

“MANY GHOSTS TO FIGHT, MANY PREJUDICES TO OVERCOME”

When asked by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World to write an introductory article (on the short stories written by Lebanese women since 1960) to a “Bibliography of Lebanese Woman's Writing,” I did not hesitate despite many other responsibilities. Starting off, I had expected a handful of stories, but I began to discover that the number of stories as well as novels written by women is considerable. I found out that with the exception of few writers, the bulk of women's writing is virtually unknown to the reader despite the sound quality of many of their works.

While the majority of women's work is underestimated compared to the works of male writers, only few women such as Layla Baalbakki, Hanan al-Shaykh, Emily Nassrallah, Ghada al-Samman, and Layla Ussayran have enjoyed recognition. The fact that Nasrallah, al-Samman, and Ussayran have continued to publish regularly since the 1960's until the present, has kept them generally within the field of literary and artistic visibility. As for Layla Baalbakki, the stir created by her collection of short stories entitled *A Spaceship of Tenderness to the Moon* (*Safīnat Ḥanān 'ilā al-Qamar*, 1963) and the charge of immorality must have incited people to read her book if only out of curiosity. Baalbakki was summoned to the office of the chief of the Beirut vice squad who carried out an investigation concerning the subject and words used in her book of short stories. Baalbakki's defense lawyers clarified her intentions and asserted that the “stories in question do not arouse sexual instincts or harm public morality.” On the contrary, the “work is to be seen rather as a serious creative effort, a call to set people free from their narrow environments, a call for all of us to face the naked truth and its ramifications, to see good and evil and to learn to choose between them, not with eyes closed with the trachoma of tradition that has woven a veil of ignorance around us, but with eyes wide open toward the light.”¹ While al-Shaykh was recognized in Lebanon only after her books attracted the attention of Western readers and scholars, and after *The Story of Zahra* (*Ḥikāyat Zahrah*, 1980) was translated into English in 1986.

Needless to say, the vast majority of fiction written by women has remained unknown and unappreciated. One reason for this is that poetry, considered the superior genre and monopolized by male writers, overshadowed most

works of fiction, particularly those written by women. At the same time, the general prejudice against women and the strongly ingrained view of the “limitation” of their lives, their personal experience and, consequently, their intellectual and cultural abilities have kept many women on the defensive and made them shun personal issues and embrace general and public themes. For instance, in her autobiography entitled *Colored Ribbons* (*Sharā'it Mulawwanah*, 1994), Layla Ussayran describes herself as a representative of a generation and insinuates that if the reader is looking for any information regarding her personal life, he will discover that her greatest passion is her struggle in the national movement and the Palestinian resistance. Similarly, 'Anbara Salam in her autobiography *Roaming Memories between Lebanon and Palestine* (*Jawlah fī al-Zikrayāt bayna Lubnān wa Falasṭīn*, 1978) refers to her work as a “history of an era that I lived and a representation of historical and social incidents.”

The fact that women have been associated with the “trivialities” of housework and the limitations of the home plot has emboldened critics and encouraged them either to approach women's work with condescension and with a sense of superiority, or to overlook it completely. It is worthwhile noting here that many of those who have reviewed women's writing or have written about it have been predominantly women rather than men. It is as though women's writing was the man's least concern. This attitude still persists at universities where fiction by men is given precedence, while fiction by women is virtually non-existent in the class room. Nevertheless, the most worrying part of it is that many of the women who have reviewed works written by women have approached them with the same tools and criteria adopted by men, and thus manifested, in many cases, a great deal of misunderstanding of and prejudice against women's writing.

