

## ABSTRACTS OF THREE INTRODUCTORY STUDIES TO A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS WRITTEN BY WOMEN SINCE 1960

### *The Presentation Of Reality in Short Stories Written By Lebanese Women*

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This study deals with the short story as a genre that has attracted a surprisingly large number of women writers since the 1960's. Even though women writers wrote without strong orientations and direction, the stories, on the whole, have insisted on a realistic shape.

Keeping in mind the elasticity of the word realism, the study deals with various modes and shapes of realism ranging from depictions of tangible reality and particular events, accurate observation of empirical phenomena, exposition of social injustice, concern with documentation, and conveyance of a message. The stories pay more attention to the visible rather than the invisible and represent reality as intelligible and as making sense. At the same time, in addition to a direct and uncomplicated reporting of the truth of everyday life, the study reveals a more differentiated understanding of the writers' partial relationship to the world, ontological uncertainties, and the problems and constraints involved in trying to depict reality. If these texts reveal the impossibility of depicting reality as it is, they show, at the same time, the subtleties and contradictions of realism. In fact, some of these stories reveal a slight shift in focus from the stable, the balanced, and the harmonious, to the random, the shifting, and the changing.

However, despite some moves toward experimentation, the Lebanese short story remains traditional, and the subjects remain anchored securely in time and place. One could say that these stories generally fit into the category of the well-made, that is they have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Even when they depart into areas of modern uncertainty, or when they overlook part of the beginning, the middle, or end, they are still in line with traditional fiction.

Explicit references to reality occur in many of the actual works and continue until the 1990's. Referring to real places is one way of mirroring reality and giving the illusion that what is portrayed is the real world. This is seen in the incorporation of real places into the texts. Among such places are Beirut, Damascus, Morocco, London, Paris, Yemen, the Intercontinental Hotel, the Horseshoe and many others. In addition to places, some writers, such as Daisy al-Amir, stress their relatedness to objects and things in their immediate surroundings, particularly in the home plot. In

some texts, objects begin to assume human forms, subverting and overpowering the human animate world. Some other stories incorporate semi documentary material and remain close to journalistic writing as we see in stories by Nur Salman. This is a more heightened form of realism which can be largely attributed to the civil war in Lebanon.

Another technique employed is the achievement of authenticity not through adherence to physical and tangible reality, but in the emphasis, not so much on the external world, but rather on what this world represents. In other words, a place like Beirut becomes a set of signs, a text to interpret, and the writer or narrator reads meaning into it. This is seen in the stories of a vast majority of writers from the sixties to the nineties.

Another form of adherence to reality is through the emphasis on the body. The female body emerges in these texts tinged with the hue of eroticism. The texts reveal the woman's awareness of her body, her desire for liberation through sexual freedom and the right to choose the man she loves, and to express her physical and sexual needs. This can be seen in the writings of the sixties and early seventies; however, this tendency almost disappeared in the 80s because of the prioritizing of the political and military problems, but reappeared again in the nineties with greater intensity in the short stories of Hanan al-Shaykh. Al-Shaykh uses language and themes that had not been tackled before such as themes of homosexuality. By choosing such topics that are normally associated with male authors, the writer transgresses and disturbs by her gender.

If realism may have been the predominant mode of portrayal for women, other writers employ strategies that run counter to realism and undermine conventional notions of reality by blurring the boundaries between the real and the imaginary. Such strategies can be seen in some stories by Layla Ba'albaki, and Salwa Safi. These stories bare their own devices and incorporate metafictional elements by telling the reader explicitly about the actual process of writing. Other stories, like some of those written by Rafif Fattuh, have no beginning and seem to end in the middle.

Another strategy includes the use of elements of the fantastic that do not destroy realism but reveal a slow shift away from it. The creation of such fantasy worlds is a form of heightened realism where such worlds are created to comment upon the real world and show its limitations. Among the stories that highlight this mode are those written by Nuha Tabbara Hammud, Emily Nassrallah, and Nada Amin al-A'war.

Other stories such as those by Rene al-Hayek employ interior monologue or dialogue which highlights the subjective nature of the material presented and creates the impression of an autonomous narration. In these stories, the emphasis is on character rather than plot and atmosphere rather than action.

In the light of the above, one could say that the stories written by women represent an authentic female voice and portray an authentic female experience. The stories maintain a very strong tie with reality no matter how they have tried to soar above or beyond it. Despite the fact that some writers disrupt linear plot, abandon sequential plotting and causality, and flaunt their presence foregrounding the subjective nature of their narration, there is a continuing belief in the meaningfulness of language and the written word. Despite some questioning of the assumptions of realism, these writers, by and large, aspire to depict the world in which they live using authentic and documentary material such as journals, newspapers, diaries, and letters in an attempt to get at reality. Thus, one could say that although fiction written by women from 1960 to the present demonstrates a variety of experiences and stylistic approaches, it has maintained its strong ties with the outside world and has remained committed to the realistic mode.

