

Arab Women Novelists: *The Formative Years and Beyond*

by Joseph T. Zeidan

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Dr. Joseph Zeidan, Professor of Near Eastern Literature at Ohio State University, has published two editions of the Bibliography of Women's Literature in the Modern Arab World. In his latest book, *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond*, he surveys a relatively new genre in Arabic literature: novels by Arab women. The study is limited to women writers from the Arab East, i.e., Lebanon, Egypt, Syria and Palestine, where the genre originated, and focuses upon women who use Arabic as their vehicle of creative expression. In his Introduction, Zeidan argues that Arab women writers deliberately refused the use of European languages in order to better express local issues and concerns to a larger Arab audience and thereby directly influence Arab culture and politics. A key issue confronting these women novelists is the need to grapple with the patriarchal traditions of Classical Arabic language and literature which tend to marginalize women's self-expression.

Chapter One, "Women in Arab Society: A Historical Perspective," discusses the status of women in the Arabian Peninsula and the Arab East from pre-Islamic times up until the 1960s. The information is standard. Zeidan summarizes the well-known theories on the position of women in the pre-Islamic period, the formalization of women's rights and duties in Islam, and the heated discussion regarding the veil, women's education and segregation. Western readers may be surprised to learn that the 19th century Arab women's movement was almost exclusively run by male scholars who only gradually lost their exclusive right to speak and write on behalf of women.

Chapter Two, "The Pioneering Generation,"

reveals how literary women in the Arab East, from the 19th century *nahda* (Renaissance) period until the mid-twentieth century, slowly validated their participation in cultural life, in spite of the fact that the patriarchal environment made it so difficult for them to imagine themselves as writers, let alone to be accepted as serious artists. Among these pioneers, we must consider the privileged, educated women who animated literary societies, journals and salons. Though numerous, they achieved little else than bringing mainstream cultural activities into their otherwise isolated lives. The first real contribution of Arab women to their literature was poetry, especially eulogies, elegies and love lyrics. Few of these early women poets, however, diverged from the conventions of European and Arab male poets, and fewer still dared to break away from the "puritanical approach to the Arabic language taken by the mainstream [male] writers" (p. 61). The remarks on Egypt's Aisha Taymur, "perhaps the most outstanding female Arab writer to emerge in the second half of the nineteenth century" (p. 59), provide a good transition to Zeidan's survey of early writers of fiction, since Taymur was both a "remarkable" poet and a "mediocre" story-teller (p. 61). The pioneers of women's fiction (e.g., Alice Al-Bustani, Zaynab Fawwaz, Labibah Hashim, Labibah Sawaya, Faridah Atiyyah, Afifah Karam and Mayy Ziadeh) deserve praise for their courageous determination to write rather than for their artistic achievements. They hewed to historical plots and conventional melodrama (again imitated from European novels or from patriarchal Arab literary traditions). Their control over form was weak and they were only slowly learning to construct narratives and to ply the language to convey their intentions. Mayy Ziyadah is cited as the most gifted and original of these women, "the first Arab woman in modern times to be recognized as an established writer in her own lifetime" (77). The work of Bint al-Shati represents a significant change in Arabic women's fiction the world wars: real-life social problems of ordinary women (especially in the country-side) gradually replaced the conventional historical themes and the *cliché* characters. Overall, these pioneers were certainly not feminists; none of them tried to topple the "whole superstructure of [literary, cultural, social and linguistic] norms set up by men" (p. 90); instead, they generally conformed to these norms.

The third chapter, "The Quest for Personal Identity," surveys the 1950s and 1960s, when "Women novelists began to assert themselves as

'beings in society' and at the same time achieved a heightened sense of individuality" in the face of often very harsh criticism (p. 235). Zeidan devotes separate sections to Aminah al-Sa'id ("New Beginnings"), Layla Ba'albakkī ("Rebellion"), Colette Al-Khuri ("Unconvincing Developments"), Layla Usayran ("More Experiments"), Emily Nasrallah ("Village Novelist"), and Nawal As-Sa'adawi ("Militant Fiction"). These authors exposed the many negative repercussions of the patriarchal social system for women and, through their heroines, demanded the right to personal self-determination in matters of social activities, sexuality and politics. Obviously, much work produced in this period resembled that of earlier feminist writers in the West.

