

# POETRY

## BY ARAB WOMEN

*Poetry, more so than painting, theater, music or dance, is the premier art form in the Arab world, where facility with language has always been highly regarded. Arab women have been writing beautiful verses for centuries. In fact, one of the most celebrated Arab poets of the pre-Islamic era was a woman, Al-Khansaa'. In our own century, several women poets have achieved fame throughout the Arab world and even in the West for their compelling imagery, technical virtuosity and bold experimentation with verse. The following poems, composed by three of the leading Arab women poets of the twentieth century, offer but a glimpse of Arab women's considerable poetic talents.*

*(These poems are reproduced from a monograph published by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World in 1985 entitled Contemporary Arab Women Poets and Writers. Rose Ghurayyib compiled, edited and translated the poems. The monograph, which also features two highly informative critical essays on Arab women poets and novelists respectively, is available from the IWSAW office.)*

*Andree Chedid  
(Lebanese, born in 1921 in Egypt)*

### *The Sailing Heart*

Far from rituals  
Which reduce us into ashes,  
Far from temples  
Where the sky vainly forces an entrance,  
Far from brass powers conquered by other powers  
Let us choose life  
At the summit of the wounded day  
Rather the haphazard fruit  
Than the marble letter  
Rather to continuously seek and never to know  
Than to despair and stop moving.  
Rather an arch through the jungle  
A wing through pitfalls  
Than a sinister fresco  
Of a hidden truth.  
Time melts like wax,  
Bolts will yield to the sailing heart

### *The Distance*

I often inhabit my body  
To the very hollow of my armpits  
I engrave myself on it  
To the very finger tips  
I decipher my belly  
I inhale my breath  
I sail in my veins  
At the tempo of my body.  
To have been my body  
I have often lived  
I live  
But often from a vague point,  
I see this body knocked by the days,  
Assailed by time  
Often from a vague pint  
I keep it at a distance  
Out of this alternation itself  
I live.

*File*      *File*      *File*      *File*      *File*

**Nazik al-Mala'ika**  
(Iraqi, born in 1923)

*To Wash their Shame Away*

“Ah, Mama!” the fateful cry pierced the air,  
A pool of blood submerged the head, the ebony  
hair,

A final shiver from the corpse, lying inert,  
“Ah Mama!”, only the executioner heard.  
Tomorrow dawn will peep and roses will awake,  
A call to youth, to dreams, will be heard at day-  
break,

But the green fields will answer, the red poppies  
will say:

“Yea! She is gone! To wash their shame away!”

The executioner and his friends will meet again.  
He'll say, wiping his knife, “we've done away with  
shame!

We're free again and honest, our honor is restored!

Bring the cup, barman, fill it and take my gold!  
Call the perfumed, the languid, the sweet cabaret  
girl,

Her eyes are more precious to me than gold or  
pearl!”

Fill the cup, O assassin,  
Be merry and gay!  
Thy victim's blood will surely  
Wash thy shame away!

O women of our quarter, O maidens far or near,  
Tell your lords, tell your men, to be of good cheer.  
With the tears of our eyes we'll knead the bread we  
eat,

We shall cut off our locks and skin our hands and  
feet,

So their clothes may remain pure, shining and  
white.

No smile, no laugh, no sign, no look to left or right.

And tomorrow, who knows? How can we ever  
guess,

How many of us will be thrown in some wilderness  
To wash their shame away.

**Fedwa Tuqan**  
(Palestinian)

*My Sad Town*

On the day we beheld death and treachery,  
The ebb moved back,  
The windows of heaven were closed,  
The town held its breath  
When the wave was repelled,  
When ugly depths were revealed to sight,  
Hope fell into ashes.  
My sad town was choked, assaulted by misfortune,  
Children and songs disappeared  
No shade, no echo;  
Sadness in my town crawled naked,  
With blood-stained steps,  
Silence crept, heavy and fast like mountains,  
Obscure like night, tragic,  
Burdened with the weight of death and defeat.

O, my sad, silent town,  
Is it possible that in the season of gathering,  
Crops and fruits are burned?  
Is this the ending of our long journey?

*To A Foreign Friend*

My foreign friend,  
If the road to you  
Were now as it was before,  
If deadly vipers did not lie in wait on our way,  
Digging tombs for my kin and my people,  
Sowing death and fire;

If disaster had not been raining stones  
of shame on the soil of my country,  
If my heart were not bleeding on the dagger of  
defeat.

If I were still as before  
Proud of my people, of my country, of my name,  
I should have been now near you,  
Anchoring my boat on the shores of your love;  
Together we would have been like a pair of young  
doves.