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ARAB WOMEN

AND LITERATURE



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## Women and Literature



The «gift of the tongue» has been generally acknowledged as one of women's chief aptitudes. In world mythology and history, women performed several roles requiring eloquence and fluency: those of priestess, prophetess, mourner, poetess, sorceress, soothsayer, singer, mourner and story-teller (for ex. Scheherazade). We read that Maysoun, wife of the first Omayyad Caliph, Mu'awia, longed to return to her Bedouin tent in the desert, which she preferred to the sumptuous Damascene Palace. She expressed her longing in a famous poem which so moved the Caliph that he decided to grant her wish. Another woman poet from Andalusia was immortalized by a verse which she improvised as a complement to an improvised one by King Al-Mutamid of Sevilla. The King was so delighted by her witty response that he decided to marry her.

A well - known saying warns against indulgence in speech, by quoting a fable attributed to Esop, which says that the tongue is the source of all evils; but those who quote it forget that part of the fable which affirms that the tongue is equally the source of all blessings.

Women of to-day, like those of the past, have been using their literary skills for self - expression and self - assertion, but on a much wider scale. In Third World, as in First and Second World, countries, women have distinguished themselves as poets, novelists, journalists, lawyers, educators, lectures, actresses, politicians and other professionals who depend on language and literature for handling their arts. The literary field offers women of today unprecedented opportunities for work. It also gives

them a unique means for claiming their rights and expounding their demands and their needs. Literary production has the possibility of travelling, of spreading far and wide and reaching every corner of the world. Through literature women are able to emerge as a world power, as a «global sisterhood». In this respect, they may strive for improvement and reform in every field and claim the instauration of justice and the elimination of exploitation not only in their own spheres but also in those of men. After all, those who commit or permit injustice toward women also do it in their dealings with men. It is commonly accepted now that a really developed country is one which has a single, not a double, standard of justice.

As a conclusion, I find it convenient to quote from Robin Morgan, a dedicated feminist, poet, and journalist, the following paragraph which ends the preface of her masterly compilation: «Sisterhood is Global»<sup>(☆)</sup>

«Male-led revolutions, so often and so tragically mere power exchange in a basically unaltered structure, have left dramatic accounts of their crises and heroism.... If such revolutions sometimes seem to have been based on the concept of dying for a cause, woman-conceived transformation seems more about daring to **live** for a cause, a heroism more difficult because it is daily and ostensibly **less** dramatic».

**Rose Ghurayyib**

☆ R. Morgan (ed), Sisterhood is Global, Anchor Books, N.Y. 1984.

## Thorayya Malhas a Pioneer from Jordan

Thorayya Malhas is widely regarded as the first Jordanian woman writer to declare her rebellion against obsolete ideas, and to attack, through her way of life and her writings, the «cave-dwellers» who cling to tradition as a means of preserving their privileges or justifying their wrong acts.

When she was still a student preparing a master's degree at the American University of Beirut, she published, in 1949, a collection of free verse, «An-Nasheed-ut-Ta'eh» (The Meandering Song), in which she condemned both traditional forms of writing and reactionary ways of thinking. Like many Arab intellectuals who chose to live outside their countries, in a spot where they could move and speak-out freely, Thorayya decided to settle in Lebanon where she joined hands with a number of socially conscious writers, poets and journalists; she participated in their efforts to modernize Lebanon and make it a center point of cultural radiation in the Arab world. While many of her colleagues and associates quit and went each in a different direction, she remained faithful to her ideal. Her writings echoed her interest in social justice, in national freedom, in loyalty, but not enslavement to the Arab heritage.

Her keen sense of right and wrong made of her a born feminist, a strong advocate of sexual equality, and she succeeded in inculcating this attitude in her women students at B.U.C. and at the Lebanese University. When president Muammar Gadhafi of Libya delivered his speech in which he announced the «Era of Liberation» of the Arab woman», in 1982 she was so enthusiastic that she published an article in the paper in which she hailed him as the awaited hero of woman's freedom.

Her sympathy with suffering Lebanon has inspired her with a number of elegies in which she deplored in highly emotional tones the tragic fate of this country. One example is «The Seagull and the Pen», Published in *Al-Adib* magazine, (nos. 8-12, 1983).

