

Women's Image in Arabic Fiction(1)

In a study of 80 middle sized pages, Dr. Latifeh ez-Zayyat, Head of the English Department at Ain-Shams University, Egypt, presents the image of woman in the Arabic novels and short stories which appeared during the second half of the 20th century, particularly between 1960 and 1980, i.e. the period which was marked by important political and social changes in the Arab East.

In her analysis, the author makes use of a few current theories of psychoanalysis, such as that of the oedipus complex (the libidinal feeling that a child develops toward the parent of the opposite sex). Another sexual deviation, to which she refers, is the dual image that a man usually develops regarding woman: that of the ideal, forbidden woman, represented by the mother, and that of the ordinary woman who belongs to another man and whom he considers as easily conquerable. In selecting the stories, Dr. ez-Zayyat points out those that show the unjust treatment inflicted on women by society, the wrong attitude adopted by males toward females, in accordance with the traditions of the 8000 year-old patriarchal system.

All the works mentioned in the study were written by men and represent men's point of view. Those written by women receive no attention except occasionally, as for example, in a brief comparison between a novel by Sharif Hattata, "Al-Ain that-ul-Jafn' il-Ma'adaniya". (The Eye with the Metal Eyelid), and that of Nawal Saadawi, "Al-Bahitha an'il-Hubb" (The Seeker of Love).

Latifeh ez-Zayyat tries to analyze, briefly or in detail, twenty-five selected stories and novels, some of which belong to well-known fiction writers, such as Toufiq al-Hakim, Najib Mahfouz, Hanna Meena, Zakariyya Tamer, Yusif Idris. The perspective widens, however, to include the younger generation of authors who represent a spirit of rebellion against tradition, such as Fat'hi Ghanem (Egypt), Muhammed Abdullah, Muhammed abdul-Malik (Bahrain), Khaleefa Husein Mustapha, Abdullah Toukhi (Lybia), Abdul-Hamid ben Haduqa, At-Taher Wattar (Algeria), Abddul Rahman Munif (Syria) and At-Tayyeb Saleh (Sudan).

In discussing the topic of marriage, ez-Zayyat emphasizes the political and social implications of this

institution which is completely free from anything that we may call "romantic love" or "spiritual understanding" between the betrothed. Its unique function seems to be the support of the system of private property which started 5000 years B.C. and, since that time, has consecrated woman's enslavement to the tribe or clan. This practice has reduced her into a tool for the procreation of males who perpetuate the name of the husband and enhance the prestige of the family or tribe by increasing its number, extending its possessions, guarding its honor and watching over the legitimacy of its children. This last activity requires the chastity of the wife who becomes menaced with divorce if she fails to bear male children, and threatened with death if she is adulterous, i.e. capable of giving birth to illegitimate children, outside the marriage bond. Social traditions, on the other hand, do not require chastity from the husband who enjoys the privilege of sexual freedom, as declared by Toufiq el-Hakim in his novel, "Al-Ribat-ul-Muqaddas" (The Sacred Tie): "A woman's adultery differs from that of man. A man toils in order to obtain and take care of offspring which is legally his own. A woman does not enjoy the same privilege unless her financial contribution is equal to that of her husband." May we infer from this statement that, if a wife's financial contribution equals that of her husband, she should be allowed to betray him and commit adultery? What about her biological function and her social contribution as housekeeper, nurse and guide of the children? According to Toufiq el-Hakim, marriage is a contract which imposes the production of a male heir on a woman. It is a means of enforcing the age-old law of inheritance.

Since the existence of a woman depends on procreation, sterility legitimates her divorce. An unmarried woman becomes a problem, an object of scorn, because she has failed her vocation. Latifeh ez-Zayyat mentions the stories dealing with the problem of "old maids", like "Nahnu Nuhibb ush Shams" (We Like the Sun) by the Bahraini writer, Muhammed Abdul-Malik, and "Al-Abnusa-l-Baida" (The White Ebony) by Hanna Meena, and comments on them by saying: "The status of the unmarried woman has been changing in our society. She is no more the rejected black sheep. Every woman, married or single, possesses large reserves of love and talent which she may exploit for her own benefit and that of others, whether they be her kin or outsiders and yet," the author adds, "the image of the unmarried woman in fiction has not changed. It has failed to conform to reality. It is a tragic image, leading its subject to insanity, suicide or to slow agony and death. It often takes a dramatic form, which is contrary to fact."

