

Challenges Facing Arab Women Writers

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1. Introduction

Arab writers are facing numerous difficulties. Locally, there are publishing and distribution issues. Even within the broader Arab world, restriction, official procedure and a lack of professional channels for distribution are major challenges. At the international level, the main challenge is translation. While translations sponsored by Arab publishers - mostly government-controlled - are not up to standard, translations outside the Arab world are usually selective, concentrate on folklore and generally cater to orientalist's expectations. It is only with collaboration between governments, institutions and associations representing civil society that we can best address these problems.

This is what have been involved in for the past 10 years at arabworldbooks.com. The number of active members over 14,500. This site enables writers, publishers and readers to develop the potential of the internet as a window through which the world can learn about Arab thinkers, artists and intellectuals. This site is tapping into the energy of authors who, in earlier days, would have remained unpublished. It is also interesting how text messaging, email jargon and even graphics have found their way into contemporary writing.

The use of the term *feminism* in Arabic literature poses a number of problems for Arabic women writers and critics, many of whom tend to deny any relationship to the feminist movement, even though their writings support feminist aspirations. Their detachment perhaps accrues from the misconceptions that surround the concept of feminism.

Feminism is often interpreted as being anti-male, anti-culture and anti-religion in its theoretical framework. It therefore becomes challenging for a woman writer who shares none of these ideologies to take a feminist stance. She has to accept feminism with all its implications (some of which might be opposed to her cultural beliefs), or reject it completely, or appropriate the concept and redefine it in a manner that appropriately expresses her cultural experience. An Arabic woman critic, on the other hand, often finds herself in the uncomfortable situation of categorizing a writer as feminist and then hesitant on a published interview in which the writer violently refuses to be so identified. Thus, Arabic women critics have had to negotiate between 'feminism', 'womanism', and 'humanism' as appropriate terms for the interpretation of works by Arabic women.

Reviewers of Arab women's books seem to take their cues from the titles and covers. Unfailingly, they read these novels as sociological and anthropological texts that "reflect" the reality of Islam and the Arab world and "lift the veil" from what one reviewer called the "unimaginable world of Arab women". (Maureen, H., 1994)

The praise on the back cover of Rifaat's "Distant View of A Minaret" states that the stories "admit the reader into a hidden private world." The one on Al-Shaykh's "Women of Sand and Myrrh" declares that "little is known of what life is like for contemporary Arab women living in the Middle East" and promises the reader that al-Shaykh's novel will provide a sight behind this "still-closed society." The heroine of one of al-Shaykh's novels is said to be always passive "in the best tradition of Muslim womanhood". (Judith, A., 1994)

Most reviewers conclude that Arab-Muslim culture "is vastly different from the West," especially regarding the treatment of women (Sara, T., 1986) one reviewer, an American feminist, was reminded after reading one of el Saadawi's books of where western women "have come from". (Vivian, G., 1982)

Issues of Sexuality

Issues of sexuality and oppression take a great role. Thus while Alia Mamdouh praises Ahdaf Soueif as a better representative of Arab women's creativity than el-Saadawi, the reviewer of Soueif's novel "In the Eye of the Sun" classes the author with el-Saadawi as another writer who challenges "the denial and circumscription of female sexuality" in the Arab world.(Maya, J., 1992)

Arab Women Writers in Diaspora

The number of Arab women writers narrating experiences of diaspora in the Western world has been increasing dramatically over the last few years. Conversely, the academic response to issues of diaspora in Arab literature has been overlooked despite the rising interest in gender, class and ethnicity as fields of study. Furthermore, very few conferences, seminars and workshops have been held on this topic in the UK. The last major conference in the UK was held at The University of Kent at Canterbury in 1999 under the title "Inscriptions of Identities in the Discourse of Arab Women".

Arab Women Fiction Translated

Many of the works recently published in English translations are also by women. That a market exists in the West for Arab women's creative products is hard to miss. The first Arab woman writer to catch the attention of western readers was the Egyptian feminist Nawal el Saadawi. Her non-fictional book "The Hidden Face of Eve" [Al Wajh al-ari lil-Mar'a al-Arabiya, 1977] appeared in English in 1980, instantly becoming a "classic."

