

ARAB WOMEN'S LITERARY INSCRIPTIONS

Evelyne Accad

University of Illinois

Fiction by women writers in North Africa and the Arab world goes back for sixty years.¹ In this relatively short 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 a self-empowering, inward-look at problems and the search for the self. Although the works often seem to reflect the most self-centered aspects of Western romanticism, such preoccupation is understandable: in the face of legalized oppression and social degradation, it is not too surprising that the first concern of women novelists has been their female characters' private struggles for a personal identity, seen alternatively as a search for personhood or 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 the 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 a no exit situation by universalizing 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. It moves from the background to the forefront 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

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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 their works—either outright unfavourably 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 are mainly 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 millennium.

90 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 (commitment in the Sartrean sense of the word) 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 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.

BICULTURALITY AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

Marguerite Taos-Amrouche, from Kabylie, published *Jacinthe noire* (*Black Hyacinth*) in 1945, and Djamila Debèche, from Algeria, published *Leïla, jeune fille algérienne* (*Leïla, 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, this 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 problems as women from within this context.

Taos, for instance, comes from an Algerian Kabyle family that converted to Christianity in her parents' generation. As a result, 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.

ROMANTICISM, TRADITIONALISM, AND REBELLION

Like Debèche's *Aziza*, Assia Djebar's fiction also describes women in a society that harbors two dissimilar cultures. Djebar, another writer of middle-class Moslem Algerian origins, was able 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" 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.

92 Her first novel *La soif* (*Thirst*, 1957) is the story of Nadia, 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 traditional restrictions: she comes and goes as she pleases, behind 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, *Ana Ahya* (*I Live*, 1958) at the age of twenty-two. Her precociousness and the subject matter of this first novel are reminiscent of Assia Djebar. 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, *Ana 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 audience for Baha, a young Communist who sits in cafés, expounding his beliefs. As might be expected, although Baha 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, Kulit Suhayl al-Khuri, the granddaughter of the late Syrian statesman Faris al-Khuri. She comes from a wealthy Catholic family of Damascus and was educated in both French and Arabic. Although al-Khuri has written several volumes of poetry in French, her fiction has been written in Arabic. She published *Ayyam Ma'ah* (*Days with Him*), a lengthy novel, in 1959. This was followed by another novel, *Laylah Wahidah* (*A Single Night*), in 1961. She published numerous short stories in 1962 and 1968, the novel *Dimashq Bayti Al-Kabir* (*Damascus My Big House*) in 1969, and has recently published other novels.

Al-Khuri 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-Khuri is a Christian in a Moslem country; however, the theme of religious alienation so evident in her Maghreb counterpart is absent from al-Khuri's novels. Like Ba'labakki and Djebar, al-Khuri 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-Khuri's characters look for strength within themselves, as do the characters in Djebar's later works.

In *Ayyam Ma'ah* (*Days with Him*), the central figure, Reem, reminds us of Lina in Ba'labakki's *Ana Ahya*. The pattern of her life is similar: 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. Finally, as in *Ana Ahya*, the central plot of *Ayyam 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 feelings so that both can live fuller lives.

SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS POLITICAL COMMITMENT

Among the novels reflecting the third phase, that of the embeddedness of inner problems into larger political issues are: Assia Djebar's *Les enfants du nouveau monde* (*Children of the New World*, 1962); *Al-Nar Wal-Ikhtiyar* (*Fire and Choice*, 1969) by Khanata' Bannuna, a Moroccan who writes in Arabic; and *Al-Subar* (*Wild Thorns*, 1976), by Sahar Khalifeh, a Palestinian who teaches and writes, dividing her time between the University of Iowa in the States and Bir Zeit University in the West Bank. Bannuna, the later Djebar and Khalifeh, seem to be advocating a reconstruction of all members of their communities—female as well as male—toward the accomplishment of communal goals.

94 In the works of Bannuna, Djebar and Khalifeh, there is 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 Djebar's *Les enfants du nouveau monde*. On the other hand, in Bannuna's *Al-Nar Wal-Ikhtiyar*, we see the almost complete subsumption of the personal aspirations in the communal problems of national identity and stability. And 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 Bannuna's most significant short stories in the collection under the same title, Layla, the central figure, is so preoccupied with the cultural shock that follows the 1967 war between the Arabs and Israël 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. She thinks leadership in the Arab world often failed because leaders were not close enough to the people. Even the structure of her short stories is used to promote the cause: the plots are less important than the ideas, and the stories often take the form of inner monologues on various topics.