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In the short story, "Al-Aib" (Shame), the author Yusuf Idris upholds a theory asserting that woman is unidimensional in nature, which means that her existence is concentrated in her femininity and her sexual life. As a result, her fall, which means the loss of her chastity, is equivalent to death. Man, on the other hand, is just the opposite. He is multidimensional! ez-Zayyat shows the fallacy of this theory which, if it carries any truth, is only a product of traditional upbringing which restricts a woman's interests to the needs of her body and totally neglects her spiritual and intellectual growth. While many of Idris' works revolve around the theme of sexual liberation, this story upholds the slavery of women.

In her analysis of some stories, the author shows a deep understanding of the writers' aims, as for example, her analysis of the novel, "Mawsim ul-Hijra el-sh-shimal" (The Period of Emigration to the North), a best-seller by the Sudanese At-Tayyeb Saleh, published in the early seventies. The novel presents three original and interesting characters. The first is Hassana, widow of Mustapha Said, who rebels against a polygamous husband who had forced her to marry him. She succeeds in pushing him by thrusting into his chest a knife which she afterwards plunges into her own breast. The second character is the talented and highly educated Mustapha Said, whose wide culture did not prevent him from believing that raping a foreign woman in bed compensates him for retaliation against foreign invaders whom he has been unable to expel from his country.

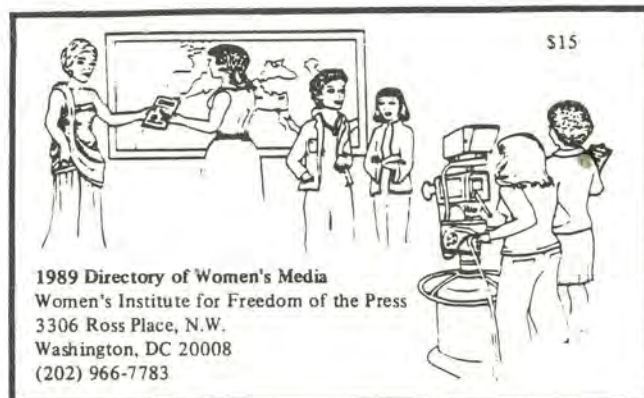
In psychoanalysis, this primitive idea represents an attitude adopted by a weak man who, unable to stand against a strong male enemy, seeks compensation by attacking his weak counterpart, his daughter or his wife. This phenomenon is exemplified by the Arabic proverb: "Jeha is strong only against his aunt." The quixotic adventures of this complexed man finally lead him to suicide.

Totally opposed to Said's views was his pupil, the narrator of the story, who succeeds in evading the tragic end of his teacher and remaining immune from the malady of violence which Said had supposedly caught from his Northern friends, the Europeans. His optimism regarding the future of his countrymen makes of him a symbol of the man of to-morrow, while Mustapha Said's suicide announces the end of complexed individuals like him. As to Hassana his widow, she is a totally unreal character in her community, probably an invention of the author. Yet she stands as a symbol of the woman of the future, who defends her freedom at the risk of losing her life.

The story of At-Tayyeb Saleh reflects originality and optimism which wipe out the image of the negative submissive woman with which we are familiar in most Arabic novels and stories. The image, however, becomes more radiant and nearer to reality in the final story analyzed by ez-Zayyat. It is the story entitled "Az-Zinjiyya wad-dhabit" (The Negro Woman and the Captain) by the Algerian At-Tahir Wattar. The heroine of the story is a pretty, educated and modern young woman who occupies a responsible position in a political organization. The Captain sitting next to her in the car thinks she must be an easy prey because education, in his opinion, has made of her a licentious woman or because all liberated women are prostitutes. The Captain awaits an opportunity for taking hold of her and when, in the evening, he goes into her room, he is surprised to see the young woman sitting on a sofa, singing a patriotic hymn of her own making, while the journalist who accompanied them in the car was kneeling on the floor, writing what the girl sang.

This story, Latifeh ez-Zayyat concludes, proves that woman is not unidimensional as Yusuf Idris pretends. Her potentials and ambitions may transcend sex and go beyond the cage to which she is confined. The heroine of the story is the modern-minded woman who has been utilizing her freedom and her capacity for the liberation of her sisters and all her country-people as well. She is the woman who has imposed her respect on her community and on all those whom she contacts.

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S15