She has written literary research, «Spiritual values in Arabic literature» and «Nu'aimy the Mystic Writer»; she also produced numerous collections of lyrical and satirical poems in free verse. In some of those works we can detect a strain of romantic or mystic longing for union with the Absolute, with nature or with man. Her literary

ambition culminated in a collection of English free verse, «Prisoners of Time», which she published in 1958. While she took teaching as a career, her love for knowledge led her to continue her study and research in ancient and modern literature. After years of investigation in Arabic linguistics, she decided to make a historical study of Kushagem, one of the lesser renowned Abbasid poets, and, for that study, she obtained in 1978 a Ph.D. degree with honors from the University of St. Joseph.

Thorayya Malhas's writing is characterized by a spontaneous expression of feeling and thought, and by little polish and embellishment. She is one of several contemporary women writers who have devoted themselves to so called «committed writing», thus she stands out by virtue of her unusual vehemence and frankness.

R. G.

### Wonder

If I could reach the sky  
I wonder if I  
My hands will move the earth  
But If I  
If I could find a seed  
A seed of peace  
I wonder if I  
My heart will weave  
Garments of delight  
But if I

If I could plant a seed  
A seed of love  
Hatred will be abolished  
From eyes  
But if I  
A sting I felt  
From tiny tiny souls  
My strong strong palm  
Stretched like mountains  
I could not see the tiny  
Tiny souls  
A chorus sang  
But if I.

**Thorayya Malhas**  
From «Prisoners of Time», p. 149.

## Arab Feminine Literature Between 1850 and 1950



May  
Ziadeh

The period between 1850 and 1950 covers the era of Arab Awakening; it can be broken down into two phases: the earlier one, 1850-1900, and the later one, 1900-1950. The signs of awakening were more evident in the later than in the earlier phase. Those signs were:

1. A pioneering literary activity which includes the study and revival of ancient Arabic literature and the promotion and reinstatement of classical Arabic.
2. A rising influence of Western culture, particularly as represented by French and English literatures and other modern subjects taught in the foreign schools which blossomed in Lebanon, Egypt and Syria.
3. The impact of foreign literatures on the Arabic language, leading to the evolution of its prose and the appearance of journalistic writing, modern fiction and drama.
4. The use of literature in its various forms to spread modernism in life and thought, such ideas as freedom of expression, liberal attitudes towards love, marriage, women, government and religion.

The general revival attracted women and aroused interest in their emancipation. The few women poets of the early period participated in the revival of old classical poetry. **Aisha Timur** (1840 - 1902), an Egyptian poet of Kurdish origin declared that in her poetic vocation she was following the steps of distinguished ancient Arab women poets. Her father brought her teachers who taught her at home; he encouraged her to write poetry in three languages: Arabic, Kurdish and Persian, which she did. In spite of her traditionalism, she complained that her veil prevented her from coming in contact with highly learned men, and at one point she blamed men for preventing women from expanding their talents.

Other «revivalists» of the same period were **Warda al-Yazigi** (1838 - 1924) and **Warda el-Turk**, two poets from Lebanon, who prided themselves on their use of traditional forms and themes, like el-ghazal (love poetry), al-ritha' (elegy), el-mahed and tahmi'ah (praise and eulogy).

In the same period, between 1840 and 1900, there

appeared a few women writers who were more or less influenced by the new ideas. **Zainab Fawwaz** emigrated from South Lebanon to Egypt where she made herself known by corresponding with papers and magazines, publishing poems and compiling a biographical work on famous historical women.

**Marianna Marrash**, from Aleppo, Syria, contributed to magazines, opened a salon for the literary figures of her city and published a collection of traditional poetry.

The women writers of this group, in spite of their relative emancipation, deviated little from traditional lines.

Between 1886 and 1950, a second group of women writers flourished in the three countries of early Arab Awakening: Lebanon, Egypt and Syria. **May Ziadeh**, **Malak Hafni Nassef**, **Marie Ajami** and **Salma Sayegh** fell under the direct influence of Western culture. They expressed themselves mainly in prose, which was earlier to evolve than poetry. They contributed to papers and magazines and practiced public speaking, which was at the time a popular art and an efficient tool for the spread of cultural change. They were the spokeswomen of their emancipated sisters who founded women's schools, magazines and associations through which they preached awakening and renovation in thought and in the way of life.

**May Ziadeh** (1886 - 1941), was a Lebanese who received, at the French Sisters of Visitation School, Aintoura, Lebanon, a solid and broad cultural background, which enabled her to gain a thorough knowledge of five languages and to master writing in three of them. At the age of 22 she emigrated to Egypt where she started her literary career by publishing prose in French. She attended courses in philosophy and history at the Egyptian University, deepened her knowledge of Arabic and became a distinguished speaker in this language. The influence of romanticism and of modern thought on her writing is clear in her published literary studies and in the essays and articles which she contributed to the leading magazines of her time, essays

dealing with social and linguistic reform, woman's emancipation and other topics of a metaphysical nature.

