

# Book Reviews

**Hikayati Sharhun Yatul: Sira Muda'afa (My Life is Too Long to Tell)**, by Hanan Al-Shaykh, Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 2005. 380 pages.

REVIEWED BY MOHAMED BERRADA

Though there are many signs in Hanan Al-Shaykh's novel *Hikayati sharhun yatul* that it is the (auto)biography of Kamila, the author's mother, the form the book takes is noteworthy. The author of the (auto)biography is not the person who wrote the book, she was the one who narrated all her life's details to her daughter in lively colloquial language, and gave her the letters she received from her beloved Mohamed. Al-Shaykh makes sure the story keeps flowing spontaneously, just as her mother recounted it in her talented and sensitive style, despite the fact that her parents had deprived her of any schooling. This is what prompted Hanan to tell her mother: "If they had educated you, you would have been the writer, not I" (p.353).

Within the layers of the text, there are signs as to how the writing process was carried out. For instance, the author would write down her mother's stories in small notebooks, in addition to using certain passages from the love letters that Kamila kept. Yet Al-Shaykh has done more than record the story and reformulate it in classical Arabic. Her creative contribution comes in many ways, from giving amusing titles to the chapters ("Even the pigeon goes to school", "The snakes' nest", "By God, you will tailor a dress for a flea"), to drawing a loving image of a courageous, fun-loving mother who resisted society's injustices thanks to her faith in love.

Thus it is a double autobiography, since the person relating her life is not the one who is writing it, while the person writing it is not merely transcribing but also incorporating elements from treasured memories of her mother, thus inserting her own voice into the layers of her mother's stories. The form that the text takes comes to symbolize the relationship between mother and daughter, problematic at first, but turning into the daughter's overwhelming love and admiration for her mother. While Kamila is certainly the cornerstone of the narrative, yet its orbit is extended to recall other characters and several periods of time, so that the mother's (auto)biography mirrors the society of a southern Lebanese village as well as cosmopolitan life in Beirut. Yet Kamila's life was for nearly 70 years closer to a world of fantasy than reality. She confronted hardships and obstacles, yet filled her life with adventures, pleasure, and love. At the end she faced sickness and death with courage.

Kamila came from a poor family and had a difficult childhood in Nabatiyah, growing up with her divorced mother and her brother Kamel. One day, her mother decided to move to Beirut. That is when a whole new world was revealed to Kamila, a world that enchanted her, awakening her love of singing and drawing her to the Egyptian cinema. Kamila made the films and their characters an alternative world to the gloomy religious atmosphere of her home.

At a dressmaker neighbor's, Kamila met Mohamed, who shared her love of cinema. Her love story with Mohamed becomes the lynchpin of her life, a daring experience in a conservative environment that denied any consideration to women's feelings. She was not yet fourteen when her sister died, and her family forced her into marrying her sister's husband, a man uninterested in anything but prayer and trade. She bore him two daughters: Fatima and Hanan (the writer). But the enchantment she had experienced before her marriage made her resume her love

encounters with Mohamed, who pressed her to ask for a divorce. His burning letters, borrowed from writers and poets, set her existence ablaze and pushed her to defy her marriage, her frowning brother and the neighbors.

Her challenge was crowned with success, when her husband, whose business went bankrupt, agreed to divorce her. She married her beloved Mohamed, and they had five children together. She endured a tough life before Mohamed was appointed head of security in the Beqaa. Kamila remained enthralled with love and movies, singing their songs, and teasing her family and neighbors. Even after Mohamed died, her love for life did not falter; she reconciled herself with her father and her two daughters, and traveled to America to visit her son. Nothing could weaken her curiosity or imprison her in grief. Even when cancer stole into her body, she confronted it calmly, happy that Hanan took care of her until the day she died. Yet her voice still speaks from the grave about her sadness at leaving her loved ones. I believe here that Al-Shaykh's decision to continue the story beyond Kamila's death was intended to signal to the reader that 'autofiction' is an integral part of this text.

Writing an (auto)biography based on oral accounts and letters means that Al-Shaykh often resorts to imagination, placing the central character in imaginary situations, which sometimes take precedence over reality. Infatuated with the characters of Egyptian movies, Kamila used them to cast different horizons over her limited and difficult life. She says for instance, "I ask him if this bunch of violets is for me. He says it is. So I start whirling just like the heroine in a movie, wishing the garden were larger, or full of trees, so I could sing and hide my face behind a tree, and then come out and show it" (p. 60).