### *Novels Written by Lebanese Women From 1960-1997*

*By Rachid Al-Daif*

The study attempts to shed light on two major issues related to the fiction written by Lebanese women since the early 1960's until the present: the trends to which the novel belonged, and the particular attributes of subject matter and goals.

The fiction written by women cannot be categorized under any distinct trend or particular school or movement. It has remained within the mainstream of the Arabic novel and has fallen under the same influences. The sixties that witnessed the rise of existentialist trends in the Arabic novel, including novels written by women, dominated the scene and almost did away with other modes of writing. Still these other modes - including Romanticism and Realism - managed to hold out and continued to develop. The realistic mode, in particular, flourished and developed to reach its peak after the 1967 defeat which led to a serious shift in Arab life in general and literature and the novel in particular. This date in effect marks the end of the existentialist era in the Arabic novel. Then came the Lebanese war which left its imprint on the fiction written by women. Accordingly, we note a substantial number of works that reveal a strong tendency to use documentary material.

If the fiction written by women writers falls within the mainstream of the Arabic novel in general and expresses the general spirit of the age, that does not imply that these

works have no particular and individualistic traits that distinguish them from works written by male writers. Male literature, in general, and particularly the novel, transformed women into a rhetorical expression or cliché. No wonder that women have concentrated in their writing on the various problems afflicting women particularly issues related to morality and the relationship with men.

These problems can be generally attributed to two main factors: customs and traditions and the prevalent ethical and moral norms. In both cases, the cause of women's suffering seems to be determined by an external factor, the society in which one lives rather than existence itself, women's nature, or psyche etc. Accordingly, one could say that some women were generally in a state of rejection of the prevalent ethical and moral standards, while others went as far as abandoning constraint and calling for unconditional freedom. A third party, unlike the other two, regarded women as human beings no more no less, and therefore, did not devote a great deal of attention to women's issues, nor did they see their problems as distinctly and particularly feminine to be dealt with separately and apart from other issues.

The study concludes with a question. What are the reasons that prevented this highly significant fiction written by women, particularly in the 1960's, from featuring in the mass media, academic and literary magazines, cultural clubs and universities?

*Translated by Samira Aghacy*

### *Lebanese Women Poets*

*Sabah al-Kharrat Zwein*

Poetry is an attempt to enter the world of writing. It is an adventure in the unknown in quest of the absolute; it is a voyage of doubt into search of peace. The poet is not merely a medium for conveying feelings. His or her mission is to generate, explore, and create language. His or her ultimate goal is the absolute. Doubt and certainty alternate in the process of writing poetry, drowning the poet in a world of contradictions and impossibilities which he or she tries to surpass through writing. The poet, however, cannot write a single word without finding the structure or form. Form comes before content because it is form that extracts the secret from the depths of the poet. Form is writing. It is the creative process.

This study is restricted to three Lebanese women poets: Nadia Tueini, Vinus Khouri-Gatta and Nuhad Salameh. Other poets like Etel Adnan, Claire Jubeili, Huda Adeeb, Andréé Shedeed, May El-Murr, Inaya Jaber, Nada El-Haj and Maha Sultan are only touched upon or referred to briefly.

Nadia Tueini is a well known voice in the world of poetry - the voice of words that reflects a sharp and spontaneous



"Narration in the Course of its Form", 1993. Maisoon Saqr al-Qasimi

vision. Nadia Tueini's words emerge from the depth of her soul taking the shape of water circles on the surface of a stagnant lake. We can see them but without being able to capture them at the moment of their occurrence. Nadia Tueini uses the four elements of creation *i.e.* water, fire, earth and air. However, no matter how hard we try to talk about each of these symbols in isolation, the four elements remain endlessly inter-related and endlessly rich. Nadia Tueini asserts that poetry is the savior from the ugliness of reality as it helps uncover the secrets lying within one's soul.

revolving around herself until her dream proved unattainable. Eventually the dream turned into a nightmare, salvation appeared far-fetched, and the "city" for which she was looking became "alien" to her. Salameh's anxiety is directly related to her personal understanding of the "city" which may be the promised land, the perfect city, or the golden place.

Another distinctive poet is Vinus Khouri-Gatta, the poet of "death", since she never writes about anything but death, but when she writes about death, she is in the peak of life and imaginative power. Khouri-Gatta's flexible, passionate, and sophisticated language attracts us to her world that revolves everlastingly around the one and only topic, death, the poet's inexhaustible subject. Khouri Gatta's language is liberated from the cold mind's surveillance. Her poems are composed in moments of extreme passion and hallucination. By naming death, describing it, and liberating it from silence, the poet breaks the mystery of her existence to show that she can escape extinction if she actually confronts it with ferocity and aggressiveness.

Nuhad Salameh entraps the reader in entangled and ambiguous images. The reader cannot easily comprehend Salameh's symbolic language. He or she will have to re-read and re-think her verses several times in order to be able to relate to them. Composing poetry is circular, and Nuhad Salameh kept

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