

Book Review

Women and Words in Saudi Arabia

By Saddeka Arebi. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 329pp.

Arebi embarks on cultural analysis via the literary work of nine contemporary Saudi women writers in this thoughtful and provocative discussion of gender and literary production at a significant historical juncture for Saudi women. The import of this discussion for and about Muslim women, by a Muslim woman, exists not only in its particular country context but also in the troubling debate now raging over personal expression and commitment to "feminist" reform versus Muslim perceptions of a continuing ideological invasion that is heavily influenced by western political hegemony. I need not even mention the name of Taslima Shahin for readers to acknowledge some degree of anguish in our sharp disagreements over the issue of gender versus culture.

The voices of these female Saudi writers range from the avant-garde to conservative "journalese," and Arebi contends that they illustrate the complex nature of female discourse in an Arab-Islamic context. However, she seems to have backed into asserting a unique and nonfeminist position for Saudi women, using such slogans as "quality not equality," although the subjects of her study often write otherwise. Arebi arrives at this analytical quandary by a similar route that has been followed by other sincere scholars and observers. As Leila Ahmed commented some years ago:

It is only when one considers that one's sexual identity alone (and some would not accept even this) is more inextricably oneself than one's cultural identity, that one can perhaps appreciate how excruciating is the plight of the Middle Eastern feminist caught between those two opposing loyalties, forced almost to choose between betrayal and betrayal.¹

At that time, Ahmed concluded that cultural loyalty obfuscated much of the work on feminism in the Middle East.² That confusion has intensified as a result of political changes that have been both internal and external to the region.

Arebi's discursive and analytical projects in this book do not always concord. She provides evidence, through the women's own words, that the rules of a Saudi society, as enacted chiefly through the family system, cause women anguish and diminish their lives or worse. However, she contests the notion that the authors are embracing the goals of western feminism or that they are attacking men in general. As the author does not describe adequately and critique the goals of western feminism—admittedly outside her task in this work—I could only disagree with her rejection of feminism as a sort of androgyny, a transitional notion now out of favor with many western and nonwestern feminists (hence the rise of “difference feminism” in the 1980s and “power feminism” in the 1990s).

Given the range of writings, from the conservative Juhayer al Musā'id to the symbolic and confrontational playwright Rajā Ālim, it is clear that women express a multiplicity of views and have complex readings of gender issues. Arebi points out that they do not indict men “in general,” seeing this as a validation of a nonwestern outlook. The creative writers among these women would not in any case target “men in general,” for the power and success of their endeavor lies in describing specific situations that will then ascend to a more pervasive level only in the minds of their readers. Essayists (journalists) do not dare address the “general” level, except for certain references to the religious establishment, given the rules of censorship which Arebi must take into account.

The author chose to present stories, essays, and plays as complete entries, cutting numerous phrases, sentences, and passages within each selection. While this strategy allows her to present entire stories, it deprives the reader of an accurate sense of the authors' literary styles, as many of the deleted sections are crucial to the flow, and indeed to the comprehension, of the work being presented. This is particularly notable in Ranā 'Ālim's and Najwā Hāshim's work, which are almost unintelligible due to the constant interruptions. One empathizes with the author, who might have chosen to analyze works without much translation, as does Miriam Cooke in her work on Lebanese women writers.³ The drawback in that other approach is that the female writers' voices may be overshadowed by the critic's perceptions, especially to readers unfamiliar with the original work. The other possibility could have been to translate shorter and more complete sections of the selected pieces and to paraphrase the story outcomes as needed.

The publisher's notes claim that these writers appear here in “excerpt for the first time in English.” But several writers have been translated previously: Khayriyya al-Saqqaf, for one, is included in quite a few collections. Several of Arebi's selections have been more felicitously translated

elsewhere, as in Ava Heinrichsdorff and Abu Bakr Bagader's translation of "The Secret and the Death," by Sharifah Ibrahim Abd al Muhsin ash-Shamlan⁴ or in Salma Jayyusi's *The Literature of Modern Arabia*.⁵ Badran and Cooke's translation of al-Saqqaf's stories⁶ and Heinrichsdorff and Bagader's rendition of her "Assassination of Light" demonstrate that al-Saqqaf's style can be rendered more smoothly and effectively than in Arebi's version of "The Reflection."

Numerous inconsistencies in transliteration did not concern me, but the author made various errors in translation, which suffered from an overly literal, direct transmission of meaning that was further complicated by the constant deletions. In ash-Shamlan's "The Secret," I did not understand why Arebi translated Zahra's illness as a "poisoned foot" rather than "leg," which would imply toxemia, a frequent side-effect of pregnancy, and thus a reasonable cause of Zahra's death. Arebi inexplicably excludes the names of the male characters in "The Secret," whereas Heinrichsdorff provides them. In Arebi's analysis of examples of what she terms "victimization" literature, she confuses the events in ash-Shamlan's "A Section from a Life" with the characters and events in "The Secret" (pp. 174–75). The author therefore refers to Zahra's "rape" (p. 160), whereas Zahra was never raped—she met clandestinely with her lover each weekend. Other allusions are baffling, such as Mona's "death in a car accident" (p. 163) in al-Saqqaf's "The Reflection," for Arebi translates: "And in the crowd she [Mona] experienced dizziness, nausea . . . and collision . . . She then disappeared beneath the feet" (p. 139). Was Mona trampled, or run over? And is Arebi criticizing the victimization of the protagonists or not? One cannot be sure. The lesser problem may be due, again, to the deletions from the translations and the fact that the author is an anthropologist, not a translator, while the analytical lack of resolution may rest with Arebi's disquiet with the feminist tone of these authors.

Arebi interviewed the authors, and these interviews emphasize their "respectability" and Arab identity and provide some glimpses of the personalities behind the work. She also provides some translations of critics' reviews of the women writers. These are very meaningful to the work in that they illustrate the language in which male writers try to marginalize "women's work" to the Arab public, although these selections are also clumsily translated.

The author claims that there is little ethnography of literary materials in Middle Eastern women's studies (no longer true) and that the project is more worthy than the efforts of (western) social anthropologists. The most relevant work complementing Arebi's endeavor is not a westerner's, but Altorki's *Women in Saudi Arabia*,⁷ because it analyzes urban elite women whose backgrounds are similar to the authors Arebi discusses. Arebi is clearly well-read and informed on Saudi society but does not bring in Altorki's work or spell out the material, political, or gender conditions of Saudi society for the reader. Therefore, readers more cognizant

of these circumstances will be better able to place and assess Arebi's discussion than the general readership. Those with interests in international women's studies and literature should welcome the work and, hopefully, supplement the literary discussion with necessary social and historical information.

Despite the shortcomings, Arebi's achievement is a multilayered discussion of Arab female literary voices and their dynamic interaction with Saudi society. It is, furthermore, a notable effort in the analysis of gender issues and women's perspectives on the debate over feminism. That debate is positioned more in the context of the Arab cultural milieu than the Islamic, although the two obviously converge in various respects in the Saudi setting.

Endnotes

1. Leila Ahmed, "Feminism and Feminist Movements in the Middle East," *Women's Studies International Forum* 5, no. 2 (1982): 163.
2. However, she takes a somewhat different stance in her more recent *Women, Gender, and Islam* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1991).
3. *War's Other Voices* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
4. In *Assassination of Light: Modern Short Stories* (Washington, DC: Three Continents, 1990).
5. Published by Kegan Paul in 1988.
6. *Opening the Gates* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990).
7. Published by Columbia University Press in 1986.

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