FEMINIST COMMITMENT

The works of the following novelists reflect a greater awareness of and commitment to the political, social, and sexual issues facing Arab women today. Within this similarity of concern, however, the writers exhibit a multifaceted approach to the problems and greater stylistic differences.

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. Some live abroad: France, England and the United States.

95 Nawal Al-Saadawi 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 reflections often seem like theoretical works rather than fiction especially in her first works. Ghada Al-Samman portrays women striving for self-realization through fantastic and occult plots in her first works. In her middle works, she expresses romantic revolt against puritan attitudes towards love and social hypocrisy. And in her latest works, she 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. Hanan Al-Shaykh approaches women's problems through an extreme sensitivity to her inner self and a 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. 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. Their style is usually realistic and thought-provoking. In the case of Daisy Al-Ameer, most of her work is in the form of short stories. Etel Adnan writes with poignancy, political commitment and urgency in conveying her ideas for justice and freedom. Andrée Chedid does it with love, vision, a universal understanding of life's complexities, and a commitment to non-violent peace activism. And Vénus Khoury-Ghata surprises us with an unusual sarcasm and irony, a sensuality close to pornography, surrealism, unexpected images, parody, but also tenderness, poetry, despair, anguish, and admonition. Finally, Assia Djebar, already talked about, who was silent for more than ten years, has moved from all the various stages described before to feminist/feminine awareness and commitment accompanied by a style that has reached great maturity and perfection.

Nawal Al-Saadawi'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 about women in the Arab world. Her writing career has thus far produced more than six books on women in the Arab world, nine novels, six collections of short stories, two plays and one memoir, all in Arabic, many of which have been translated into several languages, including English, French, German, Persian, Portuguese, Italian, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, and Dutch. Some of the works have also been adapted for theater in various countries. Her best known titles are: *The Hidden Face of Eve*, *Woman at Point Zero* (Firdaus), *Two Women in One*, *God Dies by the Nile*, *Death of an Ex Minister*, *She has no Place in Paradise*, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, *Searching*, etc. Her work has been crowned by many awards: the Literary Award of the Supreme council for Arts and Social Sciences, Cairo (1974), the Literary Award of the Franco-Arab Friendship Association, Paris (1982), and the 1992 Feminist Book Fortnight.

96 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 honor and virginity, work and education for women, marriage, polygamy, divorce, and “beit al-ta’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-Saadawi 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-Saadawi’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-Saadawi, goes to the prison to talk to this unusual woman, whose name is Firdaus. Her story unravels like a nightmare consisting of one traumatizing experience after another. Through Firdaus, and other fictional characters, Al-Saadawi explores the larger social context of individual oppression.

With her latest novel *Searching*, Al-Saadawi hits upon the important questions and problems plaguing Arab society and most other societies around the globe: namely pollution, overcrowded cities, identity crisis, etc. It is no wonder that this first publication in English has won critical acclaim from the judges for last year’s Feminist Book Fortnight.

On a first level, *Searching* tells the story of Fouada (meaning *heart* in Arabic) who is searching for her missing lover, Farid, when he fails to come to their weekly appoint-

ment in a restaurant overlooking the Nile. Fouada keeps trying to call him at his home, but as the telephone rings unanswered, she tries to come to grips with his disappearance and with her loss.

On another level, the search is a pretext for a much deeper yearning into the significance of life. Fouada realizes she is stuck in a dead-end ministry job, that there must be other more meaningful ways of having an impact on the world. But where and how? Like *A Woman at Point Zero*, *Searching* is the long painful journey of a woman into her inner self and into the limitations which society places upon women who want to rise above the pettiness, the hypocrisy and the walls surrounding their lives. In both novels, Al Saadawi indicts society and shows the need for change and reform. But this is where the similarity ends, for the two central female characters in these two novels come from different class backgrounds, and the restrictions placed on their lives are different. Firdaus, in *A Woman at Point Zero*, reaches a dead end in all aspects of her life, while Fouada, relatively free compared to Firdaus, can go on dreaming even when her dreams appear unreachable.

97 Fouada, like Al Saadawi did at one point in her life, holds a ministry job. She lives in Cairo confronted with the pollution and the overcrowding of a city threatened with major catastrophes of today’s world. She would have liked to be a scientist, and she opens a chemistry lab, hoping to make “a chemical discovery to eliminate hunger, a new gas for millions to breathe instead of food” (93). Fouada refuses a banal existence, “she would not simply live and die, and the world remain the same” (103). So she goes on searching for that “unique idea” which will not emerge, stuck as it is by “thick walls.” Al Saadawi is dealing with the problems that haunt her and that she confronts every day.

