

Freedom and the Social Context

Arab Women's Special Contribution to Literature

By Evelyne Accad

Fiction by women writers in North Africa and the Arab world goes back for about forty years; yet in this scant generation of time we can trace a remarkable pace — and breadth — of development in theme, form, and technique. Beginning with a preoccupation with bicultural anxiety and loss of identity (especially among the North African writers), the genre progresses to an egotistical orientation centered on the introspective consideration of problems and the search for the self. Although these works often seem to reflect the most self-centered aspects of Western romanticism, this preoccupation is understandable: in the face of legalized oppression and social degradation, it is not too surprising that the first concern of these women novelists has been their female characters' private struggles for personal identity, seen alternatively as a search for personhood or as an escape from 'thinghood.'

What is particularly interesting, however, is that the fiction of women writers in North Africa and the Arab world does not stop at this stage of development — even though it might be expected to, given the general powerlessness of the group from which the characters of the genre are drawn. Instead, the romantic egotism of the 1950s and '60s gives way, in the works of many of these writers, to clear rebellion in the face of newly recognized oppression. Personal rebellion, however, is of little use when the entire structure of the surrounding society militates against the exercise of individual freedom. Much of the fiction of these writers ultimately escapes this impasse by universalizing the

questions of individual freedom that confront the female characters in this genre. In addition, the social milieu begins to be explored with a new clarity and frankness that moves it from the background to the front of the fictional stage. It becomes clear that not only individuals, but also the society in which they live, must be reborn. It is because of this progression that I suggest that the fiction of at least some of the women writers considered here has achieved a true maturity of vision, a realization that the self — and its freedom — cannot be separated from the entire social context. Obviously, this evolving vision has important political implications.

Because of their overwhelming concern with finding a personal identity, the early works of these women writers were not always warmly received by the critics. In the late '50s and early '60s there was a strong tendency to compare these works — either outright unfavorably or in an act of condemnation-by-association — with Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour tristesse*. In fact, it may well be that adolescent rebellion and the search for identity are not the stuff of the great novels of tomorrow; whether or not this is the case is irrelevant. What matters is that although the works of these women writers often fall into the melodramatic or prove to be embarrassingly autobiographical, they are in many ways authentic and necessary: you must know some basic things about yourself before you can begin to write about your place in the millenium.

The next stage in the evolution of the genre is rebellion against the oppression that women must undergo in North Africa and the Arab world. This is a thing apart

from the fairly universal human experience of rebellion on the way to maturity. The pattern is brutally simple in most parts of North Africa and the Arab world: women are born to fill the roles of daughter, wife, and mother, and to be successively subservient to their fathers, husbands, and sons. In most cases the legal status of women is determined by Moslem religious codes. In court, a woman's testimony is accorded only half the weight of a man's; a husband may divorce his wife without recourse to legal action — often merely by stating aloud that he repudiates her; and the law permits a husband or father to force his wife or daughter to remain at home, often literally under lock and key. Revolt against such customs and conditions leads to political awakening. Engagement is often mixed with a sense of nationalism and national identity, because the countries from which the women write are either struggling against foreign domination or striving towards national identity and development.

Then comes disillusionment with the realization that political movements use women, instead of working for their liberation. Those novelists who find a productive solution to this impasse usually do so by universalizing the feminist cause and expressing women's problems in the context of Arab and North African societies.

I have organized the study into four parts, following the various stages of feminist consciousness and social orientation described earlier. The first section deals with the North African women writers from the mid '40s to the mid '50s,

and the problems of biculturalism and the search for identity. The second explores the relationship between romanticism, traditionalism and rebellion in Arab women writers from the mid '50s to the mid '60s. The third examines trends toward a more universalized, socially conscious political commitment in the works of Arab women writers published between the mid '60s and the mid '70s. The fourth section assesses the more recent feminist writings by Arab women writers from the mid '70s to the present.

