteronormative male, a productive agent of patriarchy, cannot be undermined – mother in this case is a stand-in for parental authority. On the other hand, her "pessimism" and her problematic relationship to her son stemmed from her longing for emancipation and her resentment of the hierarchy that exists between genders. Positioning his mother at the nucleus of the text where his "knowledge of himself is conditional upon his knowledge of her" (Bayoumi, 2003, p. 262), is problematic because Said posits the mother as a locus of power, when she, in fact, is constituted and dominated by the structure of power that Said attempts to undermine. Then, in other instances, he is sensitive to her resistance strategies and her dissatisfaction with her prescribed roles and he finds it his duty to "liberate" her from the clutches of the father. Thus, Said's attack on the institutions of patriarchy sometimes fails to spot the proper target or locus of power. This is why Said finds himself reconciling with his father (Said, 1999, p. 65) but does not reconcile in the same way with his mother. Furthermore, Said (1999) reproduces his father's opinions of mothers: "mothers are to be loved, he said, and taken care of unconditionally. Yet because by virtue of selfish love they can deflect children from their chosen career ... so mothers should not be allowed to get too close" (p. 7).

Thus, Said’s marginalization of Edward in the memoir is contingent on his mother’s focal position at the center of the narrative which embodies the problematic relationship he had with her: he is marginal because he does not conform to an Arab masculine ideal, and can thereby fight this ideal. But his placement of his mother at the center of the narrative is a representational act of latent aggression and containment of her personhood and agency. By placing Hilda at the center, Said transforms her from another character into the very fabric of the plot through which his construction of the autobiographical self takes place. As the center, she turns into a totalizing force that defines the boundaries that Edward is supposed to negotiate. Hilda’s ambivalent relationship to her maternal role becomes obscured under the language of the text: because Edward’s expectations of her as a safe haven are constantly undermined by the force of her character, Said imposes the spatial metaphor on her by transforming her into the context that Edward is required to navigate. However, his continuous defiance of such a placement is then interpreted as embodying the oppressive structures
of power that the text aims to dismantle. Said’s deployment of exile (a term that is central to Said’s theoretical contributions) to counter the dynamics of the patriarchal home, with the mother at its center, opens up the possibility to study the efficacy of exile in the gender struggle. In other words, Said’s autobiographical technique with its unconventional use of exile allows the reader to question whether exile can actually transcend gender identity or whether exile remains implicated in the subject’s gender. The dialogic voice that Said adopts distances the conventional autobiographical self. The rigorous dialogue that the writer has with the Edward of his youth opens up the autobiographical tradition subversively by placing Edward at the margins of the narrative, a gesture that ensures the specificity of Said’s experiences, while simultaneously placing his mother at the center – a center of power that imprisons Edward within the ideal of heteronormative masculinity. The mother’s position in the narrative structure thus becomes confused with the symbolic notion of parents, where she comes to be perceived as an agent of patriarchy as well as a stifled subject of patriarchy that requires rescue. Through this technique of positioning, Said opens up a divided space in Edward that attempts to overcome his definition by his mother/parents. Said’s articulation of the illness of the gendered body that exiles him from his skin in this memoir is infused with his strategic deployment of exile as a position from which to attack power. Said demonstrates that being out of place is not simply about the loss of home but more about not being allowed to develop an identity, where the household is the most intimate stifling structure of power that the individual endures. The construction of the self that ensues in this narrative is able to both represent the fragmentation of the self under an authoritarian household while at the same time attempts to rejoin the self by maintaining its marginal position. In this way, Edward’s exile from his skin is solved through his marginalization in the narrative structure of the memoir. The deployment of exile as a strategic tool to face the gendered identity of his father transforms his gendered shortcomings from a stigma and position of weakness to a critical apparatus that exposes the injustices of being molded into the heteronormative masculine ideal. Said writes this memoir in an effort to resist patriarchy and unveil a masculine specificity that endures the violence of a masculine ideal, but his resistance is limited due to the representation of his mother. This representation remains problematic in its feminist possibilities because he invests in containment strategies that finally provide us with a stable, albeit idiosyncratic, autobiographical self that at times assumes monologic dominance over his mother. As I have been arguing, the specificity of the Saidian autobiographical gesture resides in his deployment of exile in the development and progress of Edward’s character. The notion of exile that Said articulates in his other works is expanded here to suggest that patriarchy operates on the same exclusionary basis of group formation as nationalism.

The self that emerges, through its insistence to remain on the margins, does not posit its voice as truth while insisting at the same time to resist. His sensitive awareness of the context of his parents refuses to totally blame them for being executioners of the violence of patriarchy and honors their individual efforts to liberate themselves from inherited social notions. Moreover, by scrutinizing the different forces and currents that shaped him as an individual, he offers us an insightful critique of patriarchy in a specific historical context. The war against patriarchy in the Arab world continues to receive many blows especially with the rise of religious extremism and the Arabs’ inability to construct secular democratic nations. It is in this respect that Said’s memoir takes special
importance for the Arab reader. Even though his ambivalence towards his own mother is problematic as I have attempted to argue, Said’s uncovering of the power dynamic within the confines of the home exposes how patriarchy can also colonize the bodies of its subjects and render them exiles on a more intimate plane.

Rana Issa is a PhD candidate at the Oriental Studies Department at the University of Marburg, Germany, specializing in Palestinian literature.

Email: ranahissa@yahoo.com

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Writing Arab-American Identity Post 9/11

Carol N. Fadda-Conrey

In their introduction to the first anthology of Arab-American short fiction, *Dinarzad’s Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction*, editors Pauline Kaldas and Khaled Mattawa (2004) comment on the inextricable link between the global political repercussions triggered by the events of 9/11 and the need to assert Arab-American literature on the US literary map. They write,

Post-September 11, the invasion of Afghanistan, the extralegal treatment of Arab Americans, [and] the war on Iraq must be considered turning points not only for the community but also for the larger American public’s awareness of this community’s existence. Arab Americans could not try to engage the world and remain anonymous. (p. xiii)

The stark realization faced by many Arab-Americans post-9/11 was that their heretofore relative anonymity and even invisibility among the ranks of US communities was being replaced by blanket representations that often portrayed them in a derogatory light. Such representations were and still are in large part induced by the limited and binary rhetoric (you are either with us or against us, patriotic vs. unpatriotic) that characterized a stricken and angry post-9/11 US public. Even before September 2001, Arab-Americans often found themselves being compromised as “members of a demonized community,” which has been used to explain why “Arab-American writers in the United States have, of necessity, tended to address communal concerns more than individual ones” (Mattawa and Akash, 1999, p. xii). Such a communal focus in the works of Arab-American writers has not abated in the wake of 9/11, but has been widened and transformed to incorporate and attest to the diversity of such a community.

The period following September 2001 did not only generate a need on the part of Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans to deflect the terrorism and fanaticism charges targeting them, but has made it important for Arab-American poets, fiction writers, journalists, and essayists to point out the historical injustices that fellow Arabs in the Middle East had been subjected to by US foreign policy. By doing so, these writers contextualize the 9/11 attacks and move them beyond simplistic “they are jealous of our freedom” rationalizations. Moreover, the post-9/11 era does not point to an emergence or even re-emergence of Arab-American literature per se (since in fact its presence dates to the early 1900s). This conflict-ridden period rather attests to the maturation of this community’s literature, which has attained a complexity in its themes and concerns, extending to religious, cultural, and national investigations that has made literature a very suitable and necessary medium for Arab-Americans’ self-representation, with respect to their pursuit of agency.
Such a complexity is portrayed in the array of works by and about Arab-Americans published after 9/11 (including novels, memoirs, books of poetry, journal issues, as well as literary criticism and non-fiction pieces). The fact that the majority of these works have appeared in the last couple of years does not only attest to the lengthy processes characterizing the publishing world’s timetables, but also points to the need for a period of mourning, rumination, and reflection before a national tragedy could be handled critically and examined on a large scale through the lens of literature. Nevertheless, examples abound of creative and journalistic pieces by Arab-Americans that appeared right after the September 2001 events, denouncing the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the ensuing backlash against Arab-Americans, Muslim-Americans, and anyone exhibiting any physical connection to Arab and/or Muslim culture, whether by way of dress, color, accent, or behavior.

Naomi Shihab Nye’s (2002) online piece, for instance, “An Open Letter from Naomi Shihab Nye to Any Would-Be Terrorists,” was published weeks after 9/11, and simultaneously exemplifies the anguish of national trauma as well as its ostracizing effects on Arab-American and Muslim-American minorities. Addressing “any would-be terrorists,” Nye recounts the personal experience of people like her Palestinian father and American mother, her Palestinian cousins in Texas and their “beautiful brown little boys,” and her Palestinian grandmother who lived in Jerusalem till she was 106 years old – all of whom, by way of simple day-to-day actions showing compassion and a shared humanity, constantly defied the divisive political and religious forces pulling peoples and cultures apart. “I beg you,” she writes to the faceless terrorist, “as your distant Arab cousin, as your American neighbor, listen to me. Our hearts are broken, as yours may also feel broken in some ways we can’t understand, unless you tell us in words. Killing people won’t tell us. We can’t read that message. Find another way to live ... Make our family proud” (Nye, 2002, ¶ 18). Thus, identifying herself as not only a Palestinian with deep roots in the Arab world, but also as an American devastated by the loss of human life as a result of the 9/11 attacks, Nye underscores her double national allegiances, not favoring one over the other, but aiming to bridge the differences that are constantly at play in separating the Arab from the American.

Moreover, by beseeching the terrorists to “[m]ake our family proud,” Nye draws on one of the most cherished values in Arab culture, the family, not only in its confined definition that encompasses the ties connecting the immediate members of a nuclear family, nor even the one linking distant relatives to a common ancestor, but signifying the bonds that run across various Arab cultures, relating the nuanced Arab identities across the Arab world to a shared familial, cultural, linguistic, geographical, or even religious root. Stressing the importance of the written word, Nye points again and again, in this piece and elsewhere in her work, to the healing and bridging power of literature, and especially poetry.

For Arab-American writers like Nye and others, the opportunity to voice Arab-American concerns in the period after 9/11 helps bring Arab-American literature into the limelight, thus lifting the shroud of invisibility that has plagued Arab-Americans for a long time. But such visibility, or even hyper-visibility, is not as clear-cut or unproblematic as it may seem. For increasing the focus on Arab-Americans does not necessarily decrease this group’s invisibility nor does it automatically result in diminishing confusions about this group’s identity. Limited or generalized portrayals of this group might even increase its invisibility, or its altogether quick exit from national local interests if closer attention is not given to the varying ethnic, religious, national, political, and cultural components of the Arab-American individual and communal make-up.

In their introduction to MIT-EJMES’s special Spring 2005 issue, Gender, Nation and
Belonging, the editors Rabab Abdulhadi, Nadine Naber, and Evelyn Alsultany highlight their feminist concerns in relation to the post 9/11 repercussions against Arabs, Arab-Americans, and Muslim-Americans. They point out that discussions of the racialized and ostracized treatment meted out to members of these communities were to the most part limited to “masculinized terms that overlook the differential, yet relational, racialization of Arab women and men” (pp. 14-15). To give attention to such “differential” treatment “entails considering the impact of the aftermath of September 11th on feminist movements and radical spaces, in general, and Arab and Arab-American women’s participation in these spaces” (p. 15). Such endeavors contribute to the dismantling of blanket and erroneous portrayals of Arabs and Arab-Americans as being indistinguishably homogenous, and include important dissenting voices that invigorate the study of these communities, thus rendering portrayals of their collective makeup more complex in nature. Pointing to strong feminist voices within these communities, for example, helps disentangle Arab women not only from the constraints of their patriarchal societies, but also from the condescending campaign heralded by some “white American feminists” to save their oppressed Arab and Arab-American sisters from repressive religions and regimes.

Amal Amireh (2005), for one, in her piece entitled “Palestinian Women’s Disappearing Act: The Suicide Bomber Through Western Feminist Eyes,” discusses what for the West constitutes the anomaly of the female suicide bomber (who does not fit the Orientalist “docile body” stereotype, 230). This gendered bomber becomes a direct counterpoint to the way in which after 9/11 the West hijacked the image of the Muslim woman, wholly represented by “the veiled and beaten body of the Afghan woman under the Taliban,” and used it as one of the important tenets justifying the invasion of Afghanistan and the overthrow of Taliban rule. “[In] the aftermath of September 11th,” Amireh (2005) points out, “U.S. feminists played a key role in disseminating this profile [of the Muslim woman], when the Feminist Majority, a prominent U.S. feminist organization, joined forces with the Bush Administration to ‘liberate’ the bodies of the downtrodden women of Afghanistan” (p. 230).

A host of Arab-American writers, featured in the MIT-EJMES special issue and elsewhere, including Amal Amireh, Mervat Hatem, and Therese Saliba reject such a wholesale exploitation of what Darraj (2005) dubs “the Faceless Veiled Woman,” calling for Arab and Arab-American feminists to offer their own varied voices in the face of such blanket representations (p. 164). Moreover, as Darraj (2005) correctly points out in her essay “Personal and Political: The Dynamics of Arab American Feminism,” Arab and Arab-American women often have to struggle on two different fronts, the first occurring within the larger cadres of their societies and the second taking place within the smaller spheres of their communities and families. In this way, discussions of the racial stereotyping and ostracizing of Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans in the aftermath of 9/11 have to take into account the communal gender differences characterizing these groups, or the “differential, yet relational, racialization of Arab women and men” (Abdulhadi, Naber, and Alsultany, 2005, p. 15). Accounting for such differences would automatically result in paying closer attention to what the editors of MIT-EJMES’s special issue identify as the participation of Arab and Arab-American women in the “radical spaces,” whether they be literary, political, cultural, or religious that were directly formed, or at least impacted, by the events of 9/11 (Abdulhadi, Naber, and Alsultany, 2005, p. 15).

Arab-American literature, then, becomes an important tool to establish and practice self-representation, and to dismantle blanket and inaccurate portrayals inherent in such generalized concepts as the “Faceless Veiled Arab Woman” or the “Muslim Woman.” The response of many Arab- and Muslim-American writers to these types of monolithic
stereotypes that became especially rampant post-9/11 was to write their own versions of what it means to be Arab, Arab-American, or Muslim living in a US that has become increasingly hostile toward them. Such an approach ultimately helps alleviate the invisibility plaguing Arab-Americans by enabling them to achieve the necessary autonomy needed to define and explore their multiplicity in their pursuit of agency.

Some literary pieces that focus primarily on the post 9-11 experience as presented from an Arab-American perspective include poetry by female writers like Syrian-American Mohja Kahf, Palestinian-American Suheir Hammad, and Lebanese-American Dima Hilal, all of whom, in the wake of the attacks, turned to their literary work as a way to express their anger, pain, and fear after finding themselves in a precarious position, caught between their American and Arab allegiances. This focus on poetry stems from and corroborates Nye’s comments in her introduction to 19 Varieties of Gazelle, in which she writes about her feelings of helplessness and frustration triggered by the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, stating:

I kept thinking, as did millions of other people, what can we do? Writers, believers in words, could not give up words when the going got rough. I found myself, as millions did, turning to poetry ... Poetry slows us down, cherishes small details. A larger disaster erases those details. We need poetry for nourishment and noticing, for the way language and imagery reach comfortably into experience, holding and connecting it more successfully than any news channel we could name. (p. xvi)

Heeding Nye’s call to write poetry and voice the Arab-American experience in the wake of 9/11, writers like Kahf, Hammad, Hilal, and Handal turn to writing as a way to humanize Arab-American identities, pointing to their subtle individual nuances in the face of an overwhelming drive to define them in terms of the enemy. Hammad’s (2003) poem, “First Writing Since,” written a week after the attacks and widely distributed on the internet, starkly depicts the fresh wounds of the nation’s collective trauma, albeit from an Arab/Arab-American perspective, which was automatically held under suspicion by a grieving and angry US majority. Upon hearing about the attacks, the speaker in the poem states, “please god, after the second plane, please, don’t let it be anyone / who looks like my brothers” (p. 3). But with the realization that the pilots who drove planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon do look like her Arab brothers, the speaker, and by extension Arab-Americans generally, had to tackle a traumatizing conflict that pitted the two parts of their hyphenated identities against each other: they could not adequately grieve as Americans since their Arab physical attributes and affiliations connected them with what quickly became synonymous with evil or simply, anti-American.