Fouada’s search becomes more desperate as her lover Farid appears to have vanished, and as her dreams seem less and less attainable. Finally, she discovers that Farid has been imprisoned, leaving her these words of hope which end the novel: “Do not grieve, Fouada, and do not weep. The words are in the wind beyond the walls, alive and entering hearts with the very air. A day will surely come when the walls will fall and voices once again be freed to speak” (114). Al Saadawi knows how to bring out the real issues, the ones that need to be addressed and dealt with if our world is to survive. In this novel, she does it with renewed imagination, creative ideas, descriptions and images that are very effective and show a maturity in style and thought.

The importance of self-realization is central in the works of Ghada Al-Samman. Originally from Syria, Al-Samman studied successively medicine and English literature, and has worked as a civil servant, journalist, and university lecturer. In one of her latest works, Al-Samman 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 to disseminate her works and avoid censorship. She 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 *La Bahra Fi Bairut* (*There is No Sea at Beirut*, 1963), *Layl al-Ghuraba'* (*The Night of the Strangers*, 1966), *Rahil Al-Marafi' Al-Qadimah* (*Journey into Ancient Ports*, 1973), and *As-Suqut Ilal-Qima* (*The Fall Towards the Summit*, 1975), all published in Beirut.

Between 1967 and 1975, many of Al-Samman'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 the Moroccan woman writer Khanata Bannuna. 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.

Among her important works is *Al-A'mal Ghair Al-Kamilat* (*Unfinished Works*, 1979) 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-Sibahat Fi Buhairat Al-Shaytan* (*The Swim in the Devil's Lake*), *Khitm Al-Zakirat Bil-Sham'a Al-Ahmar* (*The Sealing of the Memory with Red Wax*), and *I'tikaluh Lahzat Haribat* (*To Grasp a Fleeting Moment*). In *Unfinished Works*, Al-Samman 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-Samman'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-Samman 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 humour and her gift for satire. It may be that her humour 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 her perseverance and hard work have made her one of the most widely-read Arab women novelists today.

Another woman writer who has contributed much to the unveiling of women's problems is Hanan Al-Shaykh. Born in the south of Lebanon in 1947, Al-Shaykh comes from a family belonging to a conservative (Shi'ite) Moslem sect. She has contributed to *An-Nahar* as a journalist and has published four novels: *Intihar Rajul Mayit* (*The Suicide of a Dead Man*, 1971), *Faras Al-Shaytan* (*Satan's She-Horse*, 1975), *Hikayat Zahra* (*The Story of Zahra*—the name means *flower*—1980) and *Women of Sand and Myrrh* (1989).

Al-Shaykh's style is probably the most sensual of any of the writers discussed in this essay. With a sensitivity and an inner tone unequaled 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 brings to light some of the most taboo-laden sexual problems. In her third novel, for example, *The Story of Zahra*, 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. Zahra, 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 Zahra in gaining her freedom? Could she be suggesting that in the absurdity of the Lebanese devastation, Zahra 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.

Vénus Khoury-Ghata, a Lebanese Francophone woman writer, poet, and novelist (winner of many important French poetry prizes: the Apollinaire, the Mallarmé, etc.), lives in Paris. In her latest novel *La Maîtresse du notable* (1992), she brings out once again—it is the topic of several of her other novels—the Lebanese tragedy forward in a brilliant, surprising way, filled with unusual and unexpected images, parody, but also tenderness, poetry, despair, anguish, admonition, warning, concern and a relentless love/hate for a country, a society she still feels attached to. She unveils its hypocrisy and pitfalls with severity and humor, hoping perhaps to bring it to some awareness and reform.

Such aims may not reflect Vénus Khoury-Ghata's intentions, as much as my own reading and wishes. But they certainly are a valid interpretation of this latest novel, terrifying in its revelation of what may lie at the center of the Lebanese conflict: greed, depravation, lust, drugs, boasting, lying, perfidy, fanaticism, and most of all, badly lived sexuality. Even though the women are victims of men's political and sexual domination, they share their part in bringing about Lebanese society's downfall. Constantly "in heat," sexually aroused, they try to manipulate the men to get their needs met. They participate in the degradation of moral values.