TAOS-AMROUCHE AND DEBÈCHE: BICULTURALITY AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

Marguerite Taos-Amrouche, from Kabylie, published *Jacinthe noire* (*Black Hyacinth*) in 1945, and Djamila Debèche, from Algeria, published *Leila, jeune fille algérienne* (*Leila, an Algerian Girl*) in 1947. The early appearance of these works is at least partly a result of the French colonial influence in North Africa. This forced contact with Western culture created a strong bicultural stress in North African society, presenting alternative life patterns and diluting the force of local tradition. Predictably, the stress was greatest at the upper levels of society, among the *intelligentsia* and the wealthy, many of whom had become highly westernized through their contact with the French colonizers. Since most Third-World writers — male or female — tend to come from these social classes, it is not too surprising that writers such as Debèche and Taos are heavily obsessed with problems of biculturalism and lost cultural identity, and that their female characters face their problems as women from within this context.

Taos, for instance, comes from an Algerian Kabyle family that converted to Christianity in her parents' generation. In consequence, Taos has tended to create central characters, such as Marie-Corail in her novel *La rue des tambourins* (1960), who are primarily concerned with cultural alienation. Marie-Corail sees herself as being forever "on the fringe" of the culture around her, aware that "amid Moslem or French companions, I was always the only one of my kind". Taos is not unaware of the problems women face in her culture; these matters are simply less important than what one critic has termed the "drama of disruption" which her characters experience by being at odds with their cultural milieu.

This disruption and alienation is even

more evident in Djamila Debèche's novel *Aziza* (1955). Here, the Algerian heroine, Aziza, has achieved a measure of identity as a Westerner by getting her education in French schools and taking a job in a French press agency. When she falls in love and marries Ali-Kamal, a lawyer with Arab nationalist political ambitions, she discovers the price of biculturalism. Subjected to humiliating marriage rites and then left alone in the isolated village of Beni-Ahmed because her husband is afraid to be seen with his "Westernized" wife among his nationalist cronies, Aziza does not rebel openly against her fate, but gradually slips into deep depression because of it. Eventually Ali repudiates her (a male prerogative under Moslem religious law) because he sees her as a threat to his political career.

When she returns to Algiers, Aziza finds that her Western friends have turned against her because of her traditional Moslem marriage: in this they turn out to be just as provincial as the Algerian villagers. The result is that Aziza's principal problem is learning to live with her biculturalism. As in the case of Marguerite Taos, the perception of the condition of women, especially in the Moslem culture, is clear and incisive, but the agony of individual cultural disruption is more pressing.

ASSIA DJEBAR, LAYLA BA'LABAKKI AND KULÛT SUHAYL AL-KHÛRI: ROMANTICISM, TRADITIONALISM AND REBELLION

Like Debèche's *Aziza*, Assia Djébar's fiction also describes women in a society that harbors two dissimilar cultures. Djébar, another writer of middle-class Moslem Algerian origins, was unable to synthesize her traditional Moslem background and her European education. By the age of twenty-six she had published three novels and obtained a "licence" (B.A.) from the Sorbonne. During the revolution she taught in Tunis and Rabat; now she divides her time between France and Algeria, as a practicing writer, literary critic, and film producer. A close analysis of her work shows the development of all the stages described in the introduction to this study.

Her first novel, *La soif* (*Thirst*, 1957) is a story the central character's frantic rebellion against tradition that ends, however, with her numb acceptance of the existing order. Nadia, who has been educated in French schools, leads a life that bears little outward indication of the tradi-

tional restrictions: she comes and goes as she pleases, at the wheel of her own sports car. Although the plot of the novel bears some resemblance to the melodrama of Sagan's *Bonjour tristesse*, Nadia herself is rather like Meursault of Camus' *The Stranger*, leading a life which is "placid, superficial, empty." In the course of the complicated plot, Nadia manages to thoroughly destroy the lives of her friend Jedla and Jedla's husband, Ali.

A Lebanese writer from a Shi'ite Moslem background, Layla Ba'labakki published her first novel, *Anā Ahya* (*I Live*, 1958) at the age of twenty-two. Her precociousness and the subject matter of this first novel are reminiscent of Assia Djébar. Then, in May of 1959, Ba'labakki delivered her famous speech about Lebanese youth, "We Without Masks," before a Lebanese literary group. In this speech she urged others of her generation to oppose hypocrisy and help Lebanon achieve its potential through honest efforts at social reform.