**May Ziadeh's** life and thought have been discussed in several books published about her in Egypt and Lebanon. There is little room, in this article, to give her the emphasis that she deserves. In an attempt to make a general evaluation of her literary work, we may note that her 14 books, written in a personal, quasi-romantic, attractive style, make her one of the distinguished stylists of our time and are now considered among the classics of modern Arabic literature.

**Malak Hafni Nassef**, an Egyptian writer and a close friend of May Ziadeh, who later wrote her biography, devoted her writings to the question of women's emancipation. She belonged to a prominent Moslem family, received her early education at a French school after which she moved to a government training college, where she obtained a «normal diploma». She spent her short life (1886 - 1918) in teaching, writing, speaking in public meetings, drawing plans of reform in family laws and girls' education. Before she died, she published a book on women, called «An-Nissaiyyat,» containing all her ideas on woman's emancipation and social reform. In this book she condemns the prevailing custom of discriminating between boys and girls, and calls for the following: free education for girls, partial removal of the veil, abolition of polygamy and forced marriage, permission for women to attend prayers in mosques. She recommends training of women physicians, capable to treat female patients whose families object to their being treated by male doctors. She also recommends training women in economics and other subjects which would help them administer their properties successfully.

Although **Malak Hafni Nassef** wrote in a purely classical Arabic, her content reveals a broad knowledge obtained from her modern education and her extensive readings.

**Marie Ajami**, a Syrian who received her education in Russian and Irish schools, started her activity as a teacher in private schools, but found the time to contribute to Arabic papers and magazines. In 1910, she founded her own magazine, «Al-Aroos» (The Bride), which lasted, in spite of temporary suspension during the first World War, until 1925. Besides her journalistic activity, Marie Ajami practiced public speaking and wrote poetry which showed the influence of Western romanticism. She participated in the foundation of women's clubs and schools and joined literary societies. In her writings and speeches, she tried to arouse the spirit of nationalism, called for the revival

of national industry, the emancipation of women and the rehabilitation of the laborers, the farmers and the military, the trio whom she called «the pillars of the nation.»

**Salma Sayegh**, a Lebanese from Beirut, was, like Malak Hafni Nassef, a contemporary and friend of May Ziadeh's. She had an exceptional literary talent, and developed in her essays, published in magazines and later collected into books, a poetic style. Like the romantic authors who sought refuge in nature and in spiritual yearning, she says in one of her articles:

**«To the mountain of the Lord, O ye that are tired and heavy laden!**

**To the woods which echoed the kisses of Salomon.**

**To the white summits where Jessus' holiness was revealed.**

**Away from the city and its turbulence, I fled to the hilltops of Harissa where stands the mother of the Nazarene with open arms, as if repeating the call of her son: come to me, all ye that are tired and I shall give you rest.»**

Her writings reflect a highly emotional nature, deeply conscious of human suffering, strongly moved by the sight of misery, ready to denounce all forms of social injustice, such as the abuse of women and children, the ill-treatment of prisoners, handicapped people, refugees and foundlings.

The four writers we have been discussing are good representatives of the women's literary movement during the early 20th century, but, with the exception of Marie Ajami they do not include the founders of women's magazines who flourished in this period, nor the pioneers in fiction writing. Those two topics require special articles.

The period of Awakening in its second phase, 1900-1950, produced not only eminent women writers but also leading men thinkers and authors who left a lasting impact on modern Arab thought. Qassem Amin, author of the famous book on the emancipation of women, (1904); Mohammad Abdo, a rationalist religious reformer; Ali Abdul Razek who, in this book on Islam and the principles of government, favored the separation of religious law from state law; Taha Hussain who adopted Descartes' method in his study of ancient Arab literature; the Lebanese Emigrant writers; Rihani, Gibran, Nu'aimy, Abu Madi and others, who were the champions of evolution and creativity in all fields of culture.

**Rose Ghurayib**

## LIBAN

Amal Saleeby is a Lebanese Poet who lives in the United States. Her first book of poems is called «l'Heure Bleue», published in Paris by éditions Saint-Germain-des-Prés, 1981.