*Hikayati Sharhun Yatul* stands out from the conventional autobiography or biography in blending oral with written narrative, and intermeshing the mother's life with that of her writer-daughter, to the point where Kamila finds in Hanan a mirror that sheds light on aspects of her life that had remained obscure to her: "Each time Hanan spoke, she would reveal more about myself to me, and I realized that the present is the past without my knowing it; as if I were taking on her personality and turning into her" (p. 354). This form of writing subjects oral stories to alteration and to fiction, moving them beyond the realm of facts, and gaining arresting meanings and interpretations.

There is no doubt that this complex (auto)biography-novel possesses a striking aesthetic value, through emphasizing the oral qualities of story telling and using the language of everyday life to capture the idiosyncracies of the characters, as well as the ironies of popular taste. Yet it also bears the stamp of a testimony, through recounting the journey of a woman who lived in an environment that objectifies women and imposes upon them its patriarchal tutorship.

What is striking about Kamila's personality is that she represents the 'cultured illiterate', a type that numbers thousands in our societies, people deprived of education but whose natural intelligence allows them to grasp their society's priorities, and to develop their own vision of the world. This helps them in confronting obstacles and carving out a place for themselves in a harsh, merciless society. Kamila's life story shows the development of her awareness, from the day she started maneuvering her way through poverty as a girl in Nabatiyah, all the way to Beirut, where she discovered bright lights, the cinema, the blessing of love, and the harshness of traditions. About her first encounter with Beirut, Kamila says, "I could see the lights that go on and off even during the day, the liquorice vendor as he clinks his copper tumblers,

blonde women without head covers. I didn't know where to rest my eyes. I wanted to touch everything..." (p. 41).

This expression, "I wanted to touch everything", gives us a sense of the basic trait of Kamila's personality, her enthusiasm for the world and for life in all its manifestations. Throughout a life filled with difficulties, she never abandoned her love of love itself, and her love of life's offerings of joy, songs, movies, and friendships. Love was a rescue belt that saved Kamila from misery, family oppression, and the rigidity of traditions. It was not acceptable at the time for a married woman to defy her family by maintaining an open relationship with her lover. For a woman to respond to desire in an austere environment, is this not the beginning of a symbolic, subversive action towards freedom from hypocrisy?

Another aspect of *Hikayati sharhun yatul* worth mentioning is the many languages used: the language of narration, of description, the colloquial language of the dialogue, and the borrowed language of Mohamed's love letters. Such diversification of language has become a stylistic trait of many Arabic novels, contributing to bringing out the specificities of each regional dialect, whilst achieving the 'prosing' of fiction, and removing it from the realm of a fixed rhetoric. In *Hikayati sharhun yatul*, Hanan Al-Shaykh offers a model of juxtaposing different forms of language, in a manner that merits the attention of linguists and discourse analysts. Certain paragraphs of the love letters, for example, give an idea of the romantic, sentimental language that used to affect the lives of many in the 1930s and 1940s throughout the Arab countries. When Mohamed writes: "I love the path you walk on, and the bed that holds you. I love the pillow and the cover and the house and the ceiling and the walls. I wish I were the invisible air that comes in at dawn through your windows to play around with..." (p. 156) does this not remind us of a discourse that was, and maybe still is, a refuge for many from deprivation?

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**Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures**, volume IV, Economics, Mobility and Space, edited by Suad Joseph, Brill. Leiden-Boston 2007.

**REVIEWED BY NISREEN SALTI**

The first volume of the six-volume *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures* (EWIC) set up the EWIC project as an "interdisciplinary, transhistorical, and transnational" work, spanning "all facets of the life of women" in the "civilizations and societies in which Islam has played a historic role" (I: xxi), from the rise of Islam to the present day and extending from West Africa to Central and South Asia, according to the general editor, Suad Joseph (I: xxxiii). In line with this plan, EWIC's editorial board has organized the fourth volume around the themes of 'Economics, Education, Mobility and Space'. Volume I focused on 'Methodologies, Paradigms and Sources' [2003]; volume II on 'Family, Law and Politics' [2005]; and volume III on 'Family, Body, Sexuality and Health' [2005]. Volume V on 'Practices, Interpretation and Representation' and volume VI (Supplement and Index) are expected to appear in 2007. The fourth volume is primarily concerned with examining the material conditions affecting the daily realities of women in predominantly Muslim societies, as well as Muslim women in non-Muslim societies.