Ba'labakki's novel, *Anā Ahya*, describes the life of Lina Fayyad, a young woman who wants to rise above the hypocrisies of her environment. In order to do so, she rebels violently and self-destructively. The culmination of Lina's negative rebellion is an unsuccessful suicide attempt. The dual purpose of Ba'labakki's portrayal of Lina is a criticism of die-hard traditionalism as well as of superficial modernity.

Each person in Lina's world becomes an object of revulsion: her father, because she catches him watching the plump neighbour woman undressing; her mother, for submitting to the petty oppressions of her married life; one sister, for wanting to get married, and the other for wanting to amass learned degrees. She sees as typical of every Middle Eastern family an attitude that is unabashedly hypocritical or blindly passive. Lina's feelings toward her sisters show the extent of her alienation. She no longer even has any compassion for other victims of society whose circumstances closely resemble her own. Limited by the tunnel vision of her personal rebellion, Lina even feels hatred for her own sisters.

Bored and frustrated, Lina takes a job in a press agency. Her parents object violently because it costs them a good deal of social status to have a daughter who goes off to work. Nor is she taken seriously at work: her job is to answer letters of complaint, but no such letters ever come in.

Still feeling empty and bored, she takes university courses in which she is not interested and finally becomes an audi-

ence for Bāha, a young Communist who sits in cafés, expounding his beliefs. As might be expected, although Bāha is politically radical, he is socially conservative, does not approve of Lina's freedom of action, and eventually tires of her. Left alone once more, Lina throws herself in front of a cab, only to be rescued by a passerby. And so her empty life drags on. She can either rebel without goal or direction, or become a passive participant in the affairs of others. She cannot find the means to live an independent life and pursue her own ends.

Another woman who has dealt extensively with the position of women in Arab society is a Syrian, Kūlit Suhayl al-Khūrī, the granddaughter of the late Syrian statesman Faris al-Khūrī. She comes from a wealthy Catholic family of Damascus and was educated in both French and Arabic. Although al-Khūrī was written several volumes of poetry in French, her fiction has been written in Arabic. She published *Ayyām Ma'ah* (*Days with Him*), a lengthy novel, in 1959. This was followed by another novel, *Laylah Wāhidah*, in 1961. Since then she has published numerous short stories — two collections appeared in 1962 and 1968 — and the story *Dimashq Bayt Al-Kabir* (*Damascus My Big House*, 1969).

Al-Khūrī deals with problems similar to those treated by Ba'labakki and her fictional techniques are similar, but her tone is less vindictive, if not less desperate. Like the North African Marguerite Taos-Amrouche, al-Khūrī is a Christian in a Moslem country; however, the theme of religious alienation so evident in her Maghreb counterpart is absent from al-Khūrī's novels. Like Ba'labakki and Djebbar, al-Khūrī is concerned with woman's freedom to make choices but, unlike these writers, she does not choose to represent bored and selfish characters who will probably never be able to achieve real freedom or exercise it wisely. Al-Khūrī's characters look for strength within themselves, as do the characters in Djebbar's later works.

In *Ayyām Ma'ah* (*Days with Him*), the central figure, Reem, reminds us of Lina in Ba'labakki's *Anā Ayah*. The pattern of Reem's life closely resembles Lina's: she comes from a wealthy middle-class family; her parents are opposed to her working outside the home; and they also ally themselves with tradition in that they would like to have Reem marry a man of their choosing. Like Lina, Reem rebels against these wishes because she sees that they would lead her into a banal, ambitionless, self-sacrificing existence. Fi-

nally, as in *Anā Ayah*, the central plot of *Ayyām Ma'ah* revolves around a love affair that ends as a fiasco. But this is where the similarity ends. Whereas Lina almost destroys herself because of that experience, Reem emerges from her crisis as a stronger person. And although both Reem and Lina are trapped by men's view of them, Reem strives to break through the walls of her confinement, while at the same time trying to help her male friend liberate his own thoughts toward her so that both can live fuller lives.