Je t'ai rêvé Liban  
avec des yeux de lutte  
du sable plein la bouche  
de la terre sous les dents  
je t'ai rêvé de rocs  
et de sables mouvants  
on dirait une épave  
aux quatre coins du vent  
un pays de lumière  
où la mort crie vengeance  
si je ne t'avais rêvé  
je t'aurai cru maudit  
il fut un paradis  
on l'a dit trop souvent  
un pays de lumière  
où le soleil est blanc.

**Amal SALEEBY**  
(Published in the *Odyssee*  
Beirut January 1982)

## EN MAL D'ENFANCE

Well known poet, writer and playwright Andrée Chedid was born in Cairo and lives in Paris. She has been following with keen interest the work of the IWSAW. Here is an unpublished poem she sent to Al-Raida inspired by the suffering children of Lebanon.

Les armes éventrent la terre  
Les fléaux l'ont assaillie  
    Incendiant les pas de l'enfant  
    Ensanglantant ses jeux  
    Pourrissant ses soleils  
Quelle refonte de nos âmes  
Quelles alluvions de paix  
Quelles brassées d'amour  
    Ecarteront les mâchoires d'épouvante  
    Rappelleront l'espoir qui s'écarte  
    Rétabliront les corps blessés  
    Apaiseront les yeux vengeurs?  
Quelles paroles  
Quels regards  
Quel mouvement  
Redonneront enfance  
A nos enfants en mal d'enfance?

**Andrée CHEDID**

## Where Is Thy Sting, O Death?

**Lami'a Abbas Amara, an eminent Iraqi poet residing in Lebanon, has recently been honored with the Medal of the Cedars, conferred on her by President Amin Gemayel, in appreciation of her poems of love and sympathy to Lebanon.**

**She wrote the following poem on the above occasion:**

Where shall I pin my Medal of the Cedars?  
On a chest bleeding with grief?  
Over a wounded heart?  
While my eyes, dimmed with tears,  
seek a road in the dark?

Where is the Lebanon I knew,  
The Lebanon of love and peace,  
A wide breast it was,  
Where blew the breeze,  
Over a mantle of feathery clouds?  
The Lebanon I knew.

A wide open door, a refuge for the ailing and the  
heavy burdened.

Its perfumed bazaars, clad in purple silks,  
Now heaps of ruins and crumbling walls.  
Where are its proud hotels  
Glittering with splendor before the sun,  
Now blackened with soot,  
Nestling crawling vipers  
Instead of snowy doves.

Its sons gone abroad  
Seeking kinder horizons  
Mother Earth, in her tender bosom,

Shelters thousands of them,  
While the rest keep their eyes fixed  
On the battlefield.

Where are my beloved, my friends,  
Their warm gathering,  
Their soft chattering,  
Torn up every night  
By bombs and shells,  
Bombs and shells,  
Are their daily bread,  
Yet, day and night,  
Their men and women  
Keep on building,  
Their sons and daughters,  
To school keep going...

Where is thy sting, O death?  
Lebanon, eternal land,  
Life that has no end.

**Lami'a ABBAS AMARA**  
(Trans. from the Arabic)  
(Published in the **Odyssee**  
**Magazine** No. 18-19, 1983)



## Alifa Rifaat - Egypt



Alifa Rifaat, author of «Distant View of a Minaret and other stories», began to write early. When she was nine she wrote her first story, about the village where her family lived in the summer.

While much of her later writing is deeply rooted in her experience, the most important theme in her stories centers on the sexual and emotional problems encountered by women in marriage.

Dealing with such issues distinguishes her among writers, male and female, in the Arab world, where explicit references to these questions are considered by many to be taboo.

In 1955 she wrote a story based on the experience of her twin sister, who had a mental breakdown and died after she found her husband with another woman. Though the story was considered somewhat shocking, it was published.

Her husband was furious, not so much because of the subject matter, but because writing gave her a kind of independence and was perceived as undermining his authority as a husband and head of the family.

She continued to write, using pen-names, but when he found out, her husband forbade that too. He threw her out of the house. She went back to her own family, but received no sympathy from her father, who also said she should stop writing.

But against those people who urged her to get a divorce, Alifa Rifaat argued that «it is better to be an unknown wife than a well-known writer». For the next 15 years she wrote a little, and then only in secret. But

being forced to repress the urge to be read brought her close to a nervous breakdown, a state vividly evoked in some of her stories.

Finally, in the early 1970's, her husband relented and she began to write again. The result was her collection of short stories, «Distant View from a Minaret,» which dwell on the tensions, dilemmas and dreams of women in marriage.

