

# Book Reviews



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Since its inception, *Al-Raida* has included a book review section. For the past two years, most entries were reprints of reviews published online courtesy of H-Gender-MidEast <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/~gend-mid/> and Martina E. Rieker, List Editor for H-Gender-MidEast. As part of IWSAW's effort to upgrade *Al-Raida*, we approached Dr. Rosemary Sayigh, anthropologist and oral historian, to serve as editor of the newly developed book review section.

As of this issue, we will seek original reviews of books on a variety of topics related to women and gender in the Arab world. Reviews of publications of an interdisciplinary nature are especially welcome.

Because many potential reviewers live elsewhere than Lebanon, and because books take so long to order and distribute, we suggest that you indicate to us books you would be interested in reviewing. Either we will ask publishers to send review copies directly to you, or we will reimburse you if you buy the book yourself.

We would also be happy to hear your suggestions concerning books that ought to be reviewed in *Al-Raida*. Though we prefer to review books that have been published recently, we are ready to consider others if they are deemed relevant..

## ***The Inheritance***

Sahar Khalifeh Translated by Aida Bamia from the Arabic, *Al Mirath* (1997) American University in Cairo Press, 2005, 251 pages.

## **New Vistas — Old Problems**

Gender issues are foregrounded in all of Sahar Khalifeh's novels, and *The Inheritance* is no exception. What sets Khalifeh apart from some other declared feminists is that in her writing, women's liberation is consistently situated within the parameters of overall social and political development. Advancing women's status is posited as a process of making social relations more democratic in all fields, from the family and education to government. This is arguably a process that would benefit men as well as women and children.

The style and plot of *The Inheritance* reveal Khalifeh to be a committed writer who views fiction as a means of impacting on reality. In her dictionary, the social and political spheres are completely intertwined, as are nationalist and feminist issues, and private and public domains. Born in Nablus, she addresses social issues related to the lives of ordinary Palestinians living under occupation, employing an updated version of social realism tinged with satire — occasionally stretched to the borders of the absurd to drive her point home.

Yet, Khalifeh does not focus on the occupation. Her prime concern is Palestinian agency, especially that of women who must build their lives under the double jeopardy of occupation and a patriarchal society. *The Inheritance* is set in the immediate aftermath of the Oslo accord, making the question of Palestinian agency all the more acute. The story unfolds with Palestinians scrambling to recreate their lives, and new encounters with those returning from exile.

In this period of transition and redefinition of roles, Khalifeh tells a story of family and identity, setting women's status and social cohesion, or lack of same, in sharp relief. An implicit challenge is folded into the pages of *The Inheritance*: What will people do with the new vistas appearing before them? Sadly, as she tells it,

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chances of achieving something for the common good are thwarted by the persistence of old-style customs and self-defeating behavior patterns.

*The Inheritance* offers no easy solutions but serves as a diagnosis of social ills, from the abuse of women to the brain drain. Without diagnosis, in Khalifeh's view, there is no healing. "My novels give examples of our mistakes and incompetence," she acknowledges. "The characters cannot reach viable solutions to the deeper social and political problems we have inherited in the absence of development and radical change. Some people object to my exposing these problems, but I believe that if you have a disease and want a cure, you don't care about what people say. We must care about ourselves. No other culture has developed without critical writers discussing their problems" (*The Jordan Times Weekender*, May 25, 2006).

The novel's title has triple implications, referring to inherited social problems, the legacy of occupation, and the material inheritance left by the narrator's father.

The story is told by Zayna, the New York-born daughter of a Palestinian father and an American mother, who was raised by her maternal grandmother after she became pregnant and her father threatened to kill her. Yet Zayna hastens to say that he would never have done it, for he loves her very much. This is the first of numerous incidents in the novel which illustrate the contradictory role of the male-dominated family as both loving and threatening. Rather than sensationalizing the cruelty inherent in honor killing, Khalifeh makes the blustering father brandishing his knife look silly and impotent, graphically ridiculing the twin concepts of shame and honor that are used to control women.