ASSIA DJEBBAR, KHANĀTA' BANNŪNA AND SAHAR KHALIFEH: SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS POLITICAL COMMITMENT

The novels reflecting the third phase, that of the immersion of inner problems into larger political issues are: Assia Djebbar's *Les enfants du nouveau monde* (*Children of the New World*, 1962); *Al-Nār Wal-Ikhtiyār* (*Fire and Choice*, 1969) by Khanāta' Bannūna, a Moroccan who writes in Arabic; and *Al-Subar* (*Wild Thorns*, 1976), by Sahar Khalifeh, a Palestinian who teaches and writes at the University of Iowa and also works for Bir Zeit University in the West Bank. Bannūna, the later Djebbar and Khalifeh, seem to be advocating a reconstruction of all the members of their communities — female as well as male — toward the accomplishment of communal goals.

In the works by Bannūna, Djebbar and Khalifeh, there is a frequent concern with the interrelationship of individual liberation and larger political goals. While this is also a concern of feminist literature elsewhere in the world, in the literature presently under consideration the political issue is more complicated: at the same time that individual women are seeking personal liberation, the society as a whole is striving for political independence and groping for a new national identity. The anomalies which arise from the friction between these simultaneous processes of liberation provide much of the material for Djebbar's *Les enfants du nouveau monde*. On the other hand, in Bannūna's *Al-Nār Wal-Ikhtiyār* we see the almost complete subsumption of the personal aspirations in the communal problems of national identity and stability. In *Al-Subar* Khalifeh portrays everyday life and resistance in the occupied West Bank.

In *Les enfants du nouveau monde*, the female characters are made to feel that they should seek solutions to their problems within themselves. Their rebellion

should be directed toward political goals, and such qualities as commitment, independent thinking and decision-making should be desired for the sake of political change. Unfortunately, personal problems are resolved through immersion in a national cause: this reflects the approximate path of women's liberation in Algeria, which lost almost all its impetus after national independence was gained.

In "Fire and Choice," one of Bannūna's most significant short stories, Layla, the central figure, is so preoccupied with the cultural shock that follows the 1967 war between the Arabs and Israel that she is unable to pay attention to her own problems and analyze her situation as a woman. She feels that the crime inflicted on the Palestinian people was a collective one for which each Arab was responsible because their individual attitudes contributed to the defeat.

Layla's heroes include Che Guevara and anyone else who is prepared to carry out his actions to the bitter end. Along with such absolute devotion to a cause, Layla emphasizes the importance of understanding the common people and the attitudes displayed in their daily relationships. Thus, she thinks, leadership in the Arab world had often failed because the leaders have not been close enough to the people. She calls for a revolution of thought prior to a revolution of action, saying: "Fire is deep inside us and this is why we have to choose." Even the structure of this short story is used to promote the cause: the plot becomes less important than the ideas, and the stories often take the form of inner monologues on various topics.

NAWĀL AL-SAADĀWY, GHĀDA AL-SAMMĀN, HANĀNE EL-CHEIKH, EMILY NASRALLAH AND DAISY AL-AMEER: FEMINIST COMMITMENT

The works of these novelists reflect a greater awareness of and commitment to the political, social, and sexual issues facing Arab women today.

Within this unity of concern, however, the writers exhibit a multifaceted approach to the problems and greater stylistic differences. Nawāl Al-Saadāwy uses her experiences as a doctor and psychiatrist to express the internal and external conflicts brought about in women's lives through repression. Her style is direct and realistic, and her reflective thoughts often seem like theoretical works rather than fiction. Ghāda Al-Sammān portrays

women striving for self-realization through fantastic and occult plots in her first works; moves to romantic revolt against puritanical attitudes towards love and social hypocrisy in her middle works; and in her latest works shows women revolting against being treated as sexual objects or slaves by despotic husbands or authoritarian parents. Her style exhibits the wide range of her thoughts: poetic and suggestive at times, surrealistic and irrational at others, and highly symbolic throughout. Hanane El-Cheikh approaches women's problems through an extreme sensitivity to her inner self and her sensuality that helps her grasp more acutely and fully the magnitude of women's oppression from within. Her style is poetic, sensual, and highly suggestive. Finally, Daisy Al-Ameer and Emily Nasrallah portray with frankness and acute perception the evils that Arab society in general and Arab women in particular are facing today. Most of their works are in the form of short stories, particularly in the case of Daisy Al-Ameer. Their style is usually realistic and thought-provoking.