In a similar vein, Dima Hilal’s (2004) poem “America” also deals with the anguish of the Arab-American immigrants who have left their war-torn country behind, only to be faced with violence and personal threats in their new homeland. Including herself among the ranks of these immigrants, the speaker writes, “we fade into the fabric of these united states / until a plane carves a path though steel and glass / until the sudden sidelong glance / it’s us versus them / are you with us / or against us?”(pp. 105-106). In this poem, Hilal shows how simplistic national allegiances prevalent after 9/11 negate the complexity of Arab-American identities with their myriad ties to an originary homeland as well as their roots in a promising yet suddenly turned hostile present environment. As a result, the “American dream” becomes accessible only to those who denounce their multiple national belongings and submit to the assimilative demands of a melting-pot America that suspects and battles against difference. As one of the youngest Arab-American poets, Hilal portrays through her work the need to acknowledge the diversity of American identities, thus enacting what critic Salaita (2005) terms the transformation of “‘the American way of life’
into ‘American ways of life’” (p. 165).

As a counterpoint to the anger, pain, bitterness, and frustration of the Arab-American speakers depicted in the aforementioned poems by Hammad and Hilal, a conciliatory tone dominates Kahf’s poem “We Will Continue Like Twin Towers,” published in her collection of poems *E-mails from Scheherazad* (2003). This poem depicts two strangers, on the day of the 9/11 attacks, holding hands and flying through the air down from one of the buildings of the World Trade Center. Finding beauty in the heart-breaking image of two people taking the plunge to meet their deaths brings out the collective anguish of witnessing the 9/11 experience and emphasizes the shared humanity amongst people, despite their apparent difference of color, religion, or accent. Marking the fragility of human lives, this poem reveals how a devastating event like 9/11 can bring about reconciliation, continuity, and understanding between people, whether they be Americans, hyphenated Americans, or non-Americans; between strangers, even if it means taking a step, hand in hand, into a dangerous and even fatal unknown.

Another poem from Kahf’s *E-mails from Scheherazad*, entitled “The Fires Have Begun,” also deals directly with the experience of 9/11. Unlike “We Will Continue Like Twin Towers,” however, the identity of the speaker in this short poem remains unknown. Nevertheless, it still captures the speaker’s debilitating vacillation between anger and love, revenge and forgiveness, contrasting emotions that characterized the prevalent mood in the US in the period immediately following 9/11: “There is a World Love Center inside my ribcage / There is a World Hate Center inside me too / The fires have begun” (Kahf, 2003, p. 84). Whereas all the poems by Hammad, Hilal, and Kahf discussed earlier depict a clearly identified Arab-American or Muslim-American speaker, this poem voices the poignant and at the same time disturbing wavering of a speaker who feels deeply affected by the events of September 11, yet whose identity, like the outcome of his/her internal struggle, remains undetermined. The ambiguous identity of the speaker complicates and even contradicts the simplistic us vs. them rhetoric characterizing the post-9/11 dominant mindset, so much so that hate and love, just like us and them, Americans and non-Americans, cease to be separate and unrelated entities, and hate and revenge cease to be the rightful reactions of solely one group (the majority). Instead, love and hate become the natural reactions of both “full-fledged” Americans and hyphenated Americans. In this way, Arab- and Muslim-Americans are able to participate in mourning for the 9/11 victims (including those who were victims of racial hate crimes following the attacks on the World Trade Center), thus breaking down such artificial binaries as the grieving from the non-grieving, or the patriotic from the unpatriotic.

Using literature as a means to counter the silence and caution that shrouds the experiences of Arab-Americans in the US in the wake of 9/11 is to push this minority group in “new directions” (Majaj, 1999, p. 67). The era following 9/11 is one in which Arab-American literature has encountered the right, although tumultuous, circumstances that have enabled it to advance to this current stage that can be identified as a new Arab-American literary renaissance. Arab-Americans must seize this important historical moment to make their voices heard, at the same time dedicating time and energy to the honing of their creative, academic, and rhetorical skills in order to ensure a recognized and long-lasting position in the US literary and non-literary milieu. Moreover, the versatility of genres currently emanating from the Arab-American scene attests to such an evolution of talents, which are not only limited to fiction, poetry, and essays, but extend, for instance, to drama, comic strips, stand-up comedy, and rap, thus providing different outlets to the diversity of Arab-American voices.

In their pursuit of writing their identities to avoid having it written for them (Aziz, 2004,
p. xiii), Arab-Americans, in their march toward a more complex literary positioning in the twenty-first century, are steadfastly carrying out the sound advice of Palestinian-American writer and critic Lisa Suheir Majaj (1999), who writes: “At century’s end [and continuing into the current century], our split vision may be our most important legacy, forcing us to direct our gaze not only backwards, to the past, but forward, to an as-yet-unwritten future” (p. 77). These first few years of the twenty-first century have definitely offered a promising and exciting glimpse into this “as-yet-unwritten future” or the wealth of what-is-yet-to-come in Arab-American literature. This field’s widening spheres point to new and forever expanding horizons, demanding new visions, constant transformative dialogue, and multiple connections forged by Arab-American literature within the US as well as between the US and the Arab world.

Carol Fadda-Conrey is visiting assistant professor at St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia.
Email: cfaddaco@sju.edu

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Negotiating Identity Across Boundaries

Arab-American: An Identity in the Making

Ghia Osseiran

“We must go forward, because the present is unjust and insufferable, but we cannot kill the past in doing so, for the past is our identity, and without our identity we are nothing.”
- Carlos Fuentes

Searching for the Self in the “Other”

“Once I claimed a past, spoke my history, told my name, the walls of incomprehension and hostility rose, brick by brick: unfunny ‘ethnic’ jokes, jibes about terrorists and Kalashnikovs, about veiled women and camels ... Searching for images of my Arab self in American culture I found only unrecognizable stereotypes,” says Lisa Suhair Majaj (1994, p. 67), depicting her experience of what it is like to be a Palestinian living in the US. This paper strives to shed light on precisely this search for the self in the “Other,” focusing on the discursive formation of an anti-essentialist Arab-American subjectivity entrenched in the Arab-American experience, through a close analysis of the delineation of the individual and communal selves in the works of three Arab-American writers: Suheir Hammad, Mohja Kahf, and Diana Abu-Jaber. In their books Born Palestinian, Born Black, E-mails from Scheherazad, and Crescent, these three female writers, of Palestinian, Syrian, and Jordanian origin, respectively, represent the paradoxical and contradictory place Arab-American women, and by extension Arab-Americans in general, are allotted within the US. By drawing on their experience of living in the US as women of color, the aforementioned writers discursively contest and undercut the majority’s preconceived notions of what constitutes Arab-American subjectivity.

Reflecting on Arab-American literature, Majaj argues that early 20th Century Arab-American writing was more assimilationist, where writers like Gibran Khalil Gibran, Salom Rizk, and Rev. Abraham Mitrie Rihbany strove to present themselves in terms to which an American audience would be receptive, thus using biblical language for instance, while distancing themselves from Islam, being cautious of anti-Muslim and anti-Arab discrimination in the US. In contrast, the writings of second and third generation Arab-Americans emphasize and affirm ethnicity. In considering the writings

1. Suhair Hammad’s anthology Born Palestinian, Born Black was published in 1996. However the poems under consideration in this paper were all written after 9/11 and are taken off the web.
of three feminist authors who wrote post-9/11, this paper argues that 9/11 further accentuated this sense of ethnicity in Arab-Americans, so that the option of assimilation that was taken on by the first generation of Arab-American writers is no longer possible after the destruction of the twin towers. September 11 was a traumatic experience for all Americans, but particularly Arab-Americans who perhaps more vehemently than ever before had to confront head-on the stereotypes hurled at them. It is as if in contesting these stereotypes in their writing these three Arab-American feminists are revising American identity, so as to ensure that feelings of national belonging and inclusion henceforth encompass the otherness of the Arab-American.

Memory in the Narrative of Origins
It might be pertinent here to stop and ask what the common thread interweaving Arab-American identity is. Majaj (1996) proposes that it be memory, which works both at the personal and cultural levels in formulating narratives of origin. Majaj emphasizes the role of memory in the establishment of a communal past and in the assertion of identity, saying, “It is thus no surprise that Arab-American literature turns repeatedly to memory to explore, assert, critique, and negotiate ethnic identity” (p. 266). Arab-American literature thus presents an attempt to negotiate identity between an Arab past providing a sense of origins, and an American present. This inevitably renders Arab-American literature a literature across borders, one that constantly vacillates between the country of residence and the country of origin. Arab-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye (2002) echoes Majaj’s emphasis on memory, describing how Arab-American writers find themselves time and time again drawing from the same reservoir of cultural heritage, thus establishing the foundations for Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community.” “When I finally met some other Arab-American writers, we felt we had all been writing parts of a giant collective poem, using the same bouquet of treasured images” (p. xiv), writes Nye in her anthology 19 Varieties of Gazelle.

According to the US Census Bureau, Arab-Americans are categorized as non-European whites. Arab-Americans, on the other hand, perceive themselves as a minority and an ethnic people of color in the US, as is evident in Hammad’s anthology Born Palestinian, Born Black, or in Joseph Lawrence’s poem Sand Nigger. The preceding delineation, however, is not to argue for an essentialist Arab-American identity, for, if anything, Arab-American seems to be a dialectic relationship between two worlds, the Arab and the American, producing an ever-changing synthesis that makes of Arab-Americans both Arabs and Americans. In Deadly Identities, Amin Maalouf (1998) makes the same line of argument, insisting he is both French and Lebanese. He refuses to have his identity “compartmentalized,” arguing that he is not half-Lebanese half-French, but both French and Lebanese, the two together constituting his one identity that can not be split. “I do not have several identities; I only have one, made of all the elements that have shaped its unique proportions” (¶ 3) says Maalouf, expressing his apprehension at the idea pushed at him that he must internally feel drawn to one nationality at the expense of the other. “It reveals to me a dangerous, and common attitude men have. When I am asked who I am ‘deep inside of myself,’ it means there is, deep inside each one of us, one ‘belonging’ that matters, our profound truth, in a way, our ‘essence’ that is determined once and for all at our birth and never changes” (¶ 5), protests Maalouf. Similarly, Arab-American identity is a non-essentialist, non-compartmentalized identity that does not partially belong to both cultures, but constitutes rather a dynamic dialogue across borders.

The Arab-American self portrayed by Kahf, Hammad, and Abu-Jaber is reflected by the
array of nuanced themes and motifs carefully woven into their writing, where all three possess a strong poetic voice that resonates with the experience of what it means to be an Arab-American in the US. While Abu-Jaber depicts the Arab-American community in Los Angeles, Hammad and Kahf draw on their own individual experiences, describing what it is like to be a veiled Muslim woman in the US in the case of Kahf, and what it means to be a Palestinian political activist in the case of Hammad. In interweaving an autobiographical element into their writing, these three feminist Arab-American writers lend voice to the individual self in the context of communal relations, shaping the subjectivity of the Arab-American experience.

**Home on their Shoulders**

The first formations of identity and difference begin with immigration from the homeland and the experience of exile. In *E-mails from Scheherazad*, Kahf (2003) relates a series of anecdotes in verse, with the Arab-American journey beginning with immigration from the homeland.

> When they arrive in the new country,
> Voyagers carry it on their shoulders,
> The dusting of the sky they left behind (p. 1)

Little is forgotten so that even the dust lingers, and home is not left behind but carried like a burden on the exile’s shoulder. Home thus metamorphoses from something external into a place one internalizes upon arrival to a new country, and the journey of exile sets forth. The autobiographical tones in this poem are apparent in light of the fact that Kahf, who was born in Damascus, had to emigrate to the US with her parents at the age of four.

The new generation who was born in the US and has not experienced immigration, however, knows only this “new country,” and has a different story to tell. In a poem entitled “Lateefa,” Kahf (2003) presents a heart-rending conversation between a father and his daughter, in which the latter gently breaks it out to her father that Palestine is akin to a story for her.

> Daddy you can talk to me
> All you want about Palestine
> And I’ll be faithful to the end
> But I don’t know it, never
> Smelled its rain wet streets
> ... I know Jersey. I’ve run my fingers
> Up and down its spine,
> Sealed the vertebrae of official buildings (p. 22)

The daughter will listen to stories of Palestine, and will be faithful to that memory, however what touches her is not Palestine but Jersey, with which she shares an intimacy apparent in the metaphor of her running her fingers up and down its spine. Home for the second generation of Arab-Americans therefore is no longer that far away place across the Atlantic. Home is here. It becomes New Jersey, and Palestine is lost. The first generation of Arab exiles, on the other hand, continues to carry home on its shoulders, the dust never quite brushed off.

Yet, though that second generation has never seen Palestine, nor sensed the smell of wet rain there, the umbilical cord has never been quite severed either. “I don’t know what Palestine looks like, what Palestine tastes like, but it is something that is in your blood
and we all carry ancestry around with us” (cited in Handal, 1997, ¶ 4), writes Suheir Hammad. Hammad grew up in the racially diverse Sunset Park in Brooklyn, where she acquired a broader sense of identifying with globally disenfranchised people of color. And yet her writing returns time and time again to Palestine, and her narratives of origin. Perhaps this sense of belonging is nowhere more poignantly reflected than in Hammad’s poem “Broken and Beirut,” in which she says, “I want to go home ... I want to remember what I’ve never lived.”

Hammad’s poetic stance in *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, although equally confrontational, departs from Kahf’s in its stark harshness, intermixed with pain and anger propagated by a raw and unmitigated poetic honesty. Explaining the title *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, Hammad says: “Within the Palestinian culture we have the concept of black being a negative force, and it is seen that way all over the world. What the book tries to do is take back the negative energy that is associated with black, reclaim it, and say that this is something that is about survival, something that is positive” (cited in Handal, 1994, ¶ 3).

Moving from the autobiographical individual Arab-American self, *Crescent* (2003) presents the collective experience of an Arab-American community in Los Angeles, highlighting communal relations. Perhaps nowhere is the resistance to assimilate into American culture and way of life more palpable than in Abu-Jaber’s novel where love is commingled with a passion for Arab cooking, in a manner reminiscent of *Like Water for Chocolate*. The setting is a Lebanese café in an Iranian neighborhood in LA, called Nadia’s Café, which provides Arab students at the nearby university with a safe haven in which to congregate and talk about home. The TV is constantly tuned to an all-Arabic station, while Arab delicacies, whether *baklava*, *knaffeh*, or *falafel*, constitute the bulk of the menu. It is usually the male Arab students who frequent Nadia’s Café, as Arab women keep their daughters safe at home, and those who are allowed to immigrate are the good students who cook for themselves and study in the library, we are told. It is only the Arab men who “spend their time arguing and being lonely,” trying to open a conversation with Um Nadia the owner, her daughter Mireille, or Sirine the cook. An Arab student would often loiter at the counter and relate to Sirine, “how painful it is to be an immigrant – even if it was what he’d wanted all his life – sometimes especially if it is what he’d wanted all his life. Americans, he would tell her, don’t have the time or the space in their lives for the sort of friendship – days of coffee, drinking and talking – that the Arab students craved. For many of them the café was a little flavor of home” (Abu-Jaber, 2003, pp. 19-20). In *Crescent* the clash of cultures is brought to the forefront, with the difference in lifestyles made explicit as in the aforementioned statement, where the Arab student is alienated by the difference in social relations between the US and the Arab world.

In short, the Arab in *Crescent* is out of place in the US, his/her loneliness glaring in exile. “Um Nadia says the loneliness of an Arab is a terrible thing; it is all-consuming. It is already present like a little shadow under the heart when he lays his head on his mother’s lap; it threatens to swallow him whole when he loves his own country, even though he marries and travels and talks to friends twenty-four hours a day” (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 19). The Arab portrayed in this novel seems to be fated for loneliness, which explains his/her constant need for company, as is evident in the popularity of Nadia’s Café. Nevertheless, it is precisely this experience of immigration that sets the Arab exile on a journey in search of his/her place in the US.
Exile

In *Crescent* we are confronted with the immigrant in search of the way back home, through Han (Hanif), an Iraqi exile who grew up in Baghdad, and is now a professor of Arabic literature at the Near Eastern Studies Department at the university. Han falls in love with Sirine, and yet even that cannot silence the nostalgia gnawing inside of him. “The fact of exile is bigger than everything else in my life,” he tells Sirine. “Exile is like... It’s a dim gray room, full of sounds and shadows, but there’s nothing real or actual inside of it... Everything that you were – every sight, sound, taste, memory, all of that – has been wiped away. You forget everything you thought you knew. You have to let yourself forget or you’ll just go crazy.” In the anecdotes Han relates to Sirine, he describes how sometimes he forgets this is the US and not Iraq. Exile is the place where you walk down the street and you constantly think it is old friends that you are bumping into, until you get closer and “their faces melt away into total strangers.” Exile is the place where it is the homeless that one identifies with most, Han tells Sirine: “they know what it feels like – they live in between worlds so they’re not really anywhere” (Abu-Jaber, 2003, pp. 182-3).