For instance, according to Aida Labaki, literature is a mission, and because women's daily life does not allow them to devote all their time to literature, they have not excelled in their work. The meagerness of their input can be measured against the productivity and resourcefulness of male writers like Tawfiq al-Hakim and Mikhail Nuaymah. Accordingly, and owing to the paucity of their productions, their works have not left the right impact on the literary

world². Some other critics assume that women are out of their depth when they enter the complex and sophisticated realm of language. Baalbakki's overuse of colloquialisms in **Al-Āliha al-Mamsūkhah** displeased many critics such as Ayidah Idriss (who reviewed Baalbakki's novel in **Al-Jadīd** in August 1961), and according to Joseph Zeidan, "led them [the critics] to charge her with chasing after the peculiar and unusual at the expense of the essential eloquence of the Arabic language."³ In addition to her style, Baalbakki's supposed indiscretion when it came to woman's sexuality and awareness of her body offended many readers including female readers. This is not to say that all critics were unfavorable when it came to women's writing. For Aida Matraji, for instance, fiction has contributed to the liberation of women. It has helped to release them from chains and has enabled them to seek work and free themselves economically, socially, and culturally. This desire for freedom can be seen in the outright rejection of rigid traditions in the works of Layla Baalbakki and Colette Houry.⁴

Despite the fact that women writers since the 1960's have had, to use Virginia Woolf's words, "many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome," one could say that the situation is changing today. Interest in women's writing has grown and multiplied, and both critics and the general reader are becoming more favorable and more appreciative of their work. In 1990, Huda Barakat's **The Stone of Laughter** (*Hajar al-Ḍaḥek*, 1990) won **Al-Nāqid** prize for best first novel, and Rene al-Hayek won the prize for originality and inventiveness in the domain of the short story (at the Beirut 38th Exhibition of the Arabic Book) for her first collection of short stories entitled **Portraits to be Forgotten** (*Portraits lil-Nisyān*, 1994). A number of critical books have appeared notably Miriam Cooke's **War's Other Voices** (1987), Evelyne Accad's **Sexuality and War** (1990), and Joseph Zeidan's **Arab Women Novelists** (1995), not to mention reviews, articles, and chapters in books in Arabic and English on a number of women writers.

Despite such positive signs, the fact remains that many women writers have been neglected, and their contributions forgotten and consigned to oblivion. Among such contributions are Balqis al-Humani's **Al-Lija Quarter** (*Ḥayy al-Lija*, 1969), a remarkable novel that deserves attention, in addition to other novels and a vast number of short stories that deserve notice and consideration. Since the majority of these writers have been overlooked and virtually forgotten, and since their works are out of print and not readily available, the need arises for serious academic work in the field. In this context, one could say that the **Bibliography of Women's Writing since 1960**

soon to be published by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab world is an excellent and valuable contribution that will facilitate scholarship on women writers and contribute to the rediscovery of hidden talents.

The obstacles that scholars are faced with when they come to work on Lebanese female as well as male writers are real. Even though some of these problems may appear trivial, they still create endless difficulties for the scholar. Among such impediments are those related to the actual publications themselves where the reader is given no information as to the nationality or gender of the author. Other problems occur when a reader comes across a second or third edition of a book, without any reference to the date (and publisher) of the first edition. In other cases, the problem is further complicated when one finds no indication whatsoever as to whether a book has been published or printed before, and, therefore, the reader assumes a second or third edition of a book to be simply a newly published work.

Keeping in mind that the bulk of the material is out of print and that no authoritative bibliographies are available, and since publishers have made little effort to provide the relevant information on a new writer, or on a writer's earlier publications, how can any one possibly do serious critical work on female or male writers for that matter? Amidst this muddle and confusion, the fact remains that scholarly work is badly needed today and must be encouraged, and, perhaps the only entity that is well-equipped to do serious work on the subject is the University.

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Notes

1. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea and Bassima Qattan Bezirgan, ed., **Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak** (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1978), p.289.
2. "Adībāt al- 'Arabīyya wa Adab al-Mar'a," (**Al-Hikmah**, February 2, 1960), p. 43.
3. **Arab Women Novelists** (New York: State University of New York, 1995), p. 102.
4. "Adab al-Mar'a wa al-Mujtama' al-'Arabī," **Majallat al-Ṭarīq** (Nov.-Dec., 1969), pp. 132-135.