In general, we can say that the various approaches taken by women recently are courageous and daring. They reflect their concern not only to describe Arab women's problems and dilemmas, but also to find new ways for them to escape their entrapment. This boldness is reflected in the lifestyles of the writers themselves, many of whom have tried to break away from the tradition-bound circles around them. They have asserted themselves as single women or divorcees, despite the prejudices voiced against them — a path not easy to follow within Arab society. A few have had to seek refuge in Lebanon, away from the persecution or lack of understanding they faced in their own countries. One must also note that most of the works discussed in this section were published in Lebanon, a country that has been torn by war for the last thirteen years, but which nevertheless has continued to publish important works, thus demonstrating that its leading cultural role still continues in the midst of its political turmoil.

Nawāl Al-Saadāwy's achievements were made in spite of the bias she encountered within Egyptian society. Physician, psychiatrist, and fiction writer, she has dedicated herself to the task of struggling against the harmful stereotypes concerning women in the Arab world. As a medical professional, she has produced four theoretical works on matters related to women: *Al-Mar'ah Wal-Jins* (*Women*

and Sex, 1971); *Al-Rajul Wal-Jins* (*Men and Sex*, 1967); *Al-Untha Hiyā Al-Asil* (*The Young Woman is the Origin*, 1974); and *Al-Mar'ah Wal Sarāh Al-Nafsi* (*Woman and Personal Honesty*, 1977). Her fictional writing includes four volumes of short stories, all published in Beirut: *Imra'atān Fi Imra'a* (*Two Women in One*, 1975); *Imra'a 'Inda Niktat Al-Sifer* (*A Woman at Point Zero*, 1977); *Al-Wijh Al-'Ari Lil Mar'ah Al-Arabiyyah*

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(*The Naked Face of the Arab Woman*, 1977); and *Unghniyat Al-Atfāl Al-Da'iriyat* (*Dance Songs for Children*, 1978). Even in the titles of her fiction, there is a clear indication of Al-Saadāwy's pivotal concern for the struggles of Arab women. Her stories often reflect the lives of women to whom she has given psychiatric help.

When *Women and Sex* was first published in Egypt it caused so much controversy that she was dismissed from her job and had to take refuge in Lebanon, where the book was reprinted and became widely read throughout the Arab world. For the first time, an Arab woman — and one who was a doctor — was discussing frankly and scientifically the customs and taboos surrounding Arab women and their sexuality. She was not afraid to present new interpretations of such controversial issues as honour and virginity, work and education for women, marriage, polygamy, divorce, and "beit al-tā'a" ("the house of obedience"), and finally, the importance of sex and women's right to orgasm, as well as the very touchy subject of genital mutilation.

In her theoretical work, Al-Saadāwy asserts that the condition of Arab women can only be improved by structural means: that is, by bringing about changes in the existing politico-economic system of the Arab world and by reforming the laws and regulations that oppress women in these societies. The sources of this constructive radicalism are made abundantly clear in Al-Saadāwy's fiction.

A Woman at Point Zero is the inside

story of a woman condemned to death for having killed a man (a theme also treated in Andrée Chedid's *Le Sommeil délivré* (*The Awakened Sleep*). The narrator, a psychiatrist like Al-Saadāwy, goes to the prison to try and talk to this unusual woman, whose name is Firdaws. She at first refuses to see the narrator, but later opens up and tells her story, which consists of one traumatizing experience after another. Through the simplicity of this story, Al-Saadāwy's prophetic voice gives us a warning. She lays on Arab society the responsibility for the crimes committed against its women; clearly, the society itself must be reformed if it is to move ahead. Refusing to limit the focus of her fiction to the struggles of the individual character, Al-Saadāwy instead uses her characters — like Firdaws — as means of exploring the larger social context of individual oppression.