And yet Han finds himself falling in love with Sirine, and she becomes “the opposite of exile” (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 158). But the pull of home remains stronger, and Han seems to withdraw into memories of home that seem to tug at him, drawing him further and further away from the reality of the US and Sirine, and back into the past. Finally Han relents, leaving Sirine a note that simply states: “I’m driven by the prospect of my return: my country won’t let go of me – it’s filled me up” (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 353).

In *Crescent*, we are confronted not by a past that forms a common thread that unites Arab-Americans, but a past that alienates the Arab from America, clearly demarcating a dichotomy between both identities. Arab TV, Arab food, and Arab newspapers and stories are constantly invoked, creating a home away from home. Arab students identify with one another in their loneliness, but the past does not let go of them, as is evident with Hanif. The characters in *Crescent* are in fact Kahf’s voyagers who embark on a new continent, with the dust from a different sky still clinging onto their clothes – a dust that they will not brush off. Their alienation is all the more concrete, when they know that at the fringes of this safe haven that they have created for themselves the same accusations continue to be hurled at them, reinforcing stereotypes of the uncivilized, terrorist, and Arab “Other.”

**Stereotype #1: The Muslim Arab**

Syrian poet Mohja Kahf in her anthology *E-mails from Scheherazad* contemplates what it means to be a veiled Syrian-American Muslim feminist living in the US. Kahf writes poems that directly oppose the predominantly negative portrayal and perception of a “headscarf-wearing Muslim in a non-Muslim country,” and thereby creates a space that reconfigures Muslim Arab-Americans. Refusing to adhere to the repressed and subservient stereotype of the Arab woman, it is the Muslim feminist’s resistance to such stereotypes that is lent voice in Kahf’s poetry. In “Hijab Scene # 7” Kahf (2003) has taken it upon herself to respond to the regular stereotypes tossed at her time and time again, as a veiled Muslim woman living in the US.

No, I’m not bald under the scarf
No, I’m not from that country
Where women can’t drive cars
... Yes, I carry explosives
They're called words
And if you don’t get up
Off your assumption,
They’re going to blow you away (p. 39)

Kahf here sheds light on the negative perception of Arab-Americans in the US. In her repetition of “no” and “yes,” Kahf seems to be clearly answering questions asked repeatedly of her, of which she has grown tired. She does not seem surprised by the nature of the question as to whether she is bald, which is why she wears the scarf for instance. The question seems to have been posed so many times, that she does not even stop at the question, but merely hurls forth a response. As a veiled Arab Muslim living in America, Kahf is immediately presumed to be an outsider, her veil opening a spectrum of possibilities, indicating her origins, the Gulf perhaps, her nature, violent, even her physical features underneath, bald. The veil thus seems to play a contradictory role in the US, stripping her identity down to the very core, rather than evoking respect for the person wearing the veil as a fellow human being. In confirming her presumed possession of explosives, Kahf feigns succumbing to the stereotype of the Arab Muslim as a violent explosive-carrying terrorist, only to take a detour by revealing her explosives to be words instead. Violence thus takes a different form, though not any less aggressive.

Pointing out the contradictions inherent in being part of a Muslim minority in the US, Kahf (2003) writes in a poem entitled “Move Over”:

We are the spreaders of prayer rugs
in highway gas stations at dawn
We are the fasters at company banquets
before sunset in Ramadan
We wear veils and denim,
prayer caps and Cubs caps ... And thou
We will intermarrry and commingle
and multiply, oh, how we’ll multiply
Muhammad-lovers in the motley
miscellany of the land (p. 40)

The repetition of the word “we” here becomes an incantation denoting a Muslim Arab-American voice that challenges the exclusionary limits of homogenous white Christian culture in the US. As such Kahf seems to be pushing for space in American belonging for Arab identity, as is evident in the demand “move over.”

Stereotype #2: The Uncivilized Arab
In “My Grandmother washes her feet in the sink of the bathroom at Sears,” Kahf relates an anecdote in which her grandmother engages in washing her feet in the sink of a bathroom at Sears, in preparation for prayer. When she is reprimanded by a Sears representative, the grandmother, though she speaks no English, nevertheless manages to understand that the tirade is directed at her, to which she replies:

I have washed my feet over Iznik tile in Istanbul
With water from the world’s ancient irrigation systems
I have washed my feet in the bathhouses of Damascus
Over painted bowls imported from China
Among the best families of Aleppo
And if you Americans knew anything
About civilizations and cleanliness
You make wider basins, anyway
My grandmother knows one culture– the right one (p. 27)

The so-called “clash of civilizations” reaches its climax in this poem. Arab norms are provocatively juxtaposed with American cultural norms, out of which emerges a clear clash. The Sears representative shakes her head at the incivility of this old woman, while the grandmother holds firm to her old ways and meets the condescending mark with a yet more condescending one, turning the tables around about who and what “civilized” connotes.

Stereotype #3: The Terrorist Arab
In Crescent we are confronted with the stereotype of the Arab terrorist, long before the attack on the twin towers on September 11. In 1990, Nadia’s Café was owned by Egyptians, we are told. Back then it was called Falafel Farah. But then the Gulf War broke out, and CIA men began frequenting the restaurant in quest of “terrorist schemes developing in the Arab-American community.” Intimidated, the owners called Um-Nadia and asked her whether she would like to buy the place, and thus the legacy of Nadia’s Café was born. The discrimination and intimidation against Arabs therefore began long before 9/11, and was reinforced after the 9/11 attacks in a manner that did not pass without leaving its imprint on the imagination and psyche of these Arab-American feminists, as is reflected in their writings. Reflecting on September 11, in a poem called “First Writing Since…,” Hammad (2001) threatens:

one more person ask me if i knew the hijackers.
one more motherfucker ask me what navy my brother is in.
one more person assume no arabs or muslims were killed.
one more person assume they know me, or that i represent a people.
or that a people represent an evil, or that evil is as simple as a flag and words on a page.

Hammad in this poem will not yield to the stereotypes hurled against Arabs and Muslims, which have been revitalized and reinforced since 9/11. Hammad’s eclectic writing style is amply demonstrated here, a surprising fusion of Arab culture and politics mixed with Hip Hop sensibility. The enraged writing tone, and the use of the implicitly threatening word “one more,” similar to Kahf’s repetitious use of the word “no” in “Hijab Scene #7,” clearly indicates that these feminist poets particularly, and through them the Arab-American community at large, have been hounded by discriminatory stereotypes, and have grown tired. In this case, because she is Arab, Hammad is automatically presumed to be associated with the perpetrators of 9/11. She is no longer a human being, but a representative of a terrorist people, a symbol of evil, as if evil were that simple and could be pinned down that easily.

Hammad (2001) goes even further and argues that if anyone can really empathize, truly understand the meaning of the pain suffered on 9/11, it is probably precisely those Arabs and Muslims living on the other side, and more specifically it is the Palestinians living under Israeli oppression in Gaza and the West Bank, who experience terror on a daily basis:

... if there are any people on earth who understand how new york is feeling right now, they are in the west bank and the gaza strip.
... i do not know who is responsible... i don’t give a fuck about bin laden. his vision of the world does not include me or those i love.

Hammad here again denies any association with the perpetrators, refusing to deal with what Bin Laden represents, for he represents nothing for her, and certainly does not represent her nor speak in her name. Hammad’s use of slang, and her disregard for all punctuation or form, is perhaps an intentional and well-suited response to the line of uncivilized questioning which she has been bombarded with since the 9/11 attacks. One can deduce the line of questioning thrown at her from her poem, with questions like: who was responsible for 9/11, what do you think of Bin Laden, and do you identify with his line of thought?

Negotiating Identity Across Borders

While American stereotypes of the Arab as violent, uncivilized, and terrorist are contested and challenged by these Arab-American feminists, these writers concomitantly refuse to fall into the stereotypes and conformities of Arab culture. In refusing to yield to American stereotypes of the Arab Muslim women, Kahf does not seem bent on conforming to the Arab image of the Muslim women either. In “Ishtar Awakens in Chicago,” Kahf (2003) asserts:

> My arrogance knows no bounds
> And I will make no peace today,
> And you should be so lucky,
> To find a woman like me
> ... Today neither will the East claim me
> Nor the West admit me (p. 62)

And Kahf does not seem apologetic. She is in fact quite explicit about what it is that she does. In “Fatima Migrates in October” she writes:

> I enter history
> And break its windows
> Taking from its shelves
> Whatever pleases me (p. 86)

As such, Kahf conjures her own version of Islam, which she does not hesitate to put forth, criticizing Orthodox interpretations. This defiance is indicative of the positionality of the Arab-American within and yet outside both Arab and American cultures. In “Poem to my Prodigal Brother,” Kahf (2003) protests Islam’s parochial stress on obedience, and its insistence on certainty, whereas the search for the divine and the quest for truth begins precisely by relenting to incertitude, and getting lost in search of answers. Her obedience thus becomes obedience to the moment.

> Stay inside the four walls
> Of religion, they told us. Obey,
> Obey, obey- obey what?
> My body catching the wind is obeying
> The pulse of the breathtaking Divine.
> ... I don’t know much anymore.
> It is time for us not to know.
> ... All this being lost has more truth in it

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2. The title refers to African-American poet June Jordan’s “Moving Tovards Home.” In this poem, reacting to the Sabra and Shatila massacre that killed hundreds of Palestinians in Beirut, Jordan writes, “I was born a Black woman / and now / I am become a Palestinian” (Hammad, Born Palestinian ix).
Than the pocket-watch faith of believers
Who stay on dry ground,
Never wetting the hem of their piety
... Little brother here's the one thing I know:
Our only outside chance at the sacred
Comes through this being astray (p. 89)

In another poem dedicated to African-American poet June Jordan, Hammad (1996) says:
I will not forget where
I come from. I
will craft my own
drum. Gather my beloved
near and our chanting
will be dancing. Our
humming will be drumming. I
will not be played. I
will not lend my name
nor my rhythm to your
beat. I will dance
and resist and dance and
persist and dance. This
heartbeat is louder than
death. Your war drum ain’t
louder than this breath. (p. ix)

Hammad has created her own identity, her own drum to which she will dance, yielding to no other rhythm or beat. Her dance shall resonate louder than war, and it will resist. As such, Arab-Americans portrayed in Kahf and Hammad’s autobiographical poetry, and through Abu-Jaber’s main protagonist Sirine, seem to have extricated themselves from the confines of obedience, patriarchy, and silence. Born and raised in the US, Sirine represents the second generation Arab-American par excellence. Sirine is almost forty and she will not marry. Her uncle throws husbands at her, which she rejects time and time again. Her affair with Han is informed neither by Arab social norms nor ideas. The first immigrants come as voyagers carrying home on their shoulders, but the generation after them is neither Arab nor American but Arab-American, renegotiating their identity across borders. Arab-American identity as presented here in the writings of these three female authors is an identity that refuses all forms of essentialism. As such, Arab-American identity refuses any existing categorization, putting forth a novel identity on the table, one that transcends boundaries and nationalities to create a place for the Arab in America, the outright message being “move over.”

This request to “move over” is not to take over space, but to share it. For the other common thread that cuts across Arab-American writing, in addition to memory, is humanism. Being both Arab and American necessarily means rejecting the “clash of civilization” hypothesis, and positing a “clash of ignorance” hypothesis in its stead, as did the late Edward Said, no where more urgently than after 9/11. Otherwise the very word Arab-American would be a contradiction in terms. In writing about difference, and in depicting her own difference as an outsider in the US for example, Kahf does not insist on difference, invoking a common humanity instead. In a poem entitled “Affirmative Action Sonnet” Kahf (2003) writes:

But I do not insist on difference. Difference pales
Beside the horrors facing our race
-the human one: hunger, HIV, genocide
Where is the salve? We write. We recognize
-we must- each other in millennial glow
Or we will die from what we do not know
That’s all that these smoke-and-mirror poems do
I came across the world to write for you (p. 92)

Understanding the “Other” in light of a common humanity, or a common plight depicted in this poem as hunger, HIV, and genocide, becomes urgent with Kahf’s “we must.” Otherwise we will die of that which we do not know, i.e. we will be killed for not understanding the other. Kahf then stops and tells us why it is that she writes. She seems to have crossed a distance to write. Who is the “you” in this verse, one might wonder. The objective, however, is clear and that is to draw light to the urgency of recognizing our common humanity.

In another poem also juxtaposing East and West, Kahf again invokes poetry as the bridge that will enable one to overcome difference and attest to a common humanity. In “Fayetteville as in Fate” Kahf (2003) writes:

This one wears overalls and that one wears a sirwal,
But the open wound with the dirt in its creases
Makes a map both can read
But who will coax them close enough to know this?
Darling it is poetry (p. 7)

That they may recognize one another thus becomes the poet’s responsibility, one that Kahf clearly takes upon her shoulders as she embarks on this contemplative journey of self-reflection. The collective autobiography that Kahf relates in this poem affirms that Muslim-Americans are entitled to belong in the US, with their various identifications (as Muslims, Americans, feminists) complimenting rather than contradicting each other. As Robin Penn Warren (1985) notes in Poetry Is a Kind of Unconscious Autobiography, “For what is a poem but a hazardous attempt at self-understanding? It is the deepest part of autobiography” (pp. 9–10).

In her poetry Hammad seems to have taken a similar stance, affirming both her Arab and American identities, while explicitly condemning violence, and refusing any representation imposed on her. Poetry here is written in order to resend a message of peace and justice, for when all is broken, the only optimistic note with which a tragedy leaves us is the opportunity to open a new page and build anew. As such, Hammad (2001) depicts a “phoenix,” the symbol of renewal and resurrection that resurges from the ashes of annihilation, and calls for affirming life.

... there is life here. anyone reading this is breathing, maybe hurting, but breathing for sure. and if there is any light to come, it will shine from the eyes of those who look for peace and justice after the rubble and rhetoric are cleared and the phoenix has risen.

affirm life.
we got to carry each other now.
you are either with life, or against it.
affirm life.
Move over

In the preceding discussion I suggest that the writings of these three Arab-Americans are to a large extent informed by their experience of being women of color living in the US, pointing to the manner in which ethnic and religious adherences as well as the varieties and convergences of physical location have influenced and shaped the texts included in this study. While these three writers differ immensely in their style of writing, as well as their mediums of expression – verse in the case of Kahf and Hammad, and prose in the case of Abu-Jaber – there nevertheless remains a cohesive underlying project that unites all three: an unfolding sense of Arab-American identity. In Scheherazade’s Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing, Darraj (2004) discusses the diversity of the emerging Arab-American literary voice, stating: “The multitude of styles testify to the variety of ideas, opinions, and experiences within the community of women writers of Arab descent, a fact that tears down the stereotype of Arab women as uniformly similar: silent, acquiescent, unthinking” (pp. 3–4).

Arab-American identity is an identity in the making that is constantly being renegotiated across borders. The “othering” of the Arab-American post 9/11 has reinforced and reinvigorated a non-assimilationist trend in contemporary Arab-American literature, forcing these feminist writers to stand up and defend their “otherness.” In the process these writers have in fact extricated themselves from the stereotypes of both cultures. In resisting marginalization, they not only refused to suppress difference and pretend assimilation, as did the first generation of Arab-American writers, but have in effect gone a step further, asserting a place for the Arab-American within American identity. This they have done with a clear message succinctly summarized in Kahf’s title, “Move over.”

REFERENCES

Women have historically been excluded from war literature. Recently, however, women, including those in the Middle East, have begun to recount the stories of war and create alternatives to time-honoured masculinized war narratives. Their articulation of their experiences is having a dramatic impact on perceptions of conflict, sexuality, and society.