Under the broad headings of 'Cities', 'Development', 'Economics', 'Education', 'Environment', 'Migration,' and 'Space', EWIC's volume IV covers topics as sweeping as colonial cities, global cities, Islamic cities, homelessness, urban identities and movements, discourses and practices for development, farming and development, housing policies, non-governmental organizations, sustainable development, credit organizations, marketing, craft industries, foreign aid, informal and formal labor markets, Islamic banking, labor and health, land reform, trade, domestic labor, pastoral economies, professional occupations, sex workers, education from pre- to post-colonial periods, environment, migration, and space. It also includes entries under the headings 'Information Technology', 'Poverty', 'Slavery' and 'Tourism'. The volume "looks for evidence of agency, whether it is found in women's activism in non-governmental or community-based organizations, credit associations, or the possibilities created by education" (p. xxiii). Entries are organized by geographical region and are sometimes preceded or replaced by a conceptual overview. The volume contains 263 entries, including 15 overviews, each followed by a bibliography, the whole written by over two hundred contributors.

A first conceptual challenge that emerges from the *Encyclopedia's* overall aim is whether Islam constitutes an overarching theme across all the phenomena covered. The editors no doubt face this challenge in all the volumes, but it is particularly sharp in volume IV with its themes revolving around the material conditions of everyday life. This reader finds that evidence of Islamic culture as a common thread in economics, education, mobility, and space is tenuous indeed. As Joseph notes in the preface, this question invites more extensive comparative research.

The organization by geographical region of the entries on most of the topics covered is both useful and commonsensical. However, the choice of regions is unsystematic since, as Joseph admits, it was a matter of the availability of contributors rather than theoretical conceptualization. This means that one of the principal functions that this volume is intended to fulfill is somewhat compromised, since the usefulness of any work of reference is based in the predictability of its contents, a quality produced by uniformity of organization and comparability across entries.

The thematic overviews that precede some of the geographically specific entries provide the history of scholarly thought on the topic in question, setting it in the context of Islam and Islamic cultures, and fleshing out its effect and relevance to women. Hence Minako Sakai's overview entry on "The Environment" traces the origins of environmentalism in the west to the science of forestry, and links the rising concern about ecology in the west to the notion of sustainable development. The author then discusses Islam's understanding of the environment, and moves to a discussion of women's land rights in the Muslim world, attributing some of the environmental problems faced by Muslim countries to the severance of the relationship between women and the land. Adam Sabra's overview on 'Poverty' opens with a succinct discussion of poverty from the standpoint of Islam, linking much of the Muslim world's sociological treatment of poverty, its attitude towards the poor, and its institutions for poverty alleviation to the religious doctrine underlying these practices and attitudes, before discussing poverty as it is faced by women in the Muslim world.

These introductory sections are well written, informative, and closer to the ethos of a work that defines itself as more "transhistorical" than most of the other entries in the volume; the vast majority of the regional entries are focused on present day understanding and practice of the topics in question and offer little by way of history. The overview sections also address some of the difficulties that arise from the arbitrariness of the geographic divisions by providing general

entries that are not bound to a particular part of the Muslim world. However, as is the case with the choice of geographic divisions, it is also unclear to the reader on what basis the editors chose to include overviews for some topics and not for others.

According to the defining mission set out in Volume I, the *Encyclopedia* is intended to encompass all eras of Islamic culture. However, outside of the overview sections described above, the content of this volume is confined primarily to contemporary or very recent historical periods. Hence, the “transhistorical” dimension is largely lost. For example, little is said about the four main topics of Volume IV in relation to early and middle Islamic cultures. A notable exception is found in some of the entries on inherently dynamic processes such as urbanization and colonialism. The entries under ‘Colonial Cities’ all flesh out the contrast between the pre-colonial urban landscapes and colonial cities. Petra Kuppinger’s contribution under this heading on the ‘Arab World’ provides an excellent treatment of the changes to urban life introduced by colonialism, and her carefully chosen headings relate the topic to the intersection of public space, the economy, and women’s daily lives. Similarly William J. Glover’s entry on ‘South Asia’ gives the reader a useful picture of the transformations involved with the advent of colonialism, though it is too brief when contextualizing the topic in Islamic cultures and women’s lives.

