

Mi'at 'Am Min Al-Riwayā Al-Nisā'iyya Al-Arabiyya

Author: Buthayna Shaaban
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Reviewed by Abir Hamdar

Do you ever wonder who the first woman writer in Arabic literature was? Do you question the impact of women's writing in Arabic literature? And do you know the characteristics that differentiate Arab women's writing from men? If so, then Buthayna Shaaban's "Mi'at 'Am Min Al Riwaya Al-Nisa'iyya Al-Arabiyya" (One Hundred Years Of Arab Women's Novels) is definitely the book to read.

The 247-page book is divided into nine chapters that deal with the development of Arab women's writings. It also includes interesting anecdotes and problems that accompanied the realization of these writings. In short, Shaaban's book is a critical evaluation of a century of women's writings with a few stories that make it a beneficial read for those interested in women's literature as well as for the ordinary reader.

In the first chapter, Shaaban discusses the extent to which Arab women writers have been "marginalized". The author asserts that Arab women writers have, for decades, been accused of lacking the imagination and the creativity necessary for producing any work of literature. According to Shaaban, critics have repeatedly argued that Arab women writings are locked in within the themes of home, children, marriage and love (p.23). They have reiterated the view that women writers have failed in depicting the political and social reality around them. Thus, Shaaban insists her book is an attempt to "re-evaluate the significance of women's writings" (p.24). But how does she do that?

The author first presents a brief overview of the history of Arab women's poetry, exploring the reasons that overshadowed

these women poets. Since women's poetry in the Arab world was viewed as trivial and lacking in depth, little effort was made to document, explore and study it. As a result, a large number of good poems were lost to us. Shaaban also explores the complex relationship between critics and writings by women. We learn that critics played a major role in the "marginalizing" of Arab women writers and that few studies of major importance have been written on women's works.

In the second chapter, Shaaban begins the hard task of tracing the beginnings of Arab women's writing and investigates the major role they played in Arabic literature in general. Contrary to popular belief, Shaaban asserts that the first novel in Arabic literature was by the Lebanese writer Zainab Fawaz and was entitled "Hussn Al Awakib or Ghadat Al Zahraa" (1899). This contradicts many claims that Egyptian writer Muhammed Hussein Heykl's "Zainab" (1914) was the first work of fiction in Arabic Literature. Shaaban herself sets out to prove her claim and to re-evaluate Arab women's literature based on this discovery.

While the first two chapters review controversial issues related to Arab women's writings, the remaining chapters study major novels by women writers. The novels are analyzed according to chronological and historical events. For instance, chapters three and four discuss novels written between 1920-1950, while chapters five and six deal with novels between 1960 - 1969. The last three chapters cover contemporary women's writings. As she probes deeper into the characteristics of each work, Shaaban shows that

in spite of the different time spans of the novels, they still share common characteristics.

In chapters three and four, Shaaban notes that the period after the 1920's was one characterized by social and political tensions in the Arab world. Women, especially those from Syria, Lebanon and Egypt, were absorbed in these events. At the same time, they were struggling to liberate themselves from the dogmas imposed upon their sex, and women writers reflected all of this in their works. Shaaban explains that they wrote with the aim of liberating "themselves and men" from all forms of inherited discriminations, adding that men were not depicted as enemies but as victims of 'stereotyped ideas' (68-9). This form of fiction changed in the 1950's when women writers became more explicit in their call for the abolishment of all forms of discrimination against their sex. For instance, writers such as Leila Baalbacki from Lebanon and Collette Khoury from Syria challenged paternal power and male domination in their novels.

In chapters five and six, Shaaban refutes the belief that most Arab women's writings focused exclusively on love, children and family. By studying novels written after the 1960's, Shaaban reveals that these novels succeeded in portraying the political tensions, defeats and victories of the Arab world. The author insists that women writers were very much conscious of the political scene around them, as manifested in their works. The writers discussed include authors such as Lebanese Leila Osseiran, Palestinian Sahar Khalifa and Jordanian Leila Al Atrash. As she delves into the works, Shaaban shows that women who wrote about war did so from a human and social perspective. Thus, they brought to the novel in the Arab world a different perspective. A good example is Latifa Zayaat's *The Open Door* (1960) which, according to Shaaban, works on three major levels: the social, political and gender. Also Ulfat Idlibi's *Damascus Bitter Sweet*, (1989) beautifully combines the political and the personal.

Finally, the last three chapters explore contemporary women novels and their contribution to Arabic literature. The author affirms that women writers have come a long way and have accomplished much in the art of the novel, adding that their political awareness is as strong as ever. In fact, Shaaban asserts that, writers such as Ahlam Mostaghanami, Hamida Nafna, Sahar Khalifa, Emily Nassrallah and others not only write about the political and the personal, but also provide solutions to the complex events taking place around them.

"Mi'at 'Am Min Al Riwaya Al-Nisa'iyya Al-Arabiyya" is a literary exploration of decades of Arab women's novels and is written in a simple, comprehensive and extremely structured style. Those who choose to read it will gain great insight and understanding into Arab women's writing over the past hundred years.

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