Three novels written about the Lebanese civil war – Ghada al-Samman’s *Beirut ’75*, Hanan al-Shaykh’s *The Story of Zahra*, and Hoda Barakat’s *The Stone of Laughter* – are linked by their critiques of gender-specific behavioural expectations, of nationalism, of individual and communal identity and violence, as well as the connection between sexuality and violence.

All three authors belong to what Miriam Cooke (1988) calls “the Beirut Decentrists,” whom she defines as “A group of women writers who have shared Beirut as their home and the war as their experience” (p. 3). As she goes on to say, these women “have been decentered in a double sense: physically, they were scattered all over a self-destructing city; intellectually, they moved in separate spheres” (p. 3). Numbering over forty women, prominent Decentrists include Ghada al-Samman, Hanan al-Shaykh, Etel Adnan, Layla Ossieiran, Emily Nasrallah, and Hoda Barakat. “Regardless of confession and political persuasion” (Cooke, 1988, p. 3), these women captured the routine and dailiness of war, the mundane, the unheroic. War was not a cause to glorify, rather its unjustifiable horror was to be recorded so as not to be forgotten. As the violence continued day after day, year after year, the social system that had always prioritised men was crumbling away. The traditional dichotomies of home/front, ally/enemy, and dominant/subordinate no longer existed: the war was everywhere, affecting everyone at all times, and the enemy was within, and constantly changing. So completely disrupting was the war to Lebanese society that women found themselves able to emerge from the margins, and “a disproportionately large number of [them] seemed to enter into the literary arena” (Salem, 2003, p. 115). They challenged social customs that allocated submissive roles to women and dominant, violent roles to men, and successfully undermined and formed counter-narratives and counter-histories to the patriarchal stories of Lebanon.

Ghada al-Samman’s writing concentrates on oppression in Arab society and tradition, on female liberation, on internalized sexism, and individual emancipation. She sees men as being as much in need of liberation as women. All those themes are evident in her short novel *Beirut ’75*, which was completed and published only a few months before the civil war began. Because it highlights several of the reasons for the outbreak of hostilities, it is often seen as a prediction of the war. Through her characters, al-Samman comments on a
sick society which oppresses and exploits the poor and, in particular, women.

One of the characters of *Beirut '75* is Yasmeena, who leaves Damascus to realize her dreams of freedom and being published. Once in Beirut, she seems to find everything she’d lacked in Damascus. She falls in love with a rich and powerful man called Nimr, with whom she loses her virginity and discovers her potent sexual drive. Yasmeena describes her sexual liberation as speaking for that of “the passionate desires of all the Arab women who had been held prisoners for more than a thousand years” (al-Samman, 1995, p. 41), and feels “grateful to him because he transformed me [her] from an icy tundra into a minefield” (al-Samman, 1995, p. 39). Yet she cannot escape the deeply entrenched traditions governing sexuality. Her imprisonment is repeatedly symbolized through her pet turtle, which cannot cast off its shell.

For Nimr, Yasmeena was simply a sex object. His perception of her as a sexual commodity can be seen when he passes her over to his wealthy friend Nishan once he becomes bored with her. Nishan, who is uninterested in, and, indeed, scornful of all women, likewise treats Yasmeena as merchandise. The men’s depravity, which is indicative of the immorality and hypocrisy of the Lebanese patriarchal system, is exemplified by a comment Nimr makes to Yasmeena: “You’re crazy if you’d think I’d marry a woman who gave herself to me out of wedlock” (al-Samman, 1995, p. 55). Nimr ultimately leaves Yasmeena to marry the daughter of his father’s political rival, revealing he’s not even interested in finding a partner he loves – all that matters is increasing his wealth and influence.

After her abandonment, Yasmeena is left with two unappealing choices: either to move in with Nishan, or to become a prostitute. Dejected, she visits her brother, who had been ignoring her affair with Nimr in return for the cash she delivered. Upon realizing she has come empty-handed, he flies into a rage and violently murders and beheads Yasmeena. To admiring police officers, he confesses his crime as an “honour” killing. Nimr arrives to blackmail the brother into removing his name from the report, and displays absolutely no sorrow for Yasmeena’s murder. Al-Samman exposes men, the “purveyors of tradition” (al-Samman, 1995, p. 42), as sickeningly hypocritical and morally corrupt. Violence and suppression of female sexuality are integral tools in sustaining this patriarchal order.

Men, however, are also sometimes victims of tradition, gender, and class-specific roles. Ta’an is a simple pharmacist trying to escape becoming the victim of a revenge killing. His sensitive and peaceful nature is sadly lost on a culture whose “tribal mentality would fuel vengeance” (Salem, 2003, p. 91). His paranoid fear of being murdered prompts him to shoot an innocent man, exposing the futility of outdated traditions and cultural practices. Ta’an is not the only male to suffer. Abu Mustafa is a desperately poor fisherman whose livelihood depends upon powerful men like Nimr, and represents the exploited, voiceless sectors of society. He has spent his whole life fantasizing about finding a genie’s lamp in his fishing nets, but ultimately blows himself up with dynamite. In the smoky remnants, his son Mustafa glimpses the vestiges of an old lamp and realizes, “But you’re the one who never learned how to come out of the bottle! What you were looking for wasn’t in the depths of the sea, but deep inside you!” (al–Samman, 1995, p. 87). Abu Mustafa had been trapped in the role that society had allocated him, powerless to challenge his position. Al-Samman seems to be advocating revolutionary action by indicating that the power for change is present within the marginalized.

Farah, another character in *Beirut '75*, also suffers. When he meets his famous relative Nishan, he is told he will be helped to find fame if he agrees to the “price”: “obedience – absolute obedience to me” (al-Samman, 1995, p. 45). Dazzled by the thought of
success and escape from poverty, Farah accepts. Nishan soon shows sexual interest in him, and Farah is forced into sexual activity with him. Consequently, Farah begins to rapidly lose his mind. At first, he lost his libido, which he acknowledged was because he “was no longer the master of my [his] own soul. I [he] had sold it once and for all - to the devil!” (al-Samman, 1995, p. 69). Ironically, Nishan has marketed Farah as the “Singer of Manliness” (al-Samman, 1995, p. 67), and women fell head over heels for him. Meanwhile, Farah is “haunted by feelings of delicacy, fragility, and fear” (al-Samman, 1995, p. 68), indicating that he is not suited to playing the role of a macho, socially desirable man. Eventually Farah becomes totally out of touch with reality, and the novel ends with his admittance to and escape from a mental hospital.

Farah’s experience shows Beirut as a place ill with debauchery, twisted social traditions, and apathy. During his escape in the closing lines of the novel, Farah switches around the signs for Beirut and the mental hospital, a potent ending highlighting the many problems plaguing Lebanese society. Powerful men control the destiny of the majority, forcing women into subservient and submissive roles, and ‘weaker’ men into destructive behaviour as they attempt to conform to social expectations. The marginalized have no voice in a society where arbitrary gender and social divisions exist only to maintain the status quo. *Beirut '75* diagnoses many of the causes for the civil war and clearly argues that feminist concerns are irrefutably tied in with political concerns. The marginalized are here given a voice to speak of the dramatic changes needed in the Lebanese political, economic, and social systems - problems which are eroding the conscience of the nation and that will ultimately contribute to the civil war.

Al-Shaykh similarly insinuates that the patriarchal social system is to blame for the conflict in her novel *The Story of Zahra*, which can be considered a masterpiece of modern Arabic literature. The book has been criticised and banned in many Arab countries because of its “explicit sexual descriptions, its exploration of taboo subjects, such as family cruelty and women’s sexuality, especially in relation to war” (Accad, 1990, p. 43).

Zahra, a young Shiite woman, has endured years of abuse and oppression from nearly all the men she has known and, indeed, her own mother. Her misery begins at home, where she learns to associate betrayal, violence, and brutality with men. Her descriptions of her tyrannical father are terrifying; he “was always brutal. His appearance seemed to express his character: a frowning face, a Hitler-like moustache above thick full lips, a heavy body. Do I misjudge him? He had a stubborn personality. He saw all life in terms of black or white” (al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 19). That last line reveals her father’s, and by extension, Lebanese patriarchy’s rigid dichotomous ideology.

From an early age Zahra becomes aware of the preferential treatment given to her lazy brother Ahmad, simply because of his gender. Her father saved money to send Ahmad to America to study engineering, ignoring the fact that, unlike his sister, “Ahmad could barely read and write. He was always being thrown out of school” (al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 20). Zahra’s misfortune seems endless: one night whilst visiting her grandfather, her cousin Kasem molests her as she sleeps. Zahra internalizes her lack of control over her body which only makes the suffering worse. She constantly picks at the spots that mark her unremarkable face, which only scars her and angers her father more. Her relationship with a family friend, Malek, is similarly masochistic, as their sexual activities seem more like habitual rape. Indeed, their relationship ultimately leads to Zahra’s breakdown.

Throughout Zahra’s life, everyone she encounters seems less concerned with understanding her than they are in exploiting her for their own interests. An important motif in the novel is introduced on the first page, when Zahra hides behind a door with
her unfaithful mother, who has placed her hand over Zahra’s mouth to stifle any noise she might make. That symbolism of Zahra as a woman without a voice, who is unable to articulate herself because of the suppressing hand of tradition, is key to understanding Zahra’s life story. Zahra has been silenced by a society that does not allow women to control their own lives. As a result, Zahra retreats into herself and is deemed mad by the very society that is responsible for her condition.

Like Yasmeena in Beirut ’75, Zahra is trapped in a lose-all situation, abused by and yet dependent on men for survival. In a bid to escape Beirut’s domineering and hostile men and the possibility of an arranged marriage which would result in her sexual history being exposed, Zahra travels to Africa to live with her uncle Hashem. Hashem had sought exile in Africa after his political party, the Popular Syrian Party (PPS), failed a coup d’etat in Beirut. The party emblem of a swastika contained within a circle, as Semia Herbawi (2007) notes, recalls the image of Zahra’s father, with his “Hitler-like moustache.” This suggests similarities between “two totalitarian, monologic apparatuses predicated on women’s oppression: patriarchy … and nationalism” (Herbawi, 2007), as represented by her father and uncle respectively, and therefore indicates how Zahra will again fall prey to male dominance.

Zahra attempts to take control of her life by accepting the marriage proposal of Hashem’s friend, Majed. However, Majed has his own reasons for marrying her. He has been victimized by a patriarchal system that benefits men or the more advantaged social classes. As Suad Joseph observes, “Government and non-government spheres in most societies … are arenas of operation not for ‘men’, but for … men of privileged classes. The majority of men (working class) are excluded from [these] … spheres, despite their imagined identification with maleness” (cited in Ghandour, 2002, p. 243). Majed is from a working class family and accordingly is excluded from that privileged discourse of masculinity and nationalism. Majed is hurt and surprised at being excluded from the rich Lebanese community in Africa, and becomes preoccupied with making money in order to gain a sense of self-worth and self-importance – “only money… makes you strong … gives a choice of friendship and achieves equality” (al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 64). Zahra can help Majed to achieve his goal of climbing the socio-economic ladder, so he married her “and so fulfilled the dream I’ve [he] had of marrying the daughter of an illustrious family” (al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 69). Indeed, Zahra is nothing more to Majed than that, for he sees her as a sexual possession: “Here I was, married at last, the owner of a woman’s body that I could make love to whenever I wished” (al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 69). As Sabah Ghandour (2002) remarks, his “obsession with appropriating Zahra’s body is an extension of his dream to be inscribed into the socioeconomic formal history of Lebanon” (p. 243). Majed, like Nimr in Beirut ’75, is unable to see women as anything more than a source of sexual or psychological fulfilment. This exposes Lebanese men’s own sexual repression and socialization in a system that does not allow for healthy relations between the sexes.

Ultimately, Zahra’s years of exploitation and commodification explode in her third and most severe psychological fit. In Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel, Barbara Hill Regney examines how madness in female characters can be analysed as a political reaction to the collective madness of a society which suppresses women and socializes them to internalize their inferiority. Zahra goes crazy because she lives in “a patriarchal political and social system, a universe dominated by masculine energy, which, in itself, manifests a kind of collusive madness in the form of war or sexual oppression and is thereby seen as threatening to feminine psychological survival” (Regney, 1978, p. 7). As seen in Beirut ’75, men can also be alienated in such a hierarchically power-structured system – Farah similarly suffers from Zahra’s psychosis as a response to life in an unliveable, mad society. Their lunacy serves as discursive manifestations of protest.
against such systems.

The second part of the novel tracks Zahra’s homecoming to Lebanon, a country self-destructing in civil war. In many ways, the war is an extension and reflection of her pre-war suffering, and seems to be a natural consequence of a frustrated and sick society that had played out its degeneration on Zahra. Violent chaos has engulfed Beirut. Even Ahmad and his grandfather, the only non-violent men in the novel, joined a militia group. It is apparent that he has done so without any real ideological convictions, as his excuse for fighting constantly changes. The real motive, however, is because he sees fighting as a way of asserting his masculine identity, and a rejection of feminine behaviour. He states, “If I ask myself what I have accomplished, I answer that … I have not stayed at home with the women” (al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 143). Any prospect of peace frightens Ahmad, for it will return him to his previous useless, mediocre status. The war has given him a sense of importance, demonstrating how violent masculinity in war is seen as proof of manhood and creates a sense of empowerment.

Ironically, when Zahra instigates a sexual relationship for the first time in her life, it is with the local sniper, the ultimate symbol of the war and of violent masculinity, the very construction responsible for the suffering of Zahra and, therefore, Lebanon. Possibly because of her sense of independence, Zahra has her first orgasm, but her feelings of control are soon extinguished when she discovers that she is four months pregnant. Zahra’s suggestion that they marry threatens the sniper’s sense of power and domination, and in order to impose the old patriarchal authoritarianism, he kills her.

It is fruitful to look briefly at the structure of The Story of Zahra, which is original and unusual. Zahra narrates three chapters, and two are told by Majed and Hashem, which on one level may indicate a patriarchal attempt to suppress Zahra’s voice, but on another, provides valuable information. The male narratives highlight some of the inconsistencies of the patriarchal system that has fashioned their behaviour. As Joseph Zeidan says, including the men’s histories within the novel “demonstrates the complexity of the relationships among war, sexuality, feminism, and nationalism that holds society at large accountable for the construction of oppressive values” (Zeidan, 1995, p. 207). While Zahra may be passive, silent, and powerless in the face of male domination, by narrating her own story, one that is normally repressed, she subverts the dominant patriarchal discourse, undermines the authority of Lebanon’s master narrative, and presents chilling criticism of its male-dominated society. The novel ends with Zahra narrating her own murder, indicating that although she may be destroyed, her story will remain long after her death to challenge the official patriarchal Lebanese male discourse.

The Stone of Laughter, by Hoda Barakat, also challenges that discourse. It is generally considered to be the first modern Arabic novel with a gay protagonist, Khalil, who does not fit into the two available categories of masculinity:

The first group ... have broken down the door of conventional masculinity and entered manhood by the wide door of history ... The second group ... is made up of men ... who have got a grip on the important things in life, and who, holding the tools of understanding, awareness and close attention to theory have laid down plans to fasten their hold on the upper echelons ... in politics, in leadership, in the press ... both kinds of manhood were closed to Khalil and so he remained ... in a stagnant, feminine state of submission to a purely vegetable life, just within reach of two very attractive versions of masculinity. (Barakat, 1994, p. 14)
His reluctance to become involved in the violence, “his strong inclination to peace, to safety” (Barakat, 1994, p. 14), and rejection of the construction of war-time masculinity manifest themselves through his adoption of feminine traits. Khalil is “thereby refusing the dualism of traditional patriarchal society which divides people into strong males versus weak females” (Yared, 2001, pp. 226-227), and subverting the dominant gender role binarisms. Barakat’s perception of what is feminine, however, is exaggerated and just as stereotypical as many of the images her male contemporaries might employ. It is also the polar opposite of valorised masculinity. For example, Khalil escapes into passive activities such as waiting, cleaning, cooking, and doting on his loved ones.