Economics, one of the four main themes of Volume IV, is covered in 24 different headings encompassing various aspects of the economy ranging from the labor market (child labor, agricultural and industrial labor, labor and health, paid domestic labor, sex workers, etc. ...), the financial market (access to credit and Islamic banking), and consumption (commodification and consumption), to the different productive sectors of the economy. One topic central to development studies that is omitted here though it deserves attention is saving behavior, intra-household, and intergenerational distributional decisions more generally. The more pressing gap in the entries on ‘Economics’ comes from the fact that no effort is made to incorporate any scholarly work on economics, and the entries use the language of public policy, which only borrows some concepts and findings from economic scholarship. Although academic work in economics has been slow to respond to the critiques made by women’s and gender studies, as well as to adequately address challenges and questions emerging from the Muslim world, there are important findings in the empirical economics literature regarding women in the Arab and Muslim worlds that are extremely relevant to some of the ‘Economics’ sections. The same can be said of many paradigms, concepts, and findings from labor and development economics that are applicable to any discussion of women and Islamic cultures.

Many of the entries describe the evolution of debates on the topic in question, and explicitly identify gaps in relevant literatures; two examples are the entries on ‘Sub-Saharan Africa’ and the ‘Arab World’ under the heading of ‘Environment: Change and Natural Resource Extraction’. This gives the volume under review the feel of a rich and extensive reader on women and Islamic cultures rather than an encyclopedia in the classical understanding of the term. Most of the limitations described above are less relevant if the book is intended as a reader, since a reader would have less need to be transhistorical, and less concern for the uniformity of format and coverage across entries which is essential for a work of reference.

For researchers interested in the four main themes covered in Volume IV, the *Encyclopedia* provides the fruit of an immense effort to collect entries from a wide variety of scholars sensitive to the need for the richness and importance of an interdisciplinary approach. Overall, the vast survey it affords of factors affecting the material realities of the everyday lives of women in

Muslim communities is a timely and critical guide for scholars, activists, policy makers, analysts, and general readers.

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**Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present**, by Nadjé Sadig Al-Ali, London and New York: Zed Books, 2007. 292 pages.

**REVIEWED BY ZAINAB AL BAHRANI**

the US-UK war against Iraq and the continuing occupation of the country has resulted in a catastrophic upheaval of Iraqi society, and the obliteration of anything resembling a normal human existence for its people. One of the most significant social changes brought about by the occupation and the interim Iraqi government is in women's legal status and their conditions of daily life. While before 2003 women's lives were oppressed under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussain, compounded by the dire constraints of the embargo, this oppression was similar to that of most other citizens of the country; it was not particularly divided along the lines of gender. Today, women have become pawns in the power plays of the different political factions in Iraq on the one hand, and in the political rhetoric of the United States on the other. The latter is a rhetoric of the liberation of Iraqi women used primarily for American consumption; the reasons most often given in the United States and the United Kingdom for the Iraq war are those of a "humanitarian intervention" to rid the people of Iraq of a brutal dictator and to free women from the burden of the *burkha* (never mind that this garment is in fact alien to the traditional dress of Iraq). As they presented it, part of Saddam's tyranny was the tyranny of the veil. Women, in other words, have now replaced the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) as one of the causes for their 'just war'.

Another consequence of the war and occupation of Iraq has been a constant re-writing of historical accounts, declarations of identities in relation to the land and to history, narratives of diasporas and returns, and of individuals and groups of people. Telling the stories of Iraqi women is a way to uncover another layer of Iraq's multiple and shifting narratives, as Nadjé Al-Ali, author of *Iraqi Women*, explains in her introduction. She defines her work as an alternative history, focused on women's lives and experiences (p. 267). The author, who is a cultural anthropologist at the University of Exeter in England, sets out to provide this alternative oral history of Iraq through the voices of the women whom she presents in the book.