The central character is Flora, a blond Polish woman, who has just given birth to a third child by a Christian husband, and who leaves husband, children, new born baby boy, to cross the demarcation line dividing the city in two, to meet her Moslem lover and live with him in a building facing the one she has just left with its sniper and militias. This treason brings out a renewal of tensions, vengeance, killings between the two sectors. It leads to Flora's eldest son sinking deeper into depression, drug addiction, homosexuality, exile in the hope of finding fame, and finally return to Lebanon, madness and death by assassination. The husband follows the same fate to a lesser degree: he waits for his wife to return, falls into depression and madness. As for the daughter, she becomes a sexual prey for the sniper. It is a theme already developed in many other Lebanese novels on the war. In this one, however, she is not killed by him, and the whole street turns against him and kills him. Vénus' sarcasm and irony comes out sharply in her description of the sniper and the end she gives him: "They let him do it as long as he was killing their enemies, but declared him dangerous when he started attacking them. In the same bag, Christians and Moslems, old and young, poor and rich, and above all women" (215).

Etel Adnan also feels very strongly about Beirut, where she was born in 1925 to a Syrian Moslem father, a former Ottoman officer, and a Greek Christian mother. She was educated in French schools, and later studied philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris and at Harvard and Berkeley in the United States. She has published six volumes of poetry: *Moonshots* (1966); *Five Senses for One Death* (1971); *Jebu* followed by *Beirut-Hell Express* (1973); *L'Apocalypse arabe* (1980); *Pablo Neruda is a Banana Tree* (1982); *From A to Z* (1982); one novel, *Sitt Marie Rose* (1977) and more recently, some essays: *Of Cities and Women (Letters to Fawwaz)* (1993) and *Paris, When It's Naked* (1993).

An analysis of *Sitt Marie Rose* shows a woman who takes her destiny in her own hands, stands alone and courageously for what she believes and is not afraid to tell men what is wrong with their values, even when she knows they will kill her for defying them. She is truly visionary, has espoused all the causes of the oppressed, not only intellectually, but most of all actively professionally and in her personal life. She has understood what an active non-violent struggle means and goes even one step further in consenting to die for her beliefs. In that sense, she is a victim, but an expiatory victim. Her sacrifice will allow others to live.

It is significant that Etel Adnan chose a woman to incarnate values that may change society and overturn the war. The woman she describes did exist; she lived for the oppressed and gave her life hoping her sacrifice might show the fighters their foolishness. The woman portrayed by Adnan lives her ideals also at the personal level. Marie-Rose left a husband who was oppressing her. She is living with one who respects her, loves her and encourages her in her struggle and values. The narrator makes it a point to tell us that sexual relationships are at the core of political problems. The didacticism of the narrator's interferences makes the novel lose some of its effectiveness. Nevertheless, it reinforces the notion that when relationships between

men and women are conceived in terms of power games, conquest, violence, domination, possession and objectification, one cannot hope to have a society and a country which will not reflect those same pitfalls at the political level.

Born in Cairo, Egypt, of Lebanese origins, living in Paris since 1946, Andrée Chedid, writer of French expression, finds her roots in a Middle East where East and West meet, where races mix, where religions clash, where languages blend, where history is at a frightening turning point. She tells us about a language without frontiers, a communication without limitations, an understanding without walls.

Having confronted in her youth "contrasts which hurt," on one side "her big house near the Nile, the receptions, the balls, the shiny, fairy-like and factitious world" of Cairo's glimmering society of the thirties, on the other "the street with its islands of misery, its beggars on the sidewalks, its veiled women," Andrée Chedid, sensitive and tormented, could not but be marked for the rest of her life by these injustices which appealed to her sense of justice.

Very humble in spite of her great success—she has received numerous literary prizes, among which are the "Louise Labé" in 1966, the "Aigle d'or" for poetry in 1972, the "Grand Prix des Lettres Françaises de l'Académie Royale" of Belgium in 1975, the "Afrique méditerranéenne" in 1975, the "Mallarmé" in 1976, more recently the "Goncourt" for her collection of short stories, *Les corps et le temps (Bodies and Time)* followed by *L'étroite peau (The Narrow Flesh)* and this year her work as a whole has been crowned by the most prestigious prize of the French Academy—she tells us what life is about, how the movement of creation takes us towards others, towards more light and more life. Woman, poet, novelist, playwright, essay writer of a work rich in depth, diversity and variety (she is the author of more than ten novels, sixteen collections of poetry, three plays, essays, short stories), she shows us "this unceasing river dwelling deep inside us, this earth, this river, in the margins of the phenomenon of existence; yet in the sharpest of existence, life."