Despite his efforts, Khalil cannot isolate himself from the war: he has internalized the violence outside, which he plays out psychologically. The small room in which Khalil lives is occasionally invaded by the outside, by the war. Described as an “abyss” (Barakat, 1994, p. 29), Khalil sometimes feels as though it had “an evil air … as if another room had eaten the first” (Barakat, 1994, p. 49). Furthermore, his window is repeatedly smashed by street bombs, bringing home the violence and foreshadowing his ultimate immersion in it. Moreover, the contempt other men direct at Khalil obviously affects him: “A young armed man came out … and looked scornfully at pale Khalil and his bag, which looked like a housewife’s shopping bag. Khalil held onto the bag and kept walking, trying to take firm strides … and he did not forget to pass by the cleaners …” (Barakat, 1994, p. 37). The armed man’s disdain for Khalil’s ‘feminine’ behaviour exemplifies the civil war as a situation in which “gender identity is rigidly over-determined, where participation in the community is the basic touchstone of masculine identity” (Fayad, 2002, p. 163).

Khalil’s neutrality therefore leads him into a hermit lifestyle, with an increasingly consuming self-hatred which almost kills him. He is unable to mourn the death of the second man he loves, Youssef, and stops eating properly, subsequently growing very thin and throwing up blood. The turning point in the novel is when Khalil is hospitalized and operated on for a stomach ulcer. During the operation he almost dies. When he wakes up, he has a new *joie de vivre* and, determined to live, thanks to himself, “I didn’t know how much I loved you … He who hates himself doesn’t love life, Khalil my lovely” (Barakat, 1994, p. 191). Khalil rapidly changes, however. He meets a powerful militia man, known as “The Brother,” and becomes more hostile to women. The Brother can offer him the security and income he lacks. In a surreal internal battle, Khalil makes his ultimate decision: “Khalil’s self put her hand on his hand. She said in a last, desperate attempt: ... there is no choice: for you to love yourself means to hate others” (Barakat, 1994, p. 221). He is thereupon transformed into the embodiment of his society’s golden image of masculinity. Khalil enters the Brother’s world of drug and weapon smuggling and, accordingly, “moves from a marginal position to one of dominance in which he assumes power over and marginalizes others” (Fayad, 2002, p. 177).

The fact that even loving, sensitive Khalil succumbs to the clutches of violent masculinity is more indicative of the power of war and socialization than a failing on Barakat’s part. As was the case with Zahra, who thought she could escape the social structures that govern Lebanese gender identities, Khalil finds that war in fact reinforces those conventions. Having spent the course of the novel trying to negotiate between his nationalist obligations and gendered expectations, he finally decides on survival, no matter at what cost. Because he has been forced to conform to masculine stereotypes, Khalil has become a victim of the violence, just like everyone else. As Barakat explains to Brian Whitaker in an interview: “The social pressure made him search for his manhood by raping a neighbour” (Whitaker, 2006, p. 99).
If the Lebanese construction of masculinity played a role in the outbreak of war, and someone like Khalil has had no choice but to adopt that construction, then it is inevitable that the circle of violence will continue indefinitely, because it is precisely violence and war which created this masculinity in the first place. Khalil’s sexual identity crisis proves Evelyne Accad’s (2007) assertion that “sexuality is much more central to social and political problems than previously thought, and that unless a sexual revolution is incorporated into political revolution, there will be no real transformation of social relations” (¶ 7).

The Stone of Laughter extends its critique of war masculinity by sabotaging the traditional romantic visions of conflict. The narrator, merging in and out of Khalil’s perspective, ridicules men’s abuse of power and exploitation of war for individual profiteering. The concept of martyrdom is undermined and seen not as a veneration of death, but an industry which promotes the useless perpetuation of violence and upholding of masculine ideals. The dead faces that gaze down from the posters are replaced almost daily by new ones, suggesting that those men are nothing more than products of some sinister war factory that churns out cannon fodder. Those posters are manufactured by the different militias and political organizations, which “used to prepare lists of their martyr’s names every season on programmes that were remarkably like the promotional leaflets of tourism companies and hotels” (Barakat, 1994, p. 46). The novel subverts and destabilizes master war narratives by indicating there are no heroes or villains. The men, their principles, and the militias to which they belong remain faceless, suggesting that they are all wrong and bear equal responsibility for the social and moral collapse of their nation.

Throughout the novel, laughter is used as a metaphor to exemplify the ills of a nation which takes its nationalist project too seriously, and becomes associated with social sickness, violence, and war profiteering:

This is the place where people laugh more than anywhere else in the world ... The shopkeeper will laugh because people will be so busy buying so many provisions ... The moneychanger will laugh because the currency conversions will pour in from outside ... A tempestuous festival of laughter. A city thrown onto its back waving its arms and legs like a huge cockroach under a massive joke .... laughter whose blood is blue and turns black from laughter ... dies of laughter. (Barakat, 1994, p. 46)

In referring to laughter, Barakat uses, as Mona Fayad (2002) notes, the words “yanfajiru duhkan” (p. 171), which translate as ‘explode with laughter’. That choice of words indicates the communal internalization of violence which eventually, combined with the pressure to conform to war-appropriate masculinity, claimed Khalil. Laughter has become an expression of male power, strength, and supremacy: Khalil laughs after he rapes the neighbour he once took care of.

While The Stone of Laughter brilliantly depicts the destructive gender roles that lead men like Khalil to contribute to the violence around them, and delivers a trenchant anti-war message, Barakat has proved herself to be as much a victim of gender stereotyping as Khalil. She is clearly caught up in her society’s view of masculinity and femininity, depicting femininity as submission and masculinity as either gay or violent. Her gender definitions are as unbalanced, limiting, and damaging as her patriarchal society’s definitions. This apparent weakness is, paradoxically, one of the novel’s strengths, as it proves just how effective the Lebanese patriarchal structure has been in socializing its citizens, and how desperately needed a revision of that master narrative and history is. As Fadia Faqir (1994) notes in the novel’s introduction, “A change in the social construction
of identities and relationships is not possible in this patriarchal tribal system, so the only way out is to repress the feminine in the self” (p. vi). Khalil indeed changed from a gentle soul with “narrow shoulders” (Barakat, 1994, p. 13) to become a frightful, “broad-shouldered” (Barakat, 1994, p. 231) war profiteer. Through his metamorphosis into a “man,” Khalil is “swallowed by the discourse, incorporated, losing his identity completely and becoming no more than a representation in a script that has already been written” (Fayad, 2002, p. 177). A feminist narrating voice separates itself from Khalil to mourn his transformation: “You’ve changed so much since I described you in the first pages. You’ve come to know more than I do. Alchemy. The stone of laughter. Khalil is gone, he has become a man who laughs. And I remain a woman who writes” (Barakat, 1994, p. 231).

In conclusion, al-Samman, al-Shaykh, and Barakat have shown that women have voices of their own, and incredibly powerful ones at that. None of the novels display anti-male rhetoric but, rather, an acute recognition of the interwoven nature of gender, sexuality, tradition, socialization, violence, subjugation, and oppression. These women have articulated through their novels that the only power they have in a masculine society is to be women who write, using their pens, notepads, and typewriters as weapons to fight injustice, violence, and exploitation. They advocate social transformation in Lebanon by refusing to remain silent to the abuse men and women suffer in a patriarchal society, culture, and war. Though al-Samman, al-Shaykh, and Barakat do not offer prescriptive texts on how to change masculinity and femininity into more harmonious, balanced, and equal constructions, they do subvert Lebanon’s master definitions by exposing their double standards, destructiveness, and violence, thereby recognizing the need for change. Ironically, it was war that gave these talented writers the opportunity to push their sex out of obscurity and into the forefront of Lebanese literary culture. Their messages will certainly continue to resonate long after men’s guns fall silent.

Dalila Mahdawi is a graduate of the University of Manchester.

Email: dmaidawi@hotmail.co.uk

REFERENCES


You Are Still with Us

Mai

Nazik Saba Yared

When I saw and spoke to her at the opening of Alan Gignoux’s photo exhibit of Palestinians in the Diaspora on the 31st of January, little did I imagine this would be the last time I would see Mai Ghoussoub. When I asked her how long she would be staying in Beirut, hoping to meet with her and enjoy the conversations we always had when she passed through, she answered: “I arrived yesterday and am leaving in two days, I only passed by to see my parents.” Typical Mai: always on the move. How does she manage? I wondered.

I cannot recall when, where, and how I first met her. I had heard about her, known she was co-partner of the famous London based publishing house Al-Saqi Books, which had published one of my books *Kul ma Qalahu Ibn ur-Rumi fil Hiha*’ in 1988. I had come across and read some of her books, met her at various book fairs, but had never really known her. Until ...

I was sitting one day in the Al-Saqi office in Beirut when she approached me and asked if I had heard of the Prince Claus Award. I had not. She explained what it was and asked me to apply, volunteering to take my application and all my books and mail them to Amsterdam from London. This was Mai: always encouraging people, always ready to help in any way she can, always ready to sacrifice her time for others. That was the beginning of a very dear friendship, which her untimely death cut short on the 17th of February this year.

Mai was born in Beirut in 1952, attended the secular French Lycée in Beirut, then took a degree in French literature from the Lebanese University, while at the same time studying mathematics at the American University of Beirut.

Like many young idealists of her generation, she adopted Marxist and Trotskyist ideas (later giving them up for a wider humanism), and actively supported the Palestinians in the early 1970s. In spite of this, she and a group of her friends were kidnapped for distributing a publication critical of PLO leader Yasser Arafat’s corruption. They were brought before him and were only released because one of them had a well-connected father.

During the 1975 Lebanese civil war, she and André Gaspard, who later founded Al-Saqi Books with her, helped establish medical dispensaries in quarters of Beirut from where the doctors had fled and where there were no pharmacies. They lived in a poor Muslim area and often negotiated the release of Christian hostages, not always with success. When they once demanded that George Habash’s Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine hand over a kidnapped Phalange Christian militiaman, his body was dumped at the door of their dispensary. In 1977, Mai was driving a wounded Palestinian
to hospital when she was shot. She lost an eye and went to the UK for further medical treatment. This was the turning point in her life.

She moved briefly to Paris and then returned to London where in 1979, with her lifelong friend Gaspard, she started the first Arabic bookshop in London, Al-Saqi Books. They had little money, and needed to buy books from Beirut, but the road to the airport in Beirut was closed. With undaunted courage they continued as best they could, stocked their store in Westbourne Grove, which later became the center for Middle Easterners in London and for UK universities. By 1983, they were publishing their first titles. But this was not enough for Mai, whose love was not restricted to books, but included music and art as well. So in the 1980s she studied sculpture at Morley College, London, and also at the Henry Moore studio.

In the beginning, Al-Saqi published books in English about the Arab World, and then added to its list of publications English novels, Arabic books, and translations – such as Ismail Kedare’s novels into English or G. Simmons’ *Future Iraq* into Arabic. Mai and her partner were dynamic and courageous publishers, discovering and encouraging new talents, managing to make Al-Saqi one of the leading Arabic publishing houses before opening a branch in Beirut. In fact, she was proud that even English journals and magazines such as the *Independent* had written that Al-Saqi raised the standard of English literature and introduced the country to important works.

They turned out books on everything from literature and art, to sociology and politics, publishing Arabic and English books that few in the Arab world would dare to publish – such as *Unspeakable Love* by Brian Whitaker, about gay and lesbian life in the Middle East, or *Sexuality in the Arab World*, edited by Samir Khalaf and John Gagnon, or the novel *Menstruation* by Ammar Abdulhamid, about a fundamentalist who smelled women’s periods, or the controversial works of Saudi novelist Turki al-Hamad.

Mai insisted that she and her partner never interfered with an author’s point of view or freedom of expression, respecting their readers’ free choice to read whatever he/she deemed of interest. She was adamant about refusing any kind of censorship, for all that they cared about was the intellectual value of what they published, and very often published books of value which they knew would not be a commercial success – such as the *Bibliography of Lebanese Women Writers* (from the mid-nineties to the mid twenties), which Nuha Bayyoumi and I put together, or important works by the poet Adonis. They also introduced Lebanese artists to a foreign public when they published the beautifully illustrated books about Husein Madi’s and Muhammad Rawas’ paintings.

In fact, since Mai herself is an artist, a book to her was also a piece of art, above and beyond its content. So they published many books with rich, beautiful reproductions of paintings and photographs, and this is why they very carefully chose their book covers as well.

But publishing did not stop Mai’s creative work. She wrote a number of books, both in English and Arabic: *Al-Mar’a al-Arabiya wa Dhukurat ul-Asala* (1991); *Al-Arab ma Ba’ada al-Hadatha* (1992); *Leaving Beirut: Women and the Wars Within* (1997), which is a kind of memoir; *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identities and Culture in the Modern Middle East* (2000), which she co-edited with Emma Sinclair-Webb, and which focuses on issues of masculinity that have been neglected by gender studies; and *Lebanon Lebanon* (2006), a collected work she published to raise money for those displaced by Israel’s 2006 bombing against Lebanon. She also wrote numerous articles for Arabic and international journals, and wrote and directed a play, *Qatalat ul-Kitab* (The Murderers of Books), produced in 2005 in Beirut. It involved an experimental mixture of languages, techniques, artistic and literary references that ended with that beautiful sentence: “Words don’t kill... it is people who do the killing.”

Although Mai loved dance and music, especially the songs of Um Kulthum, her favorite artistic mode of expression was sculpture. She loved sculpture,
she used to say, because she loved working with her hands. She started by working with clay and gypsum, after which she wanted to work with something harder, and turned to iron and bronze in order to prove that even those hard materials could be turned and twisted and given feminine forms. Her sculptures were either raised from the ground or suspended from above. In 2001, she held in Beirut an exhibition entitled *Divas*, where she twisted iron to sculpt five great international singers: Josephine Baker, Billie Holiday, Janis Joplin, Um Kulthum, and Édith Piaf. What most attracted her to them was that they carried within themselves the entirety of women’s suffering, and managed to rise above it with their talent. Her sculptures and installations were also exhibited internationally. In 2004, in a duo show with the Israeli artist Anna Sherbany, part of the London Biennale at the Shoreditch gallery, she became one of the first Arab women artists to explore the veil in a public space.

Although very patriotic, Mai was “at the same time a woman of the world,” as the poet Abbas Beydoun put it. When Jo Glenville was asked by Al-Saqi Books to edit an anthology of Palestinian women’s short stories, she told them that as a Jew she might not be the best choice to edit a Palestinian collection. But Mai disagreed — a rare attitude in today’s Arab world, for Mai was one of the few unbiased, open-minded people in this world. She was an elegant, very intelligent, humanist person who believed in variety and diversity above everything else. She supported artists, filmmakers, musicians, young designers, and writers, encouraged all, and gave each a chance. Yet, with all she had to do, Mai always made time for every single person she met, never hesitated to sit with one of us over a cup of coffee; she loved her friends and family with complete devotion.

Remembering her, the Arab literary critic Khalida Sa’id says that Mai was like a mother to all because of her vast love for every one around her, her generosity, sincerity, strong sense of friendship, patriotism, and devotion to public service. Besides her love for people, she loved art and books, film and performance, and culture in all its forms. I never understood how she managed not to miss a single play, concert, or exhibition when she passed through Beirut even for a couple of days. Asked how she first managed to cope with being an émigré, she answered that it was thanks to her parents who had given her so much love and strength, together with freedom and a feeling of responsibility. Had her parents restrained her as a child, she said, she would never have been able to do what she did.

It is now of her parents, sister Huda, and her husband Hazem, that I think with great pain as I write this profile of a rare person in our world of sorrow and conflict.

Nazik Saba Yared is a Lebanese writer.
Email: nsyared@inco.com.lb
I was lucky. I had the possibility of leaving. Many were stuck in the war and didn’t have the luxury of avoiding involvement in it. But the bliss of amnesia seems to be short-lived, and the desire to ignore my own responsibilities was a flimsy subterfuge against guilt. The most difficult thing for me to acknowledge is that I blinded myself deliberately for such a long time. It took the ripped and torn body of my brother to release me. What right do I have now to blame those who continued indulging in the abnormality of war?