The book is organized as a historical narrative that begins with the early twentieth century, when Iraq was under the British mandate, before the 1958 revolution that overthrew the monarchy. The stories of a number of older women who recall that time are recounted in the first chapter, entitled "Living in the Diaspora", an indication that many of those interviewed for the earlier period left Iraq soon after the events of 1958. The following pages, as described by the title of each chapter, focus on the experiences of women living with the revolution, with the Ba'th, with the violence of internal government campaigns and internments, with international sanctions, and finally, with the violence of the US occupation of Iraq. This sub-division of chapters under the headings of 'living with' and a particular political era or situation could well be taken by the reader to mean that women are always on the margins of society, and never agents of societal, even less political, change. However, Al-Ali demonstrates her point that this is not the case through interviews with

women who were involved in women's rights organizations and NGOs, or who are humanitarian workers, or writers and bloggers who continue to speak out bravely under current conditions.

The voices of the women that Al-Ali presents in the book are intended as examples of how different women's experiences from the 1940s until today can be taken as accounts of the past. It is refreshing that the author does not define difference among the women narrators in sectarian, ethnic, or religious terms. In fact, the voices of the women seem to reveal that 'difference' before the US war and occupation was perceived by these women and their social circles primarily in terms of social class. The stories told are personal and varied, and provide an interesting narrative mosaic that holds the reader's attention, and provides insights into average people's lives.

However, a number of questions arise from the fact that the processes of the interviews are not laid out. We do not read the actual discussion between the author and the informants, because the author removes herself entirely from the interviews. Instead, Al-Ali has chosen to excerpt passages from the stories that women gave her, whether in Amman, Detroit, San Diego, or London. Al-Ali chose these locations because it was not possible for her to go to Iraq, and because these cities have large communities of Iraqis of various religious, social, and ethnic backgrounds. But she does not clarify how the interviewed women were chosen, nor how she presented the project or the interview to them. Not being told how the interviews were conducted is at times frustrating for the reader. It would have been useful to know, for example, if the author spoke to the informants in Iraqi Arabic, or in English. We can assume that Al-Ali was able to speak to them directly in the local dialect, since we are told that her father is Iraqi, but this issue is never clarified. Likewise, it is not clear if the author was able to consult primary Arabic sources, or was limited to secondary literature on Middle Eastern women, as her bibliography suggests. Given the author's interests and aims the latter approach is valid, but greater clarification would have been helpful.

On the other hand, Al-Ali's own story and family history is woven into the broader narrative of Iraqi women's lives in a way that allows the reader to see the personal aspect of all the narratives, thus moving away from the traditional historical account. The relationship between memory, history, and truth is thoughtfully problematized. But because these stories are idiosyncratic, dependent on the personal view-point of a particular narrator, they can also leave one wishing for more information. As an Iraqi woman familiar with the history of Iraq and with the lives of women there, I would have liked to read more about the start of women's movements in the 1920s, the important role of women in the establishment of the communist party, and their place in establishing hospitals and humanitarian NGOs such as the Red Crescent, both before the revolution of 1958 and right after it.

At the same time Al-Ali provides some fascinating details of the change in women's legal status brought about by the current government under the new Transitional Law and newly written Iraqi constitution. These constitute, in effect, a horrendous erosion of women's legal rights. Al-Ali points out that most women, whether living in Iraq or in exile, are simply unaware of the new laws and their ramifications.

For example, Article 41 of the new Iraqi constitution stipulates that the existing family laws be replaced by religious laws, based on the religion or ethnicity of the individual in question. In other words, the new law has deliberately sub-divided people on a religious and ethnic basis. As Al-Ali points out, the new law makes mixed marriages virtually impossible and threatens already existing ones, and will no doubt fuel more sectarian violence while at the same time constituting

a serious erosion of women's legal rights as human beings (p. 246). This last chapter, "Living with the Occupation", is the most powerful of the book. It provides moving narratives and a strong analysis of how women's lives are affected by the current violence and upheavals of war, occupation, and forced migration. The author's strongest points are that while women are agents in the processes of history, Iraqi women have also become a sign of identity and otherness, and are again becoming the targets of unspeakable violence from all sides.

Nadje Al-Ali's book is an important new work on the lives of women in Iraq and their current plight. While a number of recent books written as memoirs by (or about) particular Iraqi women exist in the English language, these have been primarily in the genre of Orientalist fiction, presenting exotic stereotypes of violence, despotism, and sexuality for the Western reader. Al-Ali's book is a welcome change from such writing, and a notable contribution to the scholarly literature in women's studies. It is a serious and thoughtful book, well written and absorbing to read. It is also a timely book that speaks out bravely about the new attacks on Iraqi women's lives and their legal rights today.