The importance of self-realization is central in the works of Ghāda al-Sammān. Originally from Syria, al-Sammān studied, successively, medicine and English literature, and has worked as a civil servant, journalist, and university lecturer. Although her early work is in French, her major work has been in Arabic. At an early age, she established herself in Lebanon, hoping to benefit from that country's relative freedom of the press, a reputation Lebanon has established within the Arab world in spite of the various biases already mentioned, and in spite of the fact that many of its journalists have had to pay for this freedom with their own lives. In one of her latest works, al-Sammān declares that since 1960 she has taken writing as a career and that she practices it about ten hours a day, passing most of these hours in reading, exploring, and preparing material for her task.

Until 1978 she regularly published in weekly magazines. She then collected her writings and published them as books. Probably the most productive woman writer in the Arab world, she has completed at least sixteen books in a period of twenty years and has more ready for publication. She is a dynamic person who has founded her own publishing house and seeks to popularize her liberal ideas through a writing style that is by turns emotional, humorous, and even satiric.

Her early stories are semi-autobiographical, sometimes describing her world of fantasy. They often depict in a fantastic and symbolic style the conflicts of women who deviate into madness or perversion as an escape from their intense frustrations. The volumes of short stories from this early phase include *Lā Bahra Fi*

Bairūt (*There is No Sea at Beirut*, 1963); *Layl al-Ghurabā'* (*The Night of the Strangers*, 1966); *Rahīl Al-Marāfi' Al-Qadīmah* (*Journey into Ancient Ports*, 1973); and *As-Suqūt Ilal-Qīma* (*The Fall Towards the Summit*, 1975), all published in Beirut.

Between 1967 and 1975 many of al-Sammān's writings deal with the Arab national struggle against Zionism and imperialism. Her most important work on the subject is a book entitled *Ar-Ragheef Yanbud Kal Qalb* (*The Loaf Beats like a Heart*, 1975). In it, she virulently attacks the diseases of Lebanese and Arab societies with a clairvoyance and a voice of warning much like that of the Moroccan woman writer Khanāta Bannūna. She sees political corruption, fanaticism, apathy, social inequity, the unfair treatment of women, and lack of social consciousness as the sources of the Arabs' state of underdevelopment. Oppression is not merely an individual affliction: it pervades the whole social fabric.

Her most recent and important work is *Al-A'māl Ghair Al-Kāmilat* (*Unfinished Works*, 1979), which is composed of seven volumes of fiction and non-fiction dealing with a variety of subjects and bearing unusual and intriguing titles such as: *Al-Jasad Haqibat Safar* (*The Body is a Traveling Suitcase*); *Al-Sibāhat Fi Buhairat Al-Shaytan* (*The Swim in the Devil's Lake*); *Khitm Al-Zākirat Bil-Sham'a Al-Ahmar* (*The Sealing of the Memory with Red Wax*); and *I'tikālu Lahzat Hāribat* (*To Grasp a Fleeting Moment*). In *Unfinished Works*, al-Sammān gives us vivid descriptions of her travels in Lebanon, in other Arab countries, and to various European capitals, including London, Berlin, and Rome. She conveys critical, detailed reports and her own analytical, as well as satirical views of the places and the people she meets. These works also indicate the extent of al-Sammān's wide reading and show an originality of expression and a reflective mind that never stops questioning.

As with other Arab women novelists discussed previously, Al-Sammān has been sharply attacked by the press and critics in the Arab world. They frown upon her ultraliberal ideas, her openness on sexual subjects, her eccentric style, her sweeping statements, her sharp sense of humor and her gift for satire. It may be that her humor and satire are found to be particularly unforgivable, since these qualities suggest that she is a writer of true social vision and not merely a strident mouthpiece for a political position. In any case, she has refused to be intimidated or

silenced and has founded her own publishing house to disseminate her works and avoid censorship. Her perseverance and hard work have made her one of the most widely-read Arab women novelists today. Her originality, her auto-criticism and self-analysis, and her inner growth give a unique aspect to the voice of this courageous and daring woman writer, a voice that will continue to grow and must be heard.

Another woman writer who has contributed much to the unveiling of women's problems is Hanāne El-Cheikh. Born in the south of Lebanon in 1947, El-Cheikh comes from a family belonging to a conservative (Sh'ite) Moslem sect. She has contributed to *An-Nahār* as a journalist and has published three novels: *Intihār Rajul Mayit* (*The Suicide of a Dead Man*, 1971); *Faras Al-Shaytan* (*Satan's She-Horse*, 1975), and *Hikāyat Zahrat* (*The Story of Zahrat* — the name means flower — 1980).