Chapter Four, "The Quest for National Identity", covers the period from 1967 through the early 1980s. In this section, Zeidan gives particular attention to the impact of the Palestinian question and the Lebanese war on women's writing. As a result of these national crises, many writers' interests shifted from the private female experience to the collective one. Women began writing novels about traumatized women in a world made hostile by international political maneuvering and dilemmas of national, ethnic and confessional identity. In this Chapter, Zeidan examines work by artists such as As-Sa'adawi, Az-Zayyat, Khalifeh, Badr, As-Samaan, Al-Shaykh and several others whose work is directly inspired by the war experience.

Finally, the book's reference section is impressive. It accounts for fully one-third of the book: five appendices with publication data on women's journals in Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and "the rest of the Arab world and abroad", a 26-page appendix of novels written by Arab women between 1887 and 1993, substantial end notes, thirty pages of bibliography and a fine index.

Arab Women Novelists aims to convince the Western target audience of the fact that women have been writing in the Arab world for a very long time; that, in spite of a slow start due to cultural and religious circumstances, they have gradually established their creative and intellectual presence; and that today *i.e.*, by the early 1980s, they have achieved much as artists. To this end, the author offers an avalanche of factual information (such as names, dates, titles and lists — both in the reference section and in the main body of the book) a predictable chronological organization, an impressive number of often lengthy plot summaries, and fine analyses of many novels. He makes adequate connections between the literary developments and the concurrent sociopolitical changes in the Arab world. He also compares the women's movements and women's literature in the Arab world and in the West. All of this

is very illuminating. However, what is lacking is an agenda or a critical argument which would have made this study truly fascinating. The author presents the fruits of his exhaustive research (and wide reading in several languages) in a chronological and deterministic framework while refraining from taking a critical stand. There is nothing about which to argue.

It is therefore difficult to establish what type of scholarly book *Arab Women Novelists* really is. Is it primarily a reference work, a literary history, a work of literary criticism, or an attempt to be all of the above? In his Introduction, Zeidan seems to hint that he mainly aspires to literary criticism namely when he posits that a book on women writers must be grounded in literary-critical feminist thought and discourse, although Western feminist thought should not and cannot be indiscriminately applied to non-Western culture. But in spite of its good intentions and regardless of its many merits, this book does not really have much of a significant literary-theoretical foundation, feminist or otherwise. (There are a few passages of a theoretical nature and a few token bows to feminist scholars such as Elaine Showalter and Helene Cixous.) Moreover, over-indulgence in plot summaries has become unacceptable in literary criticism; the fact that many of the novels under discussion remain untranslated and unavailable to the target audience is not a valid excuse. And finally, as mentioned earlier, the author does not propose any critical argument or agenda with which we can agree or disagree.

Consequently, we read on, but we are not entirely engaged; we learn much, but we do not feel particularly challenged or stimulated. In fact, we have the impression that we are reading neither genuine literary criticism, nor a pure reference work nor a narrowly focused literary history, but...a doctoral dissertation. Doctoral dissertations, even when exceptionally solid, seldom provide intellectual thrills and challenges. They aim at encyclopedic completeness. Their formal organization is predictable. Numerous plot summaries and discussions prove that the author has read much and that he has acquired a solid grasp of the techniques of literary analysis. Theoretical references suggest familiarity with basic names and ideologies. And a strictly impersonal, detached attitude toward the material is unlikely to upset any member of the dissertation committee.

In spite of its dissertation-like character, however, this is a very useful book. Thanks to its solid scholarship and rich documentation, it should remain useful for many years to come. It is an important and timely contribution to Arabic literary studies, Arab women's studies, Middle Eastern studies, cultural studies and comparative literature.