

Book Reviews

Mujeres árabes de Colombia (Arab Women from Colombia) by Pilar Vargas A. and Luz Marina Suaza V. Bogotá: Planeta, 2011.

REVIEWED BY GEORGE A. ABDELNOUR

Mujeres árabes de Colombia is a well-meaning attempt to give voice to the undocumented experience of Arab women in Latin America, specifically Colombia. The book comprises twenty-four personal narratives of Colombo-Arab women of diverse religious and national origins, descendants or first generation immigrants from the Levant. Though not strictly an academic work, the book serves its purpose by offering readers insights into the multiple personal realms of Arab women's experience in Colombia, in the process highlighting their challenges, successes, and continued negotiation of cultural identity as Arab diasporic subjects in their host country.

The many voices found in the pages of this well-edited book, though often framed and implicitly mediated by the book's coeditors, give testimony to the complexity and diversity of Arab women's histories in Colombia, allowing readers to ask broader questions about the migration of culture and the role of gender. Accomplished women abound in the pages of the book (the book betrays a bit of bias by focusing on "successful" immigrant women by and large, a common leitmotiv in Lebanese emigration studies), and the predominance of self-identified Lebanese women is a reminder of the deep links between Lebanon and the Americas. Among these women is the story of famed Colombian poet Meira del Mar, born Olga Chams Eljach to Lebanese immigrants who settled in Colombia in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and well-known for anthologies of Spanish verse cherished all over Latin America. Zheger Hay Harb, whose Bekaa-born parents settled in Colombia's Caribbean coast, is memorable for her political engagement and for joining Colombia's guerilla movement in the 1960s, one of only a handful of women to do so. Younger characters describing their cultural experiences include Tatiana El Jeaid Hamade, an accomplished psychologist who, in a poignant reflection on living in a predominantly Catholic country, asks: "I am Muslim and a feminist. Is this compatible?" ["Soy musulmana pero soy feminista, es esto compatible?"]. Other women of Lebanese origin describe their professional rise in the fields of business and politics, such as Colombian Ambassador to Lebanon Rida Mariette Aljure Salame.

Many other unique voices abound as well. The case of Palestinian women such as Nazmia Ambra de Nofal is a case in point, as she retells her back-and-forth experience between Colombia and the West Bank, recovering lost Palestinian traditions of embroidery and cuisine to carry back to Colombia. Karen David Daccaret, of Bethlehem stock, recounts her love for Islamic art and the old Levantine tradition of mother-of-pearl inlay furniture which together with her husband she introduces to a local Colombian audience through writing and conferences on the subject. As she puts it, this personal devotion to the art of *nácar* represents a personal quest for her Palestinian roots: acts of cultural recovery and preservation are a common theme in the self-narratives of the leading women in this book. *Mujeres árabes* is concluded by a short personal reflection on her Colombian and Arab roots by renowned pop-star Shakira, not a standard subject of academic study but an interesting voice nevertheless.

As a series of personal narratives, *Mujeres árabes de Colombia* bears close resemblance to a standard genre of Latin American writing: the *testimonio* or testimony of the subaltern subject who has been silenced, reminding us of the well-known account of Guatemalan indigenous activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú in the famous account titled *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983). This genre requires that the personal account be accepted by the reader as "real" and trustworthy, though

we know that attempts to narrate one's life are also subject to the narrative conventions of fiction, such as the reconstruction of memory or the ordering of events in linear time. As such, *Mujeres árabes de Colombia* would benefit from a self-reflective postscript on the fallibility of personal accounts, urging readers to treat these as narrative constructs even while accepting the legitimacy of their content, a task the book falls short of doing. But perhaps this is understandable given the text's other priorities and pre-established scope.

Together with *Pequeño equipaje, grandes ilusiones: La migración árabe a Colombia* [*Small Suitcase, Big Illusions: Arab Migration to Colombia*], written by co-editor Pilar Vargas Arana and published simultaneously in 2011, the present book offers a useful handbook for a deeper understanding of Lebanese and Arab women's experience in Latin America. As such it is a worthy contribution to a subject in need of further exploration, as well as to the interdisciplinary meeting of Middle Eastern and Latin American cultural studies.

George Abdelnour, Ph.D. Director of the Center for Applied Research in Education (CARE) & Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Humanities, Notre Dame University, Louaize, Lebanon
E-mail: gabelnour@ndu.edu.lb