In her second novel, *Faras Al-Shaytan* (*Praying Mantis*, an insect common to Lebanon), the central character of the novel, Sarah, seems to be a partially autobiographical avatar of the author. Like El-Cheikh, she grows up in southern Lebanon, in a Shi'ite family, closely watched by her stern and fanatically religious father. Forced to undergo rigorous cleansing and prayer rituals every day of the year, she is savagely beaten for the slightest disobedience and, at the age of twelve, is forced to don the thick, black veil of traditional Moslem womanhood. The father's fanaticism is so extreme that, at least in Sarah's eyes, it is responsible for her mother's death: he refuses to be disturbed from his prayers to fetch the doctor.

Although this portrayal is at times shocking, and is quite autobiographical, it is not at all self-pitying. The reason for this becomes clear in the second half of the novel, in which we see Sarah, now grown and married, on a visit to an unnamed desert region. Here she meets a woman who is a member of a harem of three wives and, after gaining her confidence, gradually learns of the traditional ways and customs of the tribal people. By the end of the novel, Sarah realizes that, oppressive though her own upbringing may have been, she at least was able to see her own life in sufficient perspective to understand its limitations and eventually escape them.

Hanāne El-Cheikh's style is probably the most sensual of any of the writers discussed in this essay. With a sensitivity and an inner tone unequalled so far, she has

managed to bring out a voice that is original, warm, and vibrant. The delicacy of her images and the lace-like quality of her descriptions are reminiscent of the French writer Chantal Chawaf. Her subject matter, even if she claims that she is not a feminist, brings to light some of the most taboo-laden sexual problems. In her third novel, for example, *The Story of Zahrat*, she describes the complex relationship of a little girl growing up with a mother who makes her act as the agent between her husband and her lover. Later, the story becomes a strong plea against the war which is ravaging her country, Lebanon. Zahrat, now grown up, is only able to gain a certain control over her life by engaging in sexual activity with a sniper. Why did the novelist choose a sniper to aid Zahrat in gaining her freedom? Could El-Cheikh be suggesting that in the absurdity of the Lebanese devastation, Zahrat can gain a certain control over her body only by becoming part of the violence that is ripping her country apart? Or that only through death — in the end she becomes the target not only of her "lover's" sexual weapon but of his Kalashnikov as well — can she reach real freedom and peace? The questions raised in the story are numerous and complex, reflecting the intricacies of the incomprehensible horror of the Lebanese situation.

The blunter, more open treatment of the oppressive aspects of Arab societies that we find in these more recent works is not simply a more daring exercise of literary freedom — although we must never lose sight of the courage these authors have consistently shown. Rather, the increasing clarity and frankness with which the social context is presented suggests that it is no longer merely a backdrop for the action of the story. In these works, Arab society itself comes forth as a character in the play, a character complete with principles of choice and action, and with both trivial and tragic flaws.

It is not necessarily the role of fiction to provide blueprints for concrete social action — and much bad fiction has resulted from attempts to do so — but the recent fiction of Arab women, with its greater openness and its integration of individual struggle into the larger social context, may well become a force for positive and creative change in the Arab world. Even if this were not the case, the production of fiction by Arab women writers would be remarkable for its variety and its occasional aesthetic excellence, existing as it does in the face of a tradition that has supported no such ambitions or achievements.

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A Streetcar Named Nostalgia

1903, great-grandfather then 30
came to this country
walked in a tweed blend coat
among the grey flannel,
a feather in his houndstooth hat,
slipped to work each winter day,
missed Christmas waiting for an
epiphany,
lived alone choking on tea and English
biscuits until the day
a streetcar named Nostalgia
almost clipped him there
flat on his back on the ice
vision of a red iron madonna
a great bell ringing in his wife's womb
across an ocean
a bell ringing alarm
relieving him of a vital decision
in his frigid paradise
and he jumped a steamer
back to where
my mother was born
married a man
and in 1954, my father, then 30
sailed to Canada's Toronto...

Mary di Michele

...from *Bread and Chocolate*
(Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1980).