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**A Trade like Any Other: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt**, by Karin van Nieuwkerk, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995. 240 pages, \$21.95

**REVIEWED BY DALILA MAHDAWI**

anyone who has read Naguib Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy* will remember the low esteem in which female entertainers in Egypt were held. To many, this went hand in hand with prostitution, alcohol and drugs. Mahfouz's novel may have been set many years ago, but it seems such attitudes were still prevalent in the late 1980s and prompted Karin van Nieuwkerk to undertake her study of female singers and dancers in Egypt. On the whole, she is successful. Her ethnography fuses together issues important in the fields of feminism, ethnomusicology, dance and anthropology, whilst remaining appealing for non-academic audiences.

Van Nieuwkerk spent around 15 months in Egypt conducting her fieldwork: interviewing Egyptians from every stratum of society, staying with entertainers, watching performances, and attending weddings throughout the country. During her stay, she formed solid relationships with men and women involved in the entertainment industry and, in particular, those on Muhammad Ali Street in Cairo. Her friendly relations with her subjects and immersion into their lives gave van Nieuwkerk unparalleled access to the world of Egyptian female entertainers and her study has a unique perspective, mixing theoretical concepts with personal experience.

According to van Nieuwkerk, no wedding or festivity in Egypt is considered complete without singers or dancers. In fact, such celebrations provide an opportunity for families to display their affluence, as reflected in the number of performers hired. It is therefore a puzzling paradox that those entertainers, in particular female entertainers, are met with disrespect and ignominy by Egyptian society at large. One question guides the course of the study: "Is the tainted reputation of female entertainers due to the fact that entertainment is a dishonorable profession or that it is dishonorable for women?" (pp. 2-3). By way of reply, van Nieuwkerk examines the history of the



trade in Egypt, the status of performers in society, personal accounts and opinions, and intellectual debates, in the hope that her study of female Egyptian entertainers will “create more understanding of their livelihood...and...generate more sympathy for” them (p. 1).

Examining Islamic views on Egyptian entertainment, van Nieuwkerk mentions in her introduction that whilst some Islamic scholars and *hadiths* frown upon music and dancing altogether, “the acceptability of the place and occasion of the performance is...an important factor in judging the legitimacy of...entertainers” (p. 11). However, female dancers and singers are unequivocally opposed, since their voices and bodies are considered more seductive than those of men’s. This belief recurs throughout the study, backed up by historical and cultural evidence. The introduction, like the study as a whole, is clearly structured, with the author outlining her methodology and learning process. Her ability to recognize flaws in her early stages of research, with the help of her Egyptian assistant, exemplify the long process she went through in doing justice to her research and subjects.

In chapters two and three, van Nieuwkerk clarifies the relations between entertainers and religious and national authorities, outlining their legal status and various socio-economic and political developments which had an impact on the organization and professionalisation of female entertainers over the past two centuries. These chapters are fascinating, well researched, and highly informative. In her chapter on the 19th century, Van Nieuwkerk describes the fiscal regulation of entertainers and clarifies the original difference between two types of entertainers, the *awalim*, educated and respected women who performed for women in the harem, and the *ghawâzî*, plebian dancers who performed unveiled in streets and at saints’ day celebrations. A particularly informative section describes Muhammad Ali’s 1834 ban on female entertainers and prostitutes in Cairo, which marginalized public women in society and forced many into prostitution, blurring the distinction between *awalim* and *ghawâzî* entertainers. The 1834 ban was probably instrumental in formulating contemporary attitudes towards female entertainers.

Perhaps the most interesting and enjoyable part of the book are the entertainers’ personal accounts, which appear in chapter four. Those stories provide valuable insights into the women’s experiences and opinions, and bestow human faces on figures who would otherwise have remained anonymous entertainers. The accounts also serve to explain why women entered the industry. While some women were attracted as young girls to the trade, most were driven into this profession by economic necessity. A large number come from poorer segments of society and have little or no education, and decided on entertainment because it paid better than factory, domestic, or other menial work. From their accounts, one also notes that most women in the entertainment industry share the larger Egyptian ideal that women should be housewives; it is simply their economic situation which forces them to work. The majority of women stay in the profession only to guarantee a better future for their children, by saving enough money to send them to school or university. The inclusion of photographs of female entertainers, although sadly left anonymous, gives Van Nieuwkerk’s case work a personal and refreshing touch so often missing in academic studies.

