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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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