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Qissat: Short Stories by Palestinian Women, Edited by Jo Glenville. London: Telegram books, 2007. Pp. 200. \$18,95.

REVIEWED BY TANIA TABBARA

I've always had mixed feelings concerning anthologies on women writers. It seems to me that classifying writers by their nationality and their gender does not really do justice to the creative originality of their stories. By classifying them in that way the stories are somehow assumed to reflect a certain social and political reality, which might not at all be intended by the writers. Especially regarding female writers from the Middle East, one expects to find stories that reflect upon the suppression of women in a patriarchal society that is determined by Islamic culture. Palestinian women writers have to fight this cliché as much as the expectation that their writing is (merely) informed by their status as refugees or occupied people (which of course might be the case but not necessarily so, or maybe only partially so).

Yet, flipping through *Qissat: Short Stories by Palestinian Women*, edited by Jo Glanville, I was immediately fascinated by the stories, which by no means only “reflect the everyday concerns of Palestinians living under occupation,” as the back cover of the book suggests, even though

all writers of course do have a biographical connection to Palestine in one way or the other. The choice of writers is interesting because they come from different generations; some are still very young, others dead already, and they grew up and have lived in many different places, such as Lebanon, Palestine, Kuwait, Jordan, and the United States, to mention only a few of them. Five of the sixteen stories were written in English, the others are translated from Arabic.

It is therefore not astonishing that many stories evolve around themes of identity, mobility, and migrant experiences. In "Local Hospitality" by Naomi Shihab Nye, the main characters attempt to negotiate an identity between their past in a village in Palestine that is characterized by traditions and social collective pressures, and their present life in the United States where they have come to develop and enjoy individual freedoms and aspirations. Mobility (or rather the lack thereof) is also a theme in Liana Badr's "Other Cities," where the main character, a mother of six, who is poor and lives in Hebron with no ID, is dreaming of going to Ramallah, a place so close and yet so far away due to the Israeli checkpoints all over the West Bank. Against all odds and despite of her own fears, she risks the journey together with her children. The story unfolds interestingly and comes to a rather surprising ending.

In "Me (the Bitch) and Bustanji" Selma Dabbagh explores themes of identity and growing up as a female in a predominantly male society. The story of an adolescent girl with Palestinian and British parents, set in Kuwait during the Iraqi invasion, is beautifully observed in its details and does not lack humour despite the sad events the story narrates. Equally powerful and creative is Adania Shibli's "May God Keep Love in a Cool and Dry Place" (it is not her story "Dust" that is included in the anthology, as the back cover of the book claims), an intimate and dense portrayal of a couple once in love and slowly falling out of love, despite both their wishes to hold on to it. Shibli succeeds in developing an atmosphere full of tensions, translating subtle emotions into language.

"The Tables Outlived Amin" by Nuha Samara and "Pietà" by Jean Said Makdisi both look at the experience of violence during the Civil War in Lebanon, but from very different angles. Nuha Samara's story is developed around two friends, an artist, who passionately describes his beloved city Beirut, and his friend, a fighter, who at first is depicted in a rather dogmatic manner, and who does not believe in the power of art, and that change in society can come through peaceful means. Paradoxically, it is because of his feelings that in the end he dies, in an attempt to rescue his family. The artist, in a fit of anger and grief, violently avenges his friend's death.

In "Pietà" Jean Said Makdisi develops a psychological portrayal of a well-off Palestinian woman who has lived in Beirut during and after the Civil War. The story narrates the feelings of shock and guilt that the character is going through when, by coincidence, she meets an old acquaintance. Suddenly she is faced not only with the tragic loss that this woman from a poor Palestinian background has suffered during the war, but also with her own privileged situation.

Although "Her Tale" by Samira Azzam was written about half a century ago, its theme of honor killing is still relevant. In this touching, poetically written story, a woman is addressing her little brother who is planning to kill her. Without accusing him, she is seeking his compassion, explaining to him her feelings and the circumstances that have driven her into prostitution.

"Dates and Bitter Coffee" by Donia El Amal Ismael reads like a parody of the politicized mourning rituals that usually take place after someone has died a martyr. In the story, just minutes after a young man had passed away, his family, still under shock, has to cope with such a loud politically motivated mourning ceremony, which does not leave room for their feelings of grief and pain: "... the father was out of his seat and speeding away in his car, without a word to his wife and children. He raced along, leaving behind his son's mourning ceremony which had been transformed in the blink of an eye into a poster, a microphone, and a death notice in a newspaper he never read" (p. 115).