For all her emphasis on providing a platform for entertainers to voice their opinions, Van Nieuwkerk remains a critical observer, pointing out any inconsistencies or blatant lies told to her. She furthermore reveals the divisions within the entertainment industry, dismantling ideas of it as a monolithic profession, and instead shows it to be just as internally diversified and hierarchical as Egyptian society at large.

A chapter on marginality investigates whether entertainers, by virtue of their profession, constitute a marginal community in Egyptian society. In assessing this, van Nieuwkerk scrutinizes the spatial, linguistic, social, economic, and cultural realities of entertainers. She also considers their secret language, or *sîm*. It seems many communities in Egypt make use of such a secret language, ranging from goldsmiths or pickpockets to homosexuals. Nieuwkerk provides some interesting examples of the vocabulary of entertainers and their use of the *sîm*, and though she stresses that this is not important to her study as a whole, the topic is so fascinating it well deserves a study of its own.

Chapters six to eight explore the concepts of honor, shame, and gender, and seek to find out whether the poor reputation of females in the entertainment industry is because their profession is considered dishonorable, or due to prevailing 'gender ideology'. Presenting theoretical discussions on shame and honor (defined as "the presence of personal virtues", Van Nieuwkerk maintains that shame, or 'eb' ('ayb), is the main concern of Cairenes, especially amongst the poor (p. 117). She goes on to demonstrate that most people's objection to female entertainers lies in the concept of shame, which, after everything mentioned previously, comes as little surprise. It is their profession, rather than their character, which society considers a disgrace. Putting all the different pieces of the puzzle together, van Nieuwkerk concludes that although certain sectors of society consider female Egyptian entertainers with disapproval, they are mostly seen as working in a 'trade like any other' like everyone else, in order to put food on the table.

*A Trade like Any Other* is a highly commendable study that is accessible to all readers. Van Nieuwkerk's approach to writing and explaining theory and history is gratifyingly simple and yet does not underestimate the intelligence of her readers. Her book will therefore appeal to anyone from the high school student to the anthropologist or dance enthusiast. Yet it needs to be said that since her research was conducted in 1988/1990, her conclusions may now be out of date. Egypt today is experiencing both high levels of unemployment and poverty, and a surge in radical Islam. These factors may well have changed popular opinions about women and entertainment. Nonetheless, *A Trade Like Any Other* remains a comprehensive and well written study, and relevant to feminist and anthropological research. It is to be hoped that someone picks up where Karin van Nieuwkerk left off.

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**Hikayat: Short Stories by Lebanese Women**, edited by Roseanne Saad Khalaf, London/Berkeley: Telegram books, 2006. 222 pages, £9,99.

**REVIEWED BY TANJA TABBARA**

In *Hikayat, Short Stories by Lebanese Women*, Roseanne Khalaf has compiled and edited the short stories of 26 Lebanese women writers. Some of the texts are excerpts from novels, others were written as short stories. Half of the collection was written in English, the other half was translated from either Arabic or French.

The book includes established authors like Layla Baalbaki, Emily Nasrallah, and Rima Alamuddin, whose work is well known for challenging the role and constraints of women in Lebanon's pre-war society. Critique of social pressures informs Baalbaki's "A Spaceship of Tenderness to the

Moon”, which tells the story of a woman who against all societal odds marries the man she loves, only to find herself, through him, exposed to the social expectations she was trying to escape.

During the Civil War writers like Etel Adnan, Hanan al-Shaykh, and Hoda Barakat became famous for their personal accounts of the war, demonstrating the human tragedies behind the fighting.

However, their texts selected for the collection do not relate to the war experience.

In her story “Chat”, Hoda Barakat describes the younger generation’s obsession with internet communication, which allows them to act anonymously, and cross barriers they wouldn’t dare to cross if facing someone directly. In “The Hot Seat”, Hanan al-Shaykh explores a passenger’s imagination as he takes a seat in a bus that is still warm from the female passenger who has just left it. Stories by other writers like Merriam Haffar’s “Pieces of a Past Life”, Nazik Saba Yared’s “Improvisations on a Missing String”, and Renée Hayek’s “The Phone Call” do explore the tragic impact that the war had on the lives of the Lebanese people in general and on women in particular.