Woman's condition in general and of her countries of origins in particular, is of great concern in Andrée Chedid's work. Her first novel *Le sommeil délivré* (Stock, 1952, reedited by Flammarion in 1976, translated as *From Sleep Unbound*) tells the story of a woman, Samya, living in Egypt, forced into an unhappy marriage, imprisoned in customs which asphyxiate her slowly. She frees herself by helping a little girl Ammal realize her creative potential—she makes clay figures. Finally she kills her husband in a dramatic and desperate gesture, unexpected and rare in a society where women have the tendency to turn the weapon against themselves. She screams so that others may see life: "If I scream, I scream a little for them. And if there is only one who understands me, it is for her that I scream, that I scream from the depth of myself, as strongly as I can" (215).

In her poems also, Chedid describes the oppressed woman. In a beautiful poem entitled "Woman of the Long Patience," she shows us a woman coming out of her layers, giving birth to herself (*Fraternité de la Parole* 12). In another one, she describes enemy sisters (possibly the Palestinian and the Israeli) reconciling themselves to give

hope to their children (*Fraternité de la Parole* 68).

The tragedy of the Lebanese war shakes Andrée Chedid and leads her to take a position for non-violence and peace, far from fanaticism and clans, as well as a great sympathy for those suffering and being victimized by man's violence. Two collections of poems from that period underline this preoccupation and Chedid's concern. In *Cérémonial de la violence* (*Ceremonial to Violence* 22), the bodies are described and named.

Her last two novels, *La maison sans racines* (*House without Roots*, 1985, translated as *Return to Beirut*) and *L'enfant multiple* (*The Multiple Child*, 1989), deal with the war in Lebanon. *House without Roots* shows the positive role of women in the war, their efforts to reconcile enemy clans and bring back peace. Their initiative is accompanied by revolt against the traditional roles that society would like to impose in their personal lives.

102 Andrée Chedid lives far from Lebanon, but distance has given her a perspective she might not have had had she stayed. She was able to express realities about the war that must be said: women were the ones to have started peace marches at different moments of the conflict, and they did it from both the East and the West sides representing both sides of the conflict.

The novel is also interesting from a stylistic point of view. Three stories take place in different times and spaces. It is the peace march which unifies them, uniting two young women from enemy communities in the center of the torn up city. A cinematographic precision gives us a vivid image of three women's life-stories, how they tried to live differently in a stifling traditional context, in a war which brings out the best and the worst in human beings. Andrée Chedid's message of love and her vision of hope burst out through her lyricism, her humor and her desire for life, reconciliation and peace amidst the tragedy and the despair of war.

In her poems, her plays and her novels, Andrée Chedid expresses the problems of the region of the world where she was born and which preoccupy her. But these conflicts reflect more global questions, a universal vision and love for humanity wherever she/he may be found. She knows how to put her finger on the wounds to soothe and heal. She gives us a breath of hope, a window open on a horizon of light, if only we were willing to listen and accept to live differently through actions aimed at transforming the personal and the political. But Andrée Chedid does not preach, far from it. Her characters are complex and deep, her vision of the world is subtle. In a language handled with perfection, she gives us an image of the beautiful and the ugly, of the sublime and of the low. It is a long itinerary of patience, endurance, faith, vision and love which she traces through words, sentences, pages and books rich and important. Through them, femi-humanity² (I am purposefully using here the combination of man and woman to better express the complete meaning Andrée Chedid gives it) might regain its lost face.

Assia Djebar, already discussed, is today's most well-known Francophone woman writer of North Africa. In a foreword to her latest novel *Loin de Médine* (*Far from*

Madina, 1991), she tells us why she calls "novel" this collection of tales, narratives, visions, scenes, recollections inspired by her readings of some of the Muslim historians who lived during the first centuries of Islam. Fiction allows freedom in re-establishing, unveiling a hidden space. Through it, Djebar gives a voice and a presence to the many women forgotten by the recorders and transmitters of Islamic tradition.

This is quite an ambition, and Djebar does it well in her usual, carefully, sensually, well worked-out language. In a beautiful style, she recreates the lives of women who surrounded the prophet Mohammed, the influence they had on his thinking and in the debates of the times. The unofficial, occulted history of the beginning of Islam becomes very real and present with its women through Djebar's powerful pen. There is Aïcha, the prophet's favorite wife, and Fatima, his proud daughter. They both died soon after him. There is Sadjah the woman prophet, Selma the healer, and so many others. They all seem to act freely and are not afraid to stand up for what they believe, especially when it pertains to their belief in the prophet. The prophet himself is described as someone soft-spoken and very kind to his women whom he treats with respect and care and whose advice he takes seriously.