I attempted a total transmutation. I had to move into a brand new setting, come to foreign lands and hear a different language before I could realize how terrible and absurd his whole thing had been. I needed to cross thousands of miles to see what it was like to live once again outside this orgy of violence and death, and to realize how terribly cruel our cruelty was. (p. 19)

The terrible thing about wars is that they turn individuals into mere members of groups, be they nations, gangs, militias, or some other kind of tribe. This may be why, when justice is done, it often looks absurd, for the criteria applied are those of a normal modern society, in which individuals are deemed responsible for their own actions. This is why, in an epoch where one’s sense of justice abhors the tribal approach in which all are punishable as one and for one, no decent person can claim to be right in the punishments they are calling for. This was the dilemma of Hannah Arendt who, after pressure and passionate pleas from various quarters, agreed to edit and cut her courageous reporting of Eichmann’s trial. This was also the genius of Ismail Kadari in writings such as Broken April, where he has us share the feelings and dilemmas of the individual whose emotions are in collision but are also inextricable from the demands of his society. His Broken April is a fresco of the sad fate of one human who is obliged to take revenge for his group even though he has no personal grudge against the person he is about to murder. This is perhaps why we sense a frustration seeping through the words of Hassan Daoud, when he sees people still acting as groups and making as much loud, anarchic noise as did the bullets and artillery of the fighters in the times of war. (p.32)

Here I am, standing silently on my Beirut balcony, puzzled and confused by my memories. And the unease remains. It is definitely not easy just to walk away and forget. Images of violence haunt me like the eye that haunted Cain. I identify with Cain. Like him, we were compelled to move from one country to another. Like the unwanted children of a happier humanity. (p. 32)
The basic argument of Haideh Moghissi’s book *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* is that the stereotypical, orientalist view of women in Islam, used by nineteenth century colonialists and contemporary neo-imperialists alike to argue for the imposition of policy changes and even military interventions in the countries of Islam ostensibly for the protection of its oppressed women, has been countered by arguments cloaked in a romantic nostalgia of an invented past, which show that women, far from being oppressed and discriminated against in Muslim society, are actually better off than they are elsewhere. Though she energetically denounces the orientalist vision, she has even harsher words for the responsive arguments, which she traces to what she regards as the dangerous post-modern idea of cultural relativism. As she sees it, this notion has served to protect from the harsh judgement of history’s oppressive regimes and systems which continue to persecute women, by refusing to censor them according to a universal standard of human rights.

It seems to me that there is a certain, though limited, merit to Moghissi’s primary claim. Modern Arab or Muslim feminists do indeed face a double-bind: if they denounce the situation of women in Islam, they are in danger of being complicit with the Orientalist cultural attack on the Muslim world, which in its turn serves as the basis of military and political action against it. If on the other hand they defend Islam from the Orientalist attack, they are in danger of becoming complicit with those laws and customs that are precisely the objects of their hostility.

This is, however, a subject that some Arab feminists, including this writer, have already dealt with, but have emerged from in refusing the rigid polarity of the trap. Quite the contrary, in recognizing the danger of both stands, they have deliberately eschewed them as elements of analysis: the first because they, as members of Arab/Muslim society, under no illusion as to what are the orientalist intentions in their regard, see themselves as much threatened by the latter’s attacks on their culture as does any other segment of society, and the second because, refusing absolutist claims, they do not see themselves as singled out for oppression by a society totally devoted to the well-being of men, but tend to identify with the universal struggle towards equal rights for all. Indeed it is the absolutist aspect of Moghissi’s arguments, as well as her insistence on a series of dichotomies that stopped me on almost every page, and that I found not only false, but entirely counter-productive to an argument meant, I suppose, to gather up feminist strength in the Middle East.

The first polarity that she creates, and which permeates her arguments, is that which opposes “Islam” with what she calls “the West,” and their relative merits as regards women and modernity. Now while it is true that Islam regards itself as governing *deen wa dunya* (religion and the world) and Islamic *sharia*, derived directly from religious texts, governs the private as well as the public worlds of women (and men, for that matter), it is surely not true that the correct counterpart of Islam is “the West.” The counterpart should be Christianity, or Judaism, whose laws are as rigid, and as oppressive
to women, if not more so, than the Muslim ones. But of course when she writes of “the West” she means secular democratic society, which has eschewed religious law altogether. It would therefore have been more correct to create polarity of opposites between religious or theocratic societies on the one hand, and secular on the other. And as secular societies she would have had to include such countries, Muslim in religion and culture, but secular in political terms, such as Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, or Iraq (before its devastation).

Furthermore, when she writes about Islam, does she mean Muslim society? Law? Culture? Religion, including rites and practices (prayer, hajj, etc)? All of the above? Are all Muslim societies the same? Do all Muslim countries apply sharia in the same way or to the same degree or with identical interpretations? Are there no class or political differences that beg the question as to which is the true ‘Muslim society’, even in those countries that are governed by a theocracy? And similarly are all Western countries equally secular? Equally ‘modern’? Is there no oppression in “the West”? And though Moghissi often has the Iranian model in mind when she writes of fundamentalism, she does not discuss the radical and inimical differences between the various groups: Hamas and Hizbullah, which are basically national liberation movements, the separatist Abu Safyan in the Philippines, the Muslim Brotherhood, Al Qaida, and the Taliban, each of which has entirely different sets of histories and motivations, and many others as well.

And amazingly Moghissi writes of Israel as secular, ignoring not only the fact that its very existence is based on religious claims, but also the terrific oppression of Palestinian Christians and Muslims, the increasing influence of fundamentalist Orthodox religious authority on state policy, especially as apply to the colonies, as well as to women, and the fact that many Muslim fundamentalist groups rose as a direct consequence of Israeli policy.

Another, more dangerous and even less acceptable dichotomy is the one she sets up - and which unfortunately she is not the only one to use - that opposes Islam to modernity, which is represented as an entirely Western fabrication. That there is a structural incompatibility between Islam and modernity (as opposed to other religions, that is) seems to me not only an absurd thing to say, but demonstrably untrue, as is the assumption that Arabs and Muslims of other cultures can lay no claim to their own forms of modernity. If Arab or Muslim modernity does not always resemble the ‘western’ model, which includes industrialization, capitalism, urbanism, and liberal sexual morals, then it is up to us to locate and define the different forms that modernity does indeed take in the Arab/Muslim worlds: these would certainly include - among many others - resistance, whether armed or intellectual, to all forms of colonialism and imperialism, and a profound consciousness of history, which is constantly being reinvestigated and discussed, however imperfectly. It would also include the conscious adaptation of ways of life to stimuli provided by the totally unjust policies and hypocritical double standards of Europe and the USA. The adoption of hijab, for instance, by millions of young women, far from being a purely religious, anti-modern phenomenon, as Moghissi and so many others see it is, I believe, at the crux of modernity, as it implies a deliberate and self-conscious effort at self-description and identification. For many years I have not had any patience with the tradition-modernity dichotomy, in which Arab/Muslim women seem always to be implicated by those who write about them, and which I have more than once labelled a ‘red herring’.

Moghissi falls into other intellectual traps that I found frankly stunning. “The systematic, vigorous, and often violent opposition to change,” she writes, “is a grim reality in many Islamic societies” (p. 19). Is fundamentalism itself, the subject of her investigation, not one of the most remarkable symbols of change in our era? Is it not dedicated precisely to changing the structures of society?

The last chapter of her book Moghissi devotes to Islamic feminism, which to her is a contradiction in terms. Because of the discriminatory nature of so many aspects of sharia and even of the religious texts themselves, she cannot conceive of women defining themselves as both Muslim and feminist. Those who do, she claims, form an elitist group; she claims it is precisely “the populist concern for
While there may be elements of truth in her accusations, certainly as applied to some writers, it seems to me that she misses a dramatically important point. She herself privileges fundamentalist Islam over the practice of their religion by millions, nay, hundreds of millions of Muslim women who live and work like women anywhere else in the modern world. And even more importantly, her accusations against fundamentalist regimes – justified though they may be – blind her to the fact that these regimes are in their very nature oppressive, not just to women, but to all who challenge their authority and its philosophical basis, including in many cases radical fundamentalist groups. This is the real problem with Moghissi’s book, which otherwise makes some interesting points and valid criticisms.

Jean Makdisi is a writer and author of Teta, Mother and Me and has written extensively on feminism. Email: jsm@cyberia.net.lb


REVIEWED BY NADIA EL CHEIKH

Anyone engaged in the study of Islamic and Middle Eastern women’s history will be familiar with the vast output of Nikki Keddie in this field. Her contributions have been seminal in propelling the investigation of women and gender relations in a variety of historical contexts. This book includes both new and old material, brought together by the author’s formidable goal of providing a general synthesis of the state of the field at this moment. Relying on the rapidly evolving expansion of research and scholarly output, it covers the period from pre-Islam until the present. The volume is in three parts. The first and lengthiest is a history of Middle Eastern women from pre-Islam until modern times. The second part includes published articles that cover broad ideas and issues. The third part is a short autobiographical section where Keddie reflects on her own development and evolving attitudes towards the field of women’s studies. The volume also contains reproductions of photographs that the author took in the Middle East in the 1970s and 1980s.

In Book One, comprising a book-length history of Middle-Eastern women, the chapter divisions are chronological. The first part deals with the period from pre-Islamic until late Mamluk times. The first chapter focuses on pre-Islamic gender societies in the Mediterranean and Arabian regions, and the rise of Islam and its effect on the gender system with a particular discussion of the relevant Qur’anic verses. The second chapter covers, in 20 pages, the periods of the Rashidun, Umayyad, and Abbasid caliphas and synthesizes information on Islamic family law, e.g. on marriage, divorce, adultery, and child custody as well as on class and slavery. Keddie also provides information about women’s lives from the Cairo Geniza documents.

This huge effort at synthesis and condensation results in the lumping of information from various periods into a seemingly indistinguishable set of historical circumstances. One example is the very
title of the section on “women’s lives and codes of honor over the centuries” (pp. 38-40). Relying on recent anthropological studies, this section discusses the notions of shame, modesty, and family honor, without any tangible historical grounding. The specific location of this section implies that its general comments are supposed to be valid for the much earlier periods. While the author rightly points out that the scarce and controversial nature of the documentation concerning women in this very long period means that a lot of what is written about it is speculative (p. 9), this does not mean that “medieval Islam,” stretching over a thousand years, should be treated in an almost monolithic fashion, especially since the author herself refers to the problem of reading later beliefs and practices into earlier events (p. 11).

Of course, part of the problem is the near absence of incisive new methodological and epistemological approaches to women and gender history for the early Islamic period. This is to be contrasted with the substantial advances made in the fields of Ottoman and modern Middle Eastern history. The respective states of the fields are reflected in Keddie’s synthesis which gives the most emphasis and space to the modern period. The available documentation, notably the legal documents for the Ottoman empire, “the wealth and reliability of this documentation, the amount of monographic scholarship available and the proliferation of Arab countries with distinct policies and histories regarding women led me to give more space to recent events than to earlier ones” (p. 10).

The fifth chapter covers the period 1914-45 and includes coverage of women in most of the Middle Eastern countries that have come into existence since 1945. The author highlights this contribution to be a special feature of the volume (p. 2) since most of these countries have not been the subject of individual narrative historical books or articles. However, the treatments are unequal. Taking the example of Lebanon for instance, the comments on legal and societal changes affecting women since 1945 are very limited (pp. 139-140). There is no mention of important advances in the law pioneered by the late Laure Moghaizel, and no reference to the more recent changes in the sexual landscape reflected in the publication of Barra, the first lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexed, and queer magazine in the Arab world. It might have been better if this chapter had been written as a bibliographical essay, highlighting further possibilities of research in certain specific areas.

Book Two includes several published essays that elucidate the current state of writing on Middle Eastern women, analyzing what has been accomplished and suggesting what is needed to further study in this field. The oldest of these articles, “Problems in the Study of Middle Eastern Women,” was a pivotal contribution at the time of its publication in 1979, and in many ways, remains an important article for the insights it brings to the study of Middle Eastern women, especially for the earlier periods. Another reprinted article, “Scholarship, Relativism, and Universalism,” discusses the problem of attitudes towards the position of Muslim women, be they hostile or apologetic. It suggests that there may be a dialectical way of contextualizing historically evolved features now considered positive or negative. Another useful article included in this section is one that surveys recent books on modern Middle Eastern women’s history, and in which the author highlights the geographical concentration of this scholarship on Egypt and Iran.

Book Three features autobiographical recollections that tell of the author’s changing attitudes with respect to women’s studies. As such it constitutes a valuable reflection on the development of the field in the last decades.

Undoubtedly, the task of synthesizing the enormous volume of information and material available is daunting. The author has tried to incorporate well-documented conclusions on a whole range of subjects, including analyses of views regarding women in the early Islamic period, assessment of the role of Turks and Mongols, analyses of Ottoman court records, studies on women’s rights movements, and other areas of inquiries. As the author states, this is a general work aimed largely at non-specialists. It could most usefully be used as a quick reference guide that can direct readers
to the larger bibliographical resources that the author so adequately includes and that are becoming increasingly available to students of Middle East women’s history.

Nadia El Cheikh is professor of History at the American University of Beirut (AUB).
Email: nmcheikh@aub.edu.lb


REVIEWED BY SAMAR KANAFANI

There is a great dearth of studies on masculinities in the Islamic and Arab world, and emerging literature on ‘subaltern’ masculinities (in this region at least) comes mostly in the form of collected essays as opposed to single-author, depth-of-field treatises. But even as it grows, this young field seems to avoid building up a canon, and this is by no means a criticism. Practitioners in this field, as in this particular collection of essays, have opted for multiplicity in form as well as content rather than any unitary voice.

This valuable addition to the expanding body of literature in men’s studies introduces multiple readings of the experiences of men (and women) in the Muslim World, without the hubris of offering up any explanations of what it means to be a Muslim man. The editor, Lahoucine Ouzgane, who is associate professor of English and film studies at the University of Alberta, intended the book to look critically at patriarchy and structures of self-proclaimed association to Islam. Based on social constructivism, this collection of essays is premised on the principle that individuals and groups participate in the making of gender realities, in this case masculinity in the context of nations where Islam prevails. The term ‘Islamic’ in the title, as differentiated from ‘Islam’, points to a distinction between notions of manliness in Muslim religious practices and codes, and social constructs of masculinity that emerge within Muslim society: two things that are all too often conflated. The 12 essays gathered here under relatively loose bearings, avoid slapping ‘Islam’ in any single-stroke onto the manifestations they address. They lean rather toward de-naturalizing the deep-seated relationship between Islam and patriarchy, and bringing to light its diversity and contradictions, which Ouzgane claims “lie at the heart of the ongoing crisis of Arab and Muslim society, thought and politics” (p. 6).

Islamic Masculinities is at its best with articles that avoid facile or frequent reference to ‘masculinity’ or ‘Islamic’ which falsely suggests that these terms are coagulated enough to serve as stable stepping stones on any thought terrain. A good example is Celia Rotherberg’s article, “My Wife is from the Jinn: Palestinian Men, Diaspora and Love,” where she tackles some themes that dissect the social articulation of ‘masculinity’ in the West Bank: love-desire, diaspora, (otherness/otherworldliness), proximity-distance.

Looking at a popular magazine serial called “My Wife is from the Jinn” as an entry point to the mostly unspoken experiences and attitudes of men in a West Bank village, Rotherberg culls shared cultural meaning on gender and masculinity there. This essay tells of how popular phantasmagorical tales with direct and metaphoric references to social pressure (from internal and external forces, including foreign occupation, marriage norms, material constraints, etc.) act upon and reflect the social imaginary, reproducing and maintaining gender boundaries. While buttressing patriarchal structures, the fictiveness of these stories opens up a much-needed valve to release the pressure on men and women alike. The thematic axes Rotherberg builds her treatise upon allow her to discuss community belonging without ever mentioning ‘masculinity’, ‘Islamic’, or men’s (or women’s) ideal attributes or (un)acceptable behavior, a trap Banu Helvacioglu falls into after a promising start to her essay, “The smile of death and the solemncholy of masculinity.”
In this autobiographic account, Helvacioglu presents her bereavement over her tragically deceased parents as a gender transgression within strictly codified religious funerary customs (embalming, prayer, interment, etc.) in Turkey. She insists on washing her mother’s body (although Islamic law only permits an officiated female imam to do so), demands to touch her father’s naked body, and attends otherwise all-male funerary prayer sessions. Emerging as gender crossovers, her irregular exigencies are a struggle to wrest her parents’ corpses from the claims of religious patriarchy, re-appropriating their deaths when their lives could no longer be re-appropriated. With a subtle sense of defeat, Helvacioglu abruptly abandons this valuable line of thought in favor of a historic overview of the ‘gender regime’ and ‘masculine’ public roles and attributes in Turkey since the 1920s. The essay stalls with an enumeration of gender (masculine) stereotypes, leaving the reader wanting problematization of the gender regime rather than its repetition.