Zayna becomes a respected anthropologist, but finds her life sterile. When an uncle calls to tell her that her long-lost father is dying, she abruptly leaves her American life and travels to Wadi Al Rihan, a fictitious West Bank village. There she meets the relatives who have gathered at her father's bedside, maneuvering around the prospects of the inheritance. All assume that she has come to collect her share, but the inheritance Zayna wants is much more. She is seeking to recover her past, her memories, her family — nothing short of her identity.

Serving as the author's eyes-wide-open diagnostic lens, Zayna introduces the other characters. She meets her cousin, Nahleh, who spent the best years of her life working in Kuwait, sending home remittances that financed her brothers' education and lives. Expelled during the Gulf War, her return is bitter. She finds herself single and

unemployed, while her brothers have made lives for themselves, taking her contribution for granted: "All squeezed me like a lemon and then left me behind... They became engineers, with God's grace, while I worked in Kuwait, being milked like a cow, teaching and bringing them up, but they paid no attention to me and did what they wanted (p. 50-51).

In desperation, Nahleh starts a relationship that can only result in her becoming a second wife, showing the paucity of options open to an independent woman, and landing her in a quandary.

Among Nahleh's brothers is Mazen, a former resistance fighter who is unable to readjust to either traditional village life or the new political realities, after years spent in Beirut and elsewhere. His foot, destroyed by a land mine, symbolizes the paralysis of the revolutionary when the revolution is over. This is especially true when the revolution is incomplete: Mazen wanted to change the world, but he couldn't change himself. He learned about the whole wide world, but not how to treat the women in his private life as equals. In the end, his dream of opening a cultural center in Wadi Al Rihan's citadel unleashes unforeseen consequences that he can't begin to deal with.

Another brother, Said, owns a candy factory in Nablus. While successful in business, he is perceived by others as caring too much about money; his personal life is portrayed as unappealing. There are reasons for everything though, and the narrative traces the roots of his materialism back to his childhood, framing it as a form of compensation for having been treated badly by his father.

Kamal, yet another brother, is more thoughtful and sensitive than the rest. A successful engineer in Germany, he returns with plans to build a waste treatment plant in his hometown — a project Khalifeh chose for its symbolic overtones. Daunted by the lack of cooperative spirit he finds among his own people, he gives up and decides to return to Germany.

Zayna is also ambivalent about her return. The encounter with her newfound relatives makes her feel she is losing rather than finding herself. Obviously echoing the author's concerns, Zayna confides, "I no longer knew what information to collect or what I had come looking for in my country of origin. In the midst of this overwhelming welter of people's problems and worries, I lost track of my objectives, which scattered in many directions. If I were ever going to organize my thoughts and understand what was happening around me, I would have to analyze the material, applying the methods of research available to me" (p. 52).

While most male characters are presented as uncreative or incompetent, several of the women devise inventive ways to cut through socially imposed obstacles.

One example is Futna, the most recent of Zayna's father's seven wives, none of whom produced a son to be his heir. To the surprise of all, Futna announces that she is pregnant with a son, despite the fact that her husband has been incapacitated for some time. In this bizarre passage, Khalifeh is at her satirical best, showing the absurdity of a male automatically becoming the heir, even if he is an unborn, last minute, artificial-insemination addition to the family. Once again, the narrative reverts back to the roots. Zayna gets to know Futna, and discovers that her motivation for contriving this "miracle" stems from the frustrations of an earlier forced marriage.

In the end, however, all the various strategies fail, whether designed by men or women. The soldiers of the Israeli occupation, who have been looming in the background, step forward to deal a deathblow to even the best laid Palestinian plans. The challenge implicit throughout the novel is set sharply in relief: What could have been done to be better prepared for this predictable outcome?

Khalifeh has not limited her feminism to literature. In the 80s, she founded the first Palestinian institute for studying women's situation in Nablus, with a branch in Gaza. Her earlier novels were initially criticized in Arab circles for raising controversial social issues in the midst of the national struggle, but they later sold well and generated much discussion. Over the years, there has been a change in how her writing is received — surely a change which she herself contributed to. In December, she received the 2006 Naguib Mahfouz Medal of Literature awarded by the AUC Press for *Image, Icon, Covenant*, which will be published in English this year.

Reviewed by Sally Bland

### Endnote

\* Sally Bland teaches English in Amman, reviews books for the *Jordan Times*, and writes on cultural affairs.