The interest that this work generated carried over to el-Saadawi's fiction. Her novel "Woman at Point Zero" appeared in English in 1983. Since then thirteen of her books have been published in English translations, making her the most visible of Arab women writers. The popularity of her books in the American College classroom makes her particularly marketable.

El-Saadawi's positive reception sparked interest in other Arab women writers. The Lebanese novelist Hanan al-Shaykh's "The Land of Sand and Myrrh" (Misk el Ghazal), which centers around the oppressed lives of four women in a Saudi-like desert country, was a commercial success when it was published in English in 1992. It was voted by "Publishers Weekly" one of the year's best books. Its publisher, Doubleday, prepared a guide to go with it and arranged a 22-city American book tour for al-Shaykh, the first ever for an Arab novelist.

Riding on this success, an earlier novel of Al-Shaykh about the Lebanese Civil War, "The Story of Zahra" [Hikayet Zahra], was translated, followed by her most recent one "Beirut Blues" [Bareed Beirut], also about the war and its aftermath. Works by other writers such as Alifa Rifaat, Ghada el-Samman, Emily Nasrallah, and Assia Djebar have also become available in English.

The effort to translate Arab women writers into English is now more systematic. The Project for Translation from Arabic (PROTA), established and directed by the Palestinian poet, editor, and translator Salma Khadra Jayyusi, has helped bring out in English works by Palestinian women writers

like Fadwa Touqan, Sahar Khalifeh, and Liana Badr, along with works by other Arabs. Garnet Publishing of London has begun a series called "Arab Women Writers" edited by the Jordanian novelist and critic Fadia Faqir. The five novels published so far are by the Palestinian Liana Badr, the Iraqi Alia Mamdouh, the Syrian Hamida Na'na', the Egyptian Salwa Bakr, and the Lebanese Hoda Barakat.

How is one to explain this interest in Arab women writers? One might first ask whether this is a fair question to begin with. No such questions are raised about Arab male writers. In the case of Mahfouz, the translation of his works is seen as the logical outcome of his winning the Nobel prize and a long overdue appreciation of his literary genius.

Yet while it is taken for granted that Arab male writers who have not won international prizes are still worthy of being translated, their female compatriots appear on the western literary market with a cloud of suspicion hanging over their heads. (Amal, A. 1996)

The Arab world is like a patchwork. What applies in one country does not apply in another." The Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury, author of the epic novel of the Palestinian tragedy, Gate of the Sun, once said that "I don't like this idea of putting writers into categories... If I am to be read, it should not be because there are Arab elements in my work, but because it speaks to you as a human being."

Actually, Arab writers themselves identify some shared burdens as well as the shared glory of a literary language that has helped to unit them since before the time of the Koran. "The problem of the Arabic book is the problem of Arabic society," Khoury insists. "It is dictatorship and censorship. And this censorship isn't only against writers and books – it's against the whole society." As he put it, speaking publicly under the walls of the Alhambra: "The freedom of the writer is meaningless if he is in a society which is not free."

Western liberals like to thrill to tales of cruel censorship in Arab lands – and, of course, they still arrive in bulk. Khoury reports that he knows 18 or 19 writers and intellectuals currently imprisoned in Syria. More trivially, but typically, 230 titles meant for display at the last Kuwait Book Fair were excluded by the state censorship committee. Novels by the London-based Lebanese novelist Hanan al-Shaykh – including her taboo-busting Women of Sand and Myrrh – were first held up by Egyptian customs during this year's Cairo Book Fair, and then allowed to enter the country. These are everyday irritants. Now, Arab writers face not so much the basement examination chambers (they are full of Islamists now) as an endless, wearying game of cat-and-mouse.

The Jordanian-born, British-based novelist and critic Fadia Faqir says that "the censor has a red pen, still! He'll sometimes say 'Kill this character!' It's quite intrusive." More irregular government singling out took its place as just one of a daunting series of practical hurdles – from literacy rates to the cost of books, sluggish administration to dysfunctional retail systems – that lie in the author's way. "There are so many obstacles for Arab writers," Faqir sighs. "My heart goes out to them."

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