*Hikayat* is especially interesting because it assembles stories not only by acclaimed authors but also by younger writers, some of whom were Khalaf’s students, and wrote their pieces for creative writing workshops. Their stories reflect the desires and disappointments of a new generation of Lebanese female writers whose writing has been largely shaped by their trans-cultural experiences.

Their texts are provocative, breaking taboos. The narratives of their stories disrupt linearity. They play with repetition and create rhythms and poetics of their own. Their characters are often highly strung and close to, or driven towards madness and/or suicide. While desiring to belong, they are border-goers, in-betweeners, who have suffered great losses that lead them to view themselves and the world around them with irony, sometimes sarcasm. Their pain, sensitivities, and anger are mirrored in their perceptions of the country, the city of Beirut in particular.

For example Hala Alyan in “Painted Reflections” develops the story of a young woman who has been raised in the United States and who embarks on a journey to Lebanon. Her character is intense, extreme, wildly searching for herself. In her paintings she has found a way to express herself. Her journey is a journey of exploration and expression as much as it is an attempt to link up with what she calls her “tentative Arabic heritage”. Having lost a close friend in 9/11, she travels to Lebanon to be distracted from her own feelings of pain and grief. In her paintings, the violence of Beirut and people’s feelings of pain and loss interweave with her own feelings of grief and loss. She feels like a spectator, an outsider, but at the same time is attached to the place, joining the demonstrations after Hariri’s assassination: “I go to these demonstrations as an onlooker only ... I cannot demand entitlement to this pain ... Yet I understand it. I’ve seen it before. I have come here to be distracted and this country is as distracting as I could hope for” (pp. 199-200).

“The One-eyed Man” by Lina Mounzer is the portrait of a man who fails to integrate his past in Lebanon with his new life in Toronto. The death of his father, who was unhappy about his only son leaving Lebanon, and with whom he hadn’t been in contact since, forces him to go back to Lebanon after many years. In the days before leaving, he is on an emotional rollercoaster, feeling insecure and afraid at the prospect of revisiting his family and Beirut after his long absence. Beirut, he feels, “is a landscape of scars and bruises” (p. 211). It mirrors the feelings of a generation that is angry about being “robbed of our childhoods by the acrid taste of fear and sweat” (p. 211), and who resent the general non-willingness of Lebanese society to deal with the memory of the war.

In “Omega: Definitions”, Zeina Ghandour challenges our understanding of national identity and our urge to define and to judge. Her main character provocatively addresses the reader in a direct manner with short rhythmic sentences that question themes of identity and belonging. Her character is refreshingly non-stereotypical in respect to standard depictions of Muslim women living in Western countries. She mocks Western prejudices and ignorance about Islam and the Arab people. And yet she regards her Lebanese identity with equal irony: “Martyr’s Square has been renamed Democracy Square. Forgive me if I can’t join in with the buoyancy. But I feel unrepresented” (p. 140).

The theme of trans-cultural mobility and identity has become more central for the new generation of Lebanese writers who, due to the Civil War and its uncertain aftermath, have spent part or even the whole of their life outside Lebanon. However, the theme is not completely new to Lebanese writing. Etel Adnan, who has herself lived in several countries, develops in “Power of Death” the dense portrait of a man who is virtually falling apart when he realizes that he made, years ago, the biggest mistake of his life by leaving his girl friend in Sweden to return to his home town, Damascus. Her death takes him back to Sweden in search of his past life.

May Ghossoub in her story “Red Lips” and Nadine Touma in “Red Car”, both explore the theme of forbidden sexuality. In her very poetic and beautifully written story, Touma develops a sensual encounter between two strangers. She succeeds in creating a very special and dense atmosphere. At the same time the story is very provocative because the two lovers enter a forbidden holy space, the minaret of a mosque, in which the father of one of the characters is the muezzin. The story is also challenging in its intimation of lesbianism, and at the very end of the story we understand that the two lovers are women. “Red Car” is also somewhat disturbing because there is a hint of death and suicide running through it.

The intensity of the stories, the diversity of styles and themes, as well as the mix of established and new writers, make the book a very interesting read. I hope that Roseanne Khalaf will share with us more stories of talented new writers who, as she says, are “the source of creative inspiration for talented new voices in a country in dire need of innovative alternatives” (p. 23).

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