Durre Ahmad explores the gendered psychic and symbolic disposition of Islamic extremism among underprivileged men in Pakistan. The strength of her essay, “Gender and Islamic Spirituality: A Psychological View of ‘Low’ Fundamentalism,” lies in her ability to link the psychological experience of popular fundamentalists to imbalanced international relations that have widened social inequalities. She situates ‘high’ fundamentalism within educated scientific ‘modernity’, defining ‘low’ fundamentalism as the uneducated, struggling, and intellectually stifled fall-out of imbalanced distribution of power (p. 23). She argues that Saudi state ‘money-theism’ (adopted as the Pakistani state’s own modus operandi), with its focus on material, rational, and technical aspects of Islam, has stifled Islamic cultural diversity, creating a “culturally eroded spiritual environment” (p. 25). Systems of regimented and gender-segregated Islamic schooling and socialization not only exacerbate conditions of financial, social, and political marginality, they also inspire an ‘anti-feminine’ psychological disposition and the distancing of more ‘feminine’ and sensual attributes of Islamic belief and practice (e.g. mysticism). Using ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ as symbolic sets that extend beyond embodiment by either of the sexes, Ahmad remarks that men’s need to ‘other’ the feminine is one way that they consolidate their authority within the modern nation-state. She might have added that such patriarchal strategies are most symptomatic of the heightened boundary patrolling that occurs in fraught nations (fractious from within or threatened from without), of which Pakistan is a good example.

In “Stranger Masculinities: Gender and Politics in a Palestinian-Israeli ‘Third Space” Daniel Monterescu proposes ‘situational masculinity’ as a model to understand the practice and meaning of men’s multiple identity sets among Palestinian-Israelis in Jaffa. He argues that by operating through a broad discourse of ‘traditional’ gender behavior, masculinity in Jaffa incorporates seemingly irreconcilable essentialist identity components: conservative-modern, Islamic-secular, Arab-Western. Through ‘identity play’ (the mediation between and permutation of various — in this case essentially conflictual — identities) Jaffan men manage their liminal and contested manliness, juggling multiple value systems which they selectively deploy and underscore. Maintaining his analysis on a semiotic level, Monterescu presents a useful interpretation of gender discourse, but leaves out any substantial description of the situations that require or inspire Jaffan men to shuffle identities.

Marcia Inhorn’s article, “The Worms are Weak,” brings to this book the slant of anthropology of the body, more specifically procreation theory. Her central proposition is that even when the cause of childlessness among Egyptian couples proves medically to be the husband’s infertility, Egyptian women tend to carry the social blame. Organizing her essay around four sets of ‘patriarchal paradoxes’, Inhorn argues that the prevailing belief that male sperm makes the larger (or even entire) contribution to foetal formation is partly responsible for this uneven burden of responsibility. The other and principal reason, however, is the overarching patriarchal and patrilineal value system, which prompts Egyptian women to conceal their husbands’ infertility to protect their social reputations, particularly from other men. This protectiveness stems from
the great threat that infertility poses to normative masculinity in a society where male fertility is equated with virility, manliness, and even ‘personhood’ (p. 299). She writes that “by feeling compelled to shoulder the blame, they [infertile men’s wives] ensure that male infertility remains ‘invisible’ and hegemonic masculinities remain intact” (pp. 230-231).

Don Conway-Long discusses Moroccan men’s perceptions of, and attitudes towards, change in gender relations, particularly as regards power shifts between men and women, both in domestic and public space. The main value of his research is the intriguing observation that changes in the gender order, of both practice and meaning, are prompting Moroccan men to feel ‘oppressed’ by women. More interesting, however, is his suggestion that this feeling may be contributing, in unseen and unfelt ways, to the self-same structures of gender inequality that men perceive to be at risk. In this accessible and engaging essay, Conway-Long taps right into Ouzgane’s general theoretical perspective by basing his analysis on the notion that individual negotiations produce broader ideological systems of gender. Most of the men the author interviewed said they felt ‘ambivalent’ about the changes the society was undergoing and the empowerment, if incremental, that women were claiming. Men’s ‘oppression’ is one strategy of negotiation whereby men are casting themselves as the victims (the ‘reverse perspective’), as a sign of fear of change and resistance against it (pp. 148-149).

With this essay it becomes obvious that the concepts of ‘ambivalence; ‘in-betweenness; and ‘liminality’ are persistent themes in Ouzgane’s collection. Embodying the challenges facing normative and dominant constructs of manliness, these concepts bring out the idea that social change, political struggle, personal tragedy, and migration are all shaping and shifting the ways that gender is played out and articulated in the family and community. That so many of the essays in the book should wind up with presentations of neither-here-nor-there cultural spaces (Conway-Long, Rahman, Helvascioglu), or of contradictory experiences (Monterescu, Inhorn), hints, in my view, at a welcome crisis in the production of dominant masculinity.

Samar Kanafani is an independent researcher and a video-maker. She presently works at the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts - Ashkal Alwan.
Email: samar@kanafani.net

Review of Women’s Studies Volumes 1 (2003), 2 (2004), 3 (2005), Edited by Penny Johnson (English) and Jamil Hilal (Arabic). Published by the Institute of Women’s Studies, Birzeit University.

REVIEWED BY ROSEMARY SAYIGH

The Review of Women’s Studies is remarkable on several counts: the level of interest of its contents; its thrust towards linking gender studies to the building of a democratic Arab society; and not least the conditions of its production under Israeli siege and closure. The year of its launching, 2002, saw the Israeli re-occupation of the whole West Bank, manifested in a situation of violence, closure, and curfew that affected every aspect of daily life. As the Introduction to the first volume notes, this was a period when Birzeit students and faculty faced a daily struggle to reach the university. That the Birzeit Institute of Women’s Studies (IWS) carried on and even expanded its teaching, research and publication program under such conditions is a sign of the dynamic that links work on gender to Palestinian resistance.

From its establishment in 1994, the Birzeit Institute of Women’s Studies has been active in the field of publishing in English and Arabic, notably the ‘Gender and Society’ working papers, and the ‘Palestinian Women: A Status Report’ series. In 1998, it launched its MA teaching program in Gender, Law and Development. Around this program a cadre of faculty and graduate student
researchers has been formed that has engaged in large collective surveys as well as individual research projects. This research has laid an infrastructure of collective survey work for the Review to draw on, for example a survey of 2,254 households in nineteen communities in the West Bank and Gaza (1999); a survey of 401 households affected by Israeli attack in 2002; and an in-depth study of the effects of the occupation on three Ramallah neighborhoods (begun in 2004). Senior students from the MA program have taken part in these projects.

Articles by senior Institute faculty and associates form the core of the Review, often chapters written for books published outside the region, or excerpted from theses. Papers by beginner scholars add to the Review’s exceptionality as both showcase and stimulus for new research in gender. Each issue carries independent English and Arabic sections. Explanatory introductions, neat layout and almost total freedom from linguistic or typographical errors make the Review a pleasure to read.

Law and legal reform figure prominently. Rema Hammami’s “Attitudes Towards Legal Reform of Personal Status Law in Palestine” (volume 1) is based on an attitudinal survey designed by the Institute in March 2000. Shuaa Marrar gives a grassroots perspective in her “Views from the Ground: Experiences and Perceptions of Women’s Rights and Activism in the Lives of Rural and Refugee Women” (volume 2). A paper by Fadwa Labidi examines fatwas regarding early marriage issued by the Palestinian Al-Fatwa Supreme Council (volume 2). Nahda Shehadeh’s study of nafaqa claims in courts in Gaza points to the way ordinary women may bring about change in legal interpretation (volume 2). The paper on ‘crimes of honour’ by Lynn Welchman and Sara Hossein (volume 3) is excerpted from a research and action project around the globe, and emphasizes the use of the phrase ‘crimes of honour’ in stereotyping Islamic societies. These papers illuminate the interaction between an emergent legal framework and popular male and female attitudes to women’s rights, in an Arab society under occupation.

The occupation/resistance dynamic is present throughout these first three issues of the Review as a frame through which gender is examined. The clearest statement is given by Penny Johnson and Eileen Kuttab in “Where have All the Women (and Men) Gone?” (volume 1), a paper that points to the inequalities implicit in the Oslo Accords and a cascade of social effects: a militarization of younger men; a ‘crisis of paternity’ for older ones through unemployment; stress in gender roles and ‘hardening of gender asymmetries’. Whereas the first Intifada brought women into the streets, the second has intensified their domestic roles, making these harder and more agonizing. Yet activist women contribute in numerous ways, through vigils and demonstrations, and in forums that keep alive the debate on the relationship between nationalism and feminism.

Islah Jad’s “The NGOization of the Arab Women’s Movements” (volume 2) takes up an important issue as relevant to Lebanon and other Arab countries as to Palestine. The rapid growth of NGOs in the Arab world is part of a global phenomenon, closely linked to the priorities of Northern donors. Jad suggests that local NGOs are not necessarily contributing to social justice or the building of civil society, and that when women activists move into NGO work they are likely to become disconnected from the grass-roots.

Palestinian households and families caught under Israeli occupation and involved in resistance to it is another major focus of IWS research, since this dynamic is bound to affect gender relations, whether through impoverishment, human loss, men’s imprisonment, women’s greater work load, or reactions around gender. Lisa Taraki’s “Palestine Through the Lens of the Family” (volume 2) is the introduction to a newly published book, which emanates from the 1999 household survey mentioned earlier, and reflects the critical stance of the IWS towards common ideas such as that of the Palestinian family’s unlimited capacity to absorb shocks. Lamis Abu Nahleh’s “The Rise and Fall of a Patriarch” (volume 3), excerpted from her chapter in the same book, is a rare longitudinal study that looks at the same family over two generations, with particular focus on the power
of the household heads, and rebellion and status-change of the women of the family. Another contribution by Abu Nahleh comes out of the 1999 household survey and explores its findings in relation to parental attitudes towards the employment of daughters and daughters-in-law (volume 1). A suggestive finding here is the greater conservatism of urban compared to rural parents. Based in the three communities study of 2004, Penny Johnson looks closely at Am‘ari camp, noting an increasing tendency towards class stratification in spite of greater poverty and insecurity compared with ‘normal’ neighbourhoods. Edouard Conte’s “The Other Wall” (volume 3) shows how Palestinian families are affected by new Israeli laws forbidding marriage across the Green Line. Though gender history is not a component of the Institute’s program, two of the Review’s articles break this ground. Rema Hammami’s “Gender, Nakbe and Nation: Palestinian Women’s Presence and Absence in the Narration of 1948 Memories” (volume 2) analyzes the almost total absence of women’s voices from media commemorations of the Nakba in 1998. While based on recent texts, Hammami carries her analysis back to the exclusion of women in the Birzeit’s ‘Destroyed Village’ series, and to the period of Resistance group mobilization in Lebanon during the 1970s, when the Resistance raised peasant men to a symbol of resistance while failing to record their voices. Hammami links this muting of women and peasant men to their similarly iconic meanings in nationalist representation. Islah Jad’s “Re-Reading the Mandate: Palestinian Women and the Double Jeopardy of Colonialism” is taken from her masterly history of the Palestinian women’s movement that sets it in each successive historical context up to the second Intifada. Jad points to the importance of the Mandate in crystallizing a class structure that continues to affect women and their mobilization.

The Documents section carried in each issue of the Review closely reflects the Occupation, and the Institute’s involvement in researching its impact on Palestinian communities and women. Rita Giacaman and Penny Johnson’s report on “Who Lives in Jenin Camp?” (volume 1) was written during Israel’s attack in the spring of 2002, when Jenin was under siege and Ramallah under curfew. Produced under the same conditions, Eileen Kuttab and Riham Barghouthi’s report on “The Impact of Armed Conflict on Palestinian Women” (volume 1) is based on a new survey of wives and mothers in 401 households affected by Israeli violence. The Institute contributed a gender section to the national report carried by the Palestinian delegation to the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo (1994), published in volume 2 of the Review. Volume 3 carries a report on “Meeting the Housing Needs of Palestinian Women and Men: Conclusions and Recommendations” by Eileen Kuttab, Randa Nassar, and Lina Mi’ari, based in an attitudinal survey of women’s and men’s attitudes towards property rights. Publication of a forum on the Palestinian draft constitution (“Arba‘a mudakhalat hawl muswadat al-dustour”) (volume 1) is further evidence of the Institute’s involvement with nation-building, gender and democracy.

For all its disastrous political consequences, the Oslo Accords let loose a wave of creativity inside the occupied Palestinian territories which went beyond state-building. A set of lively institutions – educational, legal, health, statistical, cultural, research – arose in the same historical context of hope of liberation and independence. Anyone visiting the West Bank and Gaza cannot but be amazed by this charge of productivity in the face of Israeli repression. The Review (and the Institute of Women’s Studies behind it) is a part of this wave of national and cultural resistance. As the editors remark in their Introduction to the first issue, “The struggle to teach and conduct research is part of the determination of Palestinian society to survive, develop and live and work as ordinary human beings, even when under siege.”

For more information: http://www.birzeit.edu/centers/wso.html or http://home/birzeit.edu.wsi

Rosemary Sayigh is an anthropologist and oral historian who has written about Palestinians in general and women in particular.
Email: rsayigh@cyberia.com.lb

REVIEWED BY JEHAN MULLIN

In Gender, Behavior and Health: Schistosomiasis Transmission and Control in Rural Egypt, Samiha El Katsha and Susan Watts examine schistosomiasis (commonly known as bilharzia) in two semi-rural villages in the Nile Delta, employing gender analysis in order to better understand human behaviors that lead to infection, transmission, and prevention. It is one study among a very select few that examines the socio-behavioral and gendered aspects of schistosomiasis, a parasitic disease found predominantly in tropical and sub-tropical countries that infected over two hundred million people world-wide during the mid-1990s while three times that amount were estimated to be at-risk (p. 1). This multi-disciplined and multi-faceted study, conducted between 1991-1996, explores individual and social behaviors while also examining the complex interactions between gender, behavior, biomedicine, the environment, agriculture, and economic factors that relate to schistosomiasis.

It is important to draw attention to the fact that the authors are not epidemiologists. Rather, one is a social anthropologist while the other is a health geographer. From their perspective, schistosomiasis is a “disease of human behavior” and therefore socially patterned (p. 3). They also view it as an “illness,” a term that signifies the individual’s interpretation of their condition and the disease, as opposed to viewing it solely as a pathogen. Equally important to this extraordinarily thorough and developed study is the use of gender analysis at every stage of the project. As it relates to schistosomiasis, gender is crucial precisely because gender affects the behavior of males and females. These behaviors are key to understanding schistosomiasis since human behavior directly relates to the “exposure to infection at a water source and contamination of the water source” (p. 36).

For both schistosomiasis haematobium and schistosomiasis mansoni, the two major forms of the disease found in Egypt, the parasite first enters the individual via the skin, eventually reaching the bladder in the first form (haematobium) and the intestine in the latter form (mansoni). In the case of schistosomiasis haematobium the schistosome eggs are dispersed through the urine while for schistosomiasis mansoni the eggs are dispersed through the feces. Water sources such as canals serve as the sites of contagion. Once infected, if the individual remains undiagnosed and the infection goes untreated, he/she may further contaminate water sources thus aiding in future transmission.

Although they employed both quantitative and qualitative methods, El Katsha and Watts relied heavily upon the qualitative ones. In order to examine schistosomiasis from transmission to treatment they needed to know, inter alia, what went on at contamination sites, during visits to local health clinics, during school-based screening programs, after individuals became ill from infection, and they needed to know what all of these events meant to the individuals involved. Gender was also important because, as the researcher team found, “Meanings and expectations were often based on gender roles” (p. 75). This draws attention to the need for qualitative research through observation and in-depth discussions, for it is through qualitative research that the meanings attached to the various stages of the disease and to the activities that lead to infection can be discerned. Simply put, qualitative research helped them to provide information that could not be expressed numerically (p. 75). Through the use of these methodologies in both their research and action-based interventions, El Katsha and Watts were able to fill in gaps left by previous research projects and national initiatives.