This is certainly a revolutionary outlook and program for women's role in contemporary Arab society if it would take its tradition seriously, as an example to follow. And I have no doubt Djebar intended it this way. Nonetheless, such a tactic raises many problems, not least to be found in the text itself. The final message is that one ought to leave Madina (title of the novel): "If Aïcha, one day, decided to leave Madina? Ah, far away from Madina, to find back the wind, the breathtaking, the incorruptible youth of revolt!" (300). But actually, the whole novel is a song to Madina, a glorification of the prophet and of his women! This is the most problematic contradiction one finds throughout the book: if, in order to free oneself, one ought to leave tradition and its enslavement, then how can one look upon it as a beautiful past filled with role models?

Other questions raised by this novel as it inscribes itself in today's contemporary Arabic and North African literature are: What message can today's writers give and ought they give one? If, like Rushdie or Al Saadawi, they bring out the contemporary issues with clarity, frankness and irony, are they doomed to ostracism, house-arrest, threat of death, imprisonment and persecution? Is there no middle way between these two ventures: glorification and reinterpretation of tradition to show how today's Islam has been twisted, or vision of a radically transformed Islam? Much of the literature on Arab women by Arab women these days desperately tries to demonstrate the "evidence" that Arabo-Islamic tradition was not misogynistic, if not outright "liberating," Fedwa Malti-Douglas' *Woman's Body, Woman's Word* (1991) does not fall into this category. While I understand and sympathize with the other women writers and intellectuals' concern and strategy in bringing about changes by reclaiming a past they so much want on their side, knowing it may be the only way to move people in Arab society to necessary reforms, I prefer the more truthful and

thorough approach of Malti-Douglas. Malti-Douglas is not less concerned with the needed revolution facing Arab women's plight, but her claim is to look for the subversive elements in the texts and lives of Arab women. She forcefully demonstrates that their roles have not changed drastically since the Middle Ages. And she does it through an unusual method. She breaks the chronological critical divisions in Arabic letters which address the classical or medieval Arabic literature on the one hand and the modern literature on the other. She analyzes texts from both times. She breaks the textual or generic limits by mixing and analyzing various fields: philosophy, mysticism, geography, cosmography, biography, etc.; it gives a wider multi-disciplinary scope to her analysis. And she finally also breaks the canon by choosing profane texts as well as classics of Islamic religious writing, not only influential works but less known ones, thus giving importance to all of them. This methodology leads her to some interesting conclusions. The linking thread of her analysis is the connection between woman's body and woman's word. One of her conclusions is that "whether a woman must speak through the body (as in the classical) or in reaction to it (as in the modern)...for woman, the word remains anchored in the body" (10).

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Another important recent critique of Arab women's literature is Miriam Cooke's *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* (1988). By tracing the consciousness that has grown in Arab women's writings about the war, Cooke is able to formulate the sense of responsibility which made women determined to stay against the mood for emigration, a perspective which held them together. One of Cooke's conclusions suggests that the writings of the Beirut Decentrists offer hope of a way out of the anarchy, and if the Lebanese people were to have the women's writers' commitment and activism, the violent destruction could be transformed into reconstruction and life. What the author calls the Beirut Decentrists are the women writers who stayed in Beirut, shared the experience of the war, yet lived separately. They were decentered, "yet their marginal perspective gave them insight into the holistic aspect of the war, united them and allowed them discursively to undermine and restructure society around the image of a new center" (3). In such perspective, the difference between men and women writing about war comes out clearly: "Men wrote of strategy, ideology and violence. The Beirut Decentrists, regardless of confession and political persuasion, wrote of the dailiness of war. The men wrote of existential Angst; these women of abandoned loneliness. The men wrote defiantly of revolution; these women angrily against emigration" (3). At the same time, the book challenges the assumption that men write of war, women of the hearth. It thereby offers a complex original, dialectic analysis of women and men's roles in the Lebanese war and war in general.

The blunter and more open treatment of the oppressive aspects of Arab societies that we find in the more recent literary inscriptions by Arab women 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 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 had 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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ENDNOTES

1. Fiction, the novel, is a relatively recent genre in the Arab world for both men and women. The first novel is usually traced back to the Egyptian Muhammad Husayn Haykal's *Zaynab* (Cairo, 1914). For more information on Arab literary history, see Accad, *Veil of Shame*.
2. For more analysis of this formulation and its first use, see Accad, *Sexuality and War*.