

# In the House of Silence

(Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers)

Editor: Fadia Faqir

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Reviewed by Abir Hamdar

In the introduction to *In the House of Silence*, editor of the Arab Women Writers series, Fadia Faqir, tells us that on April 10, 1992, the Arab Women's Creativity Association organized a conference entitled "Women and the Novel." During the conference, many Arab women writers gave testimonies on their lives and writing. What they shared with the audience was so moving and poignant that Faqir decided to collect some of them in a book. The fruit of that decision was published six years later and is an essential reading book for all those interested in Arab women novelists and researchers in the literary field.

The 181-page book is divided into thirteen chapters that include the testimonies of leading women novelists from Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia, Iraq, Palestine, Algeria, Bahrain. The writers include Liana Badr, Salwa Bakr, Hoda Barakat, Fadia Faqir, Alia Mamdouh, Samira Al Mana', Ahlam Mosteghanemi, Hamida Na'na, Aroussia Nalouti, Nawal El Saadawi, Fawzia Rashid, Hadia Said and Zhor Ounissi. Each testimony they share recounts the difficult conditions under which they found themselves writing. And while each experience is a unique one, almost all of them reflect the hardship of being a female in the Arab world, the struggle to gain an education, the drive to prove oneself, and finally what it means to be a woman writer in Arab society.

For instance, the Palestinian writer Liana Badr begins her testimony, "The Story of a Novel or Reflections of Details in the Mirror: Between Awareness and Madness," by remembering her mother's strict warning against standing too long in front of the mirror, because "desire is a dangerous thing for a girl in our society, as is exploring the coverings which shield the body



from the eyes and words of others that can so easily enclose it in their grasp”(p.27). And for years, Badr says that she was terrified of looking at that glass which “invariably undertakes a dialogue with the soul,” (p.28). Yet, the many private and public wars that the author lived through finally compelled her to take a deep glance, scrutinizing and searching. That same compulsion also drove her to writing.

For Alia Mamdouh, however, it is fear, which finds its roots in the cupboards of her childhood, that drives her to write. In her testimony “Creatures of Arab Fear,” the author describes growing up in a place where fear lived in everyone: “From the living room to the shared bedrooms, encompassing the school, the street and even public baths. Fear haunted every member of this family,”(p.68). This fear has accompanied Mamdouh through the different phases of her life, until it became difficult to even express the true nature of that fear. Mamdouh says: “One day, it felt as if it had replaced the very blood in my veins,” (p.69). The author also raises a number of questions about Arab women writers and the problems they encounter. For instance, she wonders: “Is female creativity still perceived as undesirable? Could this be the reason why they don’t reach the public?” (p.70).

Ahlam Mosteghanemi’s “Writing Against Time and History,” depicts writing as a process that enables one to open secret doors, to think against oneself, to argue and to take a risk. For Mosteghanemi, the main threat lies in the suppression of freedom that Arab writers suffer, especially Algerians. She says: “Whereas we used to dream of living one day with what we write, we now dream of not dying one day because of what we write,” (p.88). But that is not all. Mosteghanemi also describes what it means to be a writer and a wife. She explains: “I steal time to write, break into my son’s study to write and cheat on those around me to make a date with paper,” (p.86).

On the other hand, Hamida Na’na’s essay “Writing Away the Prison,” relives the journey of a girl who refuses to

surrender to any institution, including marriage. Na’na recounts her first day at school, which took on a “funeral character at home,” (p.93), her struggle to gain an education, joining a political party for the liberty of a nation, and later the dilemma of finding a place to belong. All of these recollections, however, do not explain the author’s reason for writing. Na’na says: “I used to think that I wrote as part of my battle to change what I had lived through as a child. Then little by little, I became aware of the simple truth: I write because I love writing,” (p.102).

Like Na’na, Nawal El Saadawi’s “Alone With Pen and Paper,” reflects the struggle of a rebel who refuses to settle into the passive role that society tried to instill in her and the consequences of that refusal. The essay is tinged with the sadness the Egyptian author feels at the life of exile she has sometimes gone through, in her fight for intellectual and social freedom. She says: “I am living in the whole world but I am completely alone; all I have with me is pen and paper,” (p.118).

In addition to the 13 testimonies, whose language varies according to each author’s style, a biographical note on the writers and their works precedes each essay. Also, the editor provides two in-depth analytical readings on women autobiography in the Arab world, drawing on the testimonies and the works of the writers themselves as examples.

Finally, *In House of Silence* is a rare collection of autobiographical writings that throbs with the hardships, burdens and pleasures of being a woman writer in the Arab world. While the editor stresses that the testimonies should not make us “draw conclusions about the authors,” (p.x), each essay is still an insight into the lives of the novelists, still a reflection on the conditions of women in our society and the changes taking place around us. This is a book about every woman in the Arab world.

## Forthcoming in *Al-Raida*

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