For example, gendered domestic responsibilities coupled with a lack of water connections such as taps and/or drains within households, or safe methods of waste removal, have necessitated
women’s continued use of the canals, thus risking exposure to infection. The common assumption is that if households had better access to water connections within the home and to waste removal systems, then this would reduce incidence rates by reducing women’s exposure to canal sites.

However, research for this study found that women who do have access to such technologies in the home still preferred using the canals, the site of infection. El Katsha and Watts identified a variety of reasons why women would continue risking exposure. Canals, it seemed, provided the women with more space to do their work than the small sinks or basins available in their homes, making washing easier. Disposing of sullage in the canals meant they did not need to worry about overflowing septic tanks with wastewater. The researchers also found that many women felt that the canal water aided them in their responsibilities as housewives by, for example, making the clothes they washed cleaner, the pots and pans shinier. For women whose pride and power are associated with their achievements in the domestic sphere, these reasons are not to be underestimated. Socializing with other women was a significant factor too and was enabled by their use of the canals which also served as public gathering sites.

As part of their action-oriented research model, El Katsha and Watts developed strategies based on their research findings in order to help prevent the transmission of schistosomiasis. In one action-oriented strategy they addressed the factors contributing to women’s continued exposure at canal sites by creating a community-designed laundry, which reduced women’s risk of contamination by providing a safe and accessible public laundry center that was desirable to local women. In another major intervention, El Katsha and Watts offered a gender-sensitive initiative to school-based screening programs – which constituted the second most used method of diagnosis in the two surveyed villages – that surprisingly required no additional costs or staff.

The book provides illustrations, figures, tables, maps, a list of acronyms, and a glossary, all of which help to render the intense amount of information contained in the book comprehensible to readers regardless of their academic discipline. Furthermore, the Table of Contents is highly developed and specific, breaking down each chapter into subheadings, which makes referencing the wealth of information provided accessible to the reader. At times, information presented in the book is a bit dry and certain parts do not always appear relevant to the main purpose of the study. Overall, however, the entire book works to create a solid understanding of the highly complex relationships that contribute to the continued presence of schistosomiasis (bilharzia) in Egypt today.

*Gender, Behavior and Health* is an excellent example of the potential of multi-disciplined, action-oriented, participatory research. It demonstrates why gender analysis is crucial to the field of public health studies and not, as is often thought, only necessary when examining women’s health issues. It is successful precisely because, as the authors explain, the study focuses on “what actually happens in practice, in contrast to a unified model which presents a top-down view of what planners consider ought to happen” (p. 70). This study is recommended to all those interested in applied social sciences, public health, gender and/or development studies.

Jehan Mullin is conducting an oral history project with Americans of Lebanese descent evacuated during the 2006 Israel war against Lebanon.
Email: jehanmullin@hotmail.com

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**REVIEWED BY SALLY BLAND**

Like her life, Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif’s fiction spans the cultural divide, moving between Europe and the Arab World, particularly Britain and Egypt. The other main divide she addresses
is that between man and woman. After publishing her first novel, *In the Eye of the Sun*, in 1992, Soueif was singled out by Edward Said among the new generation of Arabs writing in English for her ability to dissect sexual politics.

*In the Eye of the Sun* also had political-historical overtones, showing a young Egyptian girl coming of age in the time of Nasser and the turmoil of war. Soueif’s next novel, *The Map of Love* (1999), was even more ambitiously political and was short-listed for the Booker Prize. A full-blown historical novel, *The Map of Love* spans a century of Egypt’s encounter with the West, from the time of British colonialism until the present, counterpoising two cross-cultural love stories.

Even before Soueif gained international recognition, the roots of her twin themes of gender and cultural diversity, the excellence of her prose, and the prototypes of some of her novels’ characters were apparent in her short story collections: *Aisha* and *Sandpiper*. Recently, selected stories from these two books have been released by Bloomsbury in a new volume entitled *I Think of You*.

Aisha, who lends her name to Soueif’s first collection, appears and reappears at different stages of her life, though not necessarily in chronological order, each story giving a new perspective on her. A precocious child, she grows into an intelligent young woman with great expectations. “The world has undreamt-of possibilities,” she believes (p. 79). She anticipates magic, adventure, meaning in life and love, but on her own terms. It is not that she is unwilling, but she is actually incapable of molding herself to fit neatly into the shadow of the man she loves. Yet, this is what is expected of women (and not only in Egypt).

Soueif doesn’t tell the reader all this directly. The genius of her writing is that she conveys a strong sense of women’s independent being and their need for open, sensitive lines of communication and equal recognition, obliquely, without any overtly feminist fanfare. Though Soueif is obviously an intellectual, the feminism that courses through her writing is not based on rational arguments about what should be. Rather, it seems instinctive, as natural as breathing.

From Aisha’s disappointment in love, from her inner conflicts, and the larger picture of conflict between women’s needs and social conventions, arises the tension in the stories. Subtly, through small incidents, scraps of conversation, minute reactions and descriptions of natural and man-made settings, Soueif draws her female characters and their emotional world. Aisha and other women in the stories are not unfulfilled because they are unattractive or unloved, but because they are unable to settle for an apparently successful marriage without their spiritual needs being met. This has little to do with abuse, though there are some instances of it, but everything to do with the incompatibility that grows if one’s partner is overshadowing, condescending, or self-centered. When Aisha suggests going on an exciting trip with her husband, he replies that he has already done that. “And it was true. He had already done it. He had already done a lot of things. His memories were more vivid to her than her own. She had no memories. She had had no time to acquire a past and in her worst moments, locked up in some bathroom, it had seemed to her that his past was devouring the present” (p. 17).

Some stories highlight how class figures into sexual politics. Overprotected by her well-to-do, highly educated parents, Aisha learns about the facts of life and the battle of the sexes from Zeina, her nanny, whose experience reveals the compromises and devices to which women of lesser means must resort to keep their social standing and marriages intact. Frustrated by her husband’s dry scientific certainty and lack of empathy, Aisha also ventures into mysticism, far outside her own social milieu, to attend a zar-like gathering at a saint’s shrine, thinking, “Let things come to a head. Let them all know she would do as she pleased and there was no harm in it. Let them know there were more ways of being in the world than the way they chose. And let them know she was not content with the way mapped out for her” (p. 169). Seeking a cure to restore her love for her husband in order to conceive, she gets caught up in the charged
atmosphere of unabashed sensuality and follows a lead that leaves her broken. Overall in these stories, Soueif sets up an interesting contrast to suggest a rethinking of marriage. Marriage is portrayed as necessary for survival and often empowering for women who are unable to go beyond prevailing social norms, but restricting for women who aspire to be independent and creative.

Aisha and her husband reappear in *Sandpiper*, Soueif’s second collection of short stories, and are joined by other characters of diverse origins, each giving voice to a specific experience. In these stories, sexual politics are infused with cultural differences, motherhood plays a prominent role, and Soueif’s tone is sometimes sharper.

The first story takes place in an expatriate compound in an unnamed oil state, which Soueif uses as a laboratory to explore different faces of the oppression of women, whether from East or West. Another story exposes the potential for sexual abuse within the family and how it can be covered up by a forced marriage. The weakness of the women in these stories sets Soueif’s typically strong-willed female characters in sharper relief, and tellingly the stronger women express themselves in a more gentle way, like the woman in *Sandpiper*, the story that gives the book its name.

The beach of Alexandria provides the setting for this most beautifully written story. Looking out to sea, “I was trying to work out my co-ordinates,” says a woman who is coming to terms with leaving her husband and thus giving up her daughter. This is not because of any wrong doing on his part; she simply can’t fit into the new culture of his family’s life style. She cannot “love this new him, who had been hinted at but never revealed when we lived in my northern land, and who after a long absence, had found his way back into the heart of his country” (p. 25). Too late, she realizes that she should have left earlier, when she could have taken her child with her. Now this is impossible, for the daughter is at home in Egypt, and no longer needs her mother. Employing imagery from the sea and the sand, Soueif expresses the organic bonds of motherhood and this woman’s sense of loss in an unparalleled fashion. While Soueif’s instinctive feminism postulates women’s independence, it does not ignore or aspire to dissolve the emotional bonding of family and love, despite the conflict and sorrow this may entail.

Sally Bland reviews books for the Jordan Times and Al-Raida and writes on cultural affairs.
Email: sallybland90@hotmail.com


REVIEWED BY TANIA TABBARA

I’ve always had mixed feelings concerning anthologies on women writers. It seems to me that classifying writers by their nationality and their gender does not really do justice to the creative originality of their stories. By classifying them in that way the stories are somehow assumed to reflect a certain social and political reality, which might not at all be intended by the writers. Especially regarding female writers from the Middle East, one expects to find stories that reflect upon the suppression of women in a patriarchal society that is determined by Islamic culture. Palestinian women writers have to fight this cliché as much as the expectation that their writing is (merely) informed by their status as refugees or occupied people (which of course might be the case but not necessarily so, or maybe only partially so).

Yet, flipping through *Qissat: Short Stories by Palestinian Women*, edited by Jo Glenville, I was immediately fascinated by the stories, which by no means only “reflect the everyday concerns of Palestinians living under occupation,” as the back cover of the book suggests, even though
all writers of course do have a biographical connection to Palestine in one way or the other. The choice of writers is interesting because they come from different generations; some are still very young, others dead already, and they grew up and have lived in many different places, such as Lebanon, Palestine, Kuwait, Jordan, and the United States, to mention only a few of them. Five of the sixteen stories were written in English, the others are translated from Arabic.

It is therefore not astonishing that many stories evolve around themes of identity, mobility, and migrant experiences. In “Local Hospitality” by Naomi Shihab Nye, the main characters attempt to negotiate an identity between their past in a village in Palestine that is characterized by traditions and social collective pressures, and their present life in the United States where they have come to develop and enjoy individual freedoms and aspirations. Mobility (or rather the lack thereof) is also a theme in Liana Badr’s “Other Cities,” where the main character, a mother of six, who is poor and lives in Hebron with no ID, is dreaming of going to Ramallah, a place so close and yet so far away due to the Israeli checkpoints all over the West Bank. Against all odds and despite of her own fears, she risks her journey together with her children. The story unfolds interestingly and comes to a rather surprising ending.

In “Me (the Bitch) and Bustanji” Selma Dabbagh explores themes of identity and growing up as a female in a predominantly male society. The story of an adolescent girl with Palestinian and British parents, set in Kuwait during the Iraqi invasion, is beautifully observed in its details and does not lack humour despite the sad events the story narrates. Equally powerful and creative is Adania Shibli’s “May God Keep Love in a Cool and Dry Place” (it is not her story “Dust” that is included in the anthology, as the back cover of the book claims), an intimate and dense portrayal of a couple once in love and slowly falling out of love, despite both their wishes to hold on to it. Shibli succeeds in developing an atmosphere full of tensions, translating subtle emotions into language.

“The Tables Outlived Amin” by Nuha Samara and “Pietà” by Jean Said Makdisi both look at the experience of violence during the Civil War in Lebanon, but from very different angles. Nuha Samara’s story is developed around two friends, an artist, who passionately describes his beloved city Beirut, and his friend, a fighter, who at first is depicted in a rather dogmatic manner, and who does not believe in the power of art, and that change in society can come through peaceful means. Paradoxically, it is because of his feelings that in the end he dies, in an attempt to rescue his family. The artist, in a fit of anger and grief, violently avenges his friend’s death.

In “Pietà” Jean Said Makdisi develops a psychological portrayal of a well-off Palestinian woman who has lived in Beirut during and after the Civil War. The story narrates the feelings of shock and guilt that the character is going through when, by coincidence, she meets an old acquaintance. Suddenly she is faced not only with the tragic loss that this woman from a poor Palestinian background has suffered during the war, but also with her own privileged situation.

Although “Her Tale” by Samira Azzam was written about half a century ago, its theme of honor killing is still relevant. In this touching, poetically written story, a woman is addressing her little brother who is planning to kill her. Without accusing him, she is seeking his compassion, explaining to him her feelings and the circumstances that have driven her into prostitution.

“Dates and Bitter Coffee” by Donia El Amal Ismaeel reads like a parody of the politicized mourning rituals that usually take place after someone has died a martyr. In the story, just minutes after a young man had passed away, his family, still under shock, has to cope with such a loud politically motivated mourning ceremony, which does not leave room for their feelings of grief and pain: “… the father was out of his seat and speeding away in his car, without a word to his wife and children. He raced along, leaving behind his son’s mourning ceremony which had been transformed in the blink of an eye into a poster, a microphone, and a death notice in a newspaper he never read” (p. 115).
The Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) through its director Dima Dabbous-Sensenig along with two LAU graduate students participated in the workshop titled “Teaching Gender: Curriculum Workshop” that took place at the universities of Sana’a and Aden from June 9-12, 2007. The two graduate students, Rebecca Ammar and Abir Ward, were nominated by the Comparative Literature department because of their academic distinction and because their Master’s thesis deals with gender issues.

The purpose of the workshop was to develop a two-week intensive course to be offered at the University of Oldenburg, Germany, in October 2007, to international students. During the workshop, attended by faculty and students from the five partner institutions, the participants sought to examine ways of teaching gender as a framework and analytical tool in social science research. Moreover, they looked into the potential that the international cooperation offers in terms of strengthening the gender studies program at the respective universities.

The Yemen partner meeting is the initial phase of a larger project titled “Politics and Gender – A Transnational Research and Teaching Network” that involves cooperation between five universities institutions from Germany and various Arab countries namely the Gender Development Research and Studies Center (GDRSC) at San’a University, Yemen; the Women’s Research and Training Center (WRTC) at the University of Aden; the Center
Group picture of the participants from the five workshop partners.

for Studies and Research on Women (CSAROW) at University Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdallah, Fes, Morocco; the Working Group Gender-Migration-Politics (WGGMP) at Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany; and the Institute for Women’s Studies (IWSAW) at the Lebanese American University, Lebanon.

The trip was fully funded by the German-Arab University Dialogue of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). DAAD will also be funding the intensive course that will be given at the University of Oldenburg in October 2007. As part of the intensive course, IWSAW director Dima Dabbous-Sensenig will be teaching two seminars, one on gender and religion and the other on gender and the media.

From left to right: Rebecca Ammar, Dima Dabbous-Sensenig, and Abir Ward.
IWSAW was invited to attend the Workshop of the Women’s Studies’ and Gender Research Network on July 25 and 26, 2007 in Manila, the Philippines. During the workshop the network members discussed ways of collaborating with UNESCO Social and Human Sciences Program for Gender Equality and Women’s Rights and areas for inter-university/research centers collaboration on gender issues across continents. Ms. Anita Nassar represented IWSAW in this workshop. Participants included prominent experts/academics from Uganda, Australia, Costa Rica, Argentina, and USA.

From left to right, back row: Aurora Javate-De Dios, Zosimo Lee, Jose David Lapuz, Alison Kimmich, Dina Rodriguez, Eunice Smith, Graciela Di Marco, Josefa Francisco, Tabitha Mulyampti, Suzanne Franzway. From left to right, front row: Preciosa Soliven, Patricia Licuanan, Pierre Sane, Anita Nassar, Valentine Moghadam.

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**Call for Papers**

The Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), at the Lebanese American University, is in the process of soliciting articles for the forthcoming issue of our quarterly publication Al-Raida, which will focus on “Women in Graphic Design.” (For more information on Al-Raida, kindly visit [http://www.lau.edu.lb/centers-institutes/iwsaw/raida.html](http://www.lau.edu.lb/centers-institutes/iwsaw/raida.html))

The issue will be edited by Ms. Linda Selwood Choueiri, Chairperson of the Design Department, Notre Dame University, Lebanon.

We are interested in receiving academic studies and critical essays pertaining to the topic.

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**Forthcoming Issue: Women in Graphic Design**

Graphic Design Topics may include but are not restricted to:

- Historical perspectives of Visual Communications in the Arab world.
- Expressions of femininity - in Arab countries as symbols, clichés or icons.
- Expressions of femininity in a context of conflict war and violence.
- Expressions of femininity related to gender, sexuality, and stereotyping.
- Lack of national identity that leads to mimicking of Western design idea.
- Arab women designers in the work place, the challenges and discrimination they face.

If you are interested in contributing to this issue of Al-Raida, kindly send your article no later than April 30, 2008 simultaneously to the Managing Editor, Ms. Myriam Sfeir, at al-raida@lau.edu.lb and to the Guest Editor, Ms. Linda Selwood Choueiri, at lchoueiri@ndu.edu.lb