Rifaat, however, is not a feminist in the Western sense. Women, she says, have a right to be fulfilled in their sexual and emotional lives, though she does not question marital relationships as such. What she does argue is that men should wield the power they have over women in marriage much more responsibly than they usually do. She also argues for more sexual education for women, «if only through books».

While her stories reflect primarily her own experience, in the years she spent travelling around Egypt with her husband (in the course of his work as a policeman) she met many other women and learned of their problems.

«We used to talk freely and we discussed especially the question of sexual fulfilment - because our society does not allow us to experience sex as freely as a Western woman does,» she told Sarah Graham - Brown in an interview with the Middle East magazine.

«We have our traditions and our religion,» she concluded.

(The Middle East, Feb. 1985,  
No. 124, P. 40 - 41)



## Dr. Mariam Baghdadi

### Saudi Arabia



Mariam Baghdadi is a Saudi Arabian writer and poet who received her doctorate in Arabic Literature from Paris. Upon her return she joined King Abdul Aziz University in Djeddah where she is currently professor of Arab Literature and Dean of the Literature Department.

Dr. Baghdadi is an active member of several women's organisations. One of her most popular collections of poetry, entitled «Awatef Insania» (Human Emotions), was published in 1980 by Al Kitab Al Arabi As-Saudi.

Talking about her literary career Dr. Baghdadi said:

«I started writing «prose that rhymed» when I was at intermediary level in school. With time I became surer of myself but I believe I am still at the beginning of the road and compare myself to a toddler playing with rhymes, because the road to poetry is hard and long and one should write for years and years before considering oneself a poet.»

When asked whether she believed there is a female literature and a male literature she answered:

«This question has been debated too much and I don't

have anything new to add to it. I don't believe there is a male/female literature because creativeness and excellency can be found in both men and women. However, the fact men have been longer in the literary field and women only allowed recently in, gives numerical advantage to men.»

Commenting about the literary scene in Saudi Arabia she declared:

«There are many signs of change in Saudi Arabian literature as well as in our society. There is no doubt that many more doors have been opened to Saudi women nowadays. Newspapers have welcomed women journalists and many have excelled, like professor Khayriyyah as-Sakkaf, Juhair al-Musaid, Sharifa ash-Shamlan, Thorayya Kabel and Abidiyya Khayyat.»

As for her favorite Saudi Arabian women writers they include:

«Fakhriyya as-Sakkaf, Hana' Abdel-Malek, Reem as-Sahra' and Fatima as-Sudayri».☆

☆ (Sayidati, Vol. 3, No. 135, 1983).

For more information on Women's Literary Output in Arabia and the Arabian Gulf see *Al-Raida*, Aug. 1, 1983, p. 12.

## Suad as-Sabbah - Kuwait



**Poet and economist, Suad as-Sabbah is one of the most promising figures of contemporary feminine literature in Kuwait.** Author of four books of poetry and a number of literary, sociological and economic articles, Suad as-Sabbah still considers herself an amateur poet.

Her collections of poems include «**Lahathatun min Omri**» (Moments of my Life), «**Wamadatun Bakira**» (Early Gleams), «**Amina**» (A book named after her daughter) and «**Ilayka ya Waladi**» (To you my child) - written after the death of her son.

On March 7, 1985 she was a distinguished participant in the festival of Young Arab Poets held in Baghdad, to celebrate the 16th anniversary of the General Federation of Iraqi Women.

There she read a poem entitled «**My Body is a Palm Tree,**» from which we translated the following excerpt:

**My body is a palm tree that drinks from the Arab Gulf**

**I am the daughter of Kuwait**

**The daughter of this sleepy coast over the sand,  
like a beautiful gazelle**

**In my eyes the stars of the night and the palm trees meet**

**From here all my ancestors sailed**

**Then came back carrying the impossible**

**I am the daughter of Kuwait**

**With the pearls of the sea I was raised... And I gather oysters and stars**

**Oh... how tender and generous was the sea**

**Then the petrol came like a devil**

**We sprawled under his feet men and women**

**And we worshipped him morning and night**

**And we forgot the desert, the haughtiness, the coffee and the classical poetry**

**And we drowned in details, we destroyed**

**Everything that was shining...and pure... and great**

In an interview with an Al-Raida coeditor, Suad as-Sabbah said that the Arab woman - with a few exceptions - is still exiled from the world of men. She cannot rule, nor decree laws nor participate in decision making. In order to win this battle, the Arab man himself must become liberated from his feudal and sexist mentality, for she considers him primarily responsible for the present situation of Arab women.

What saddens Suad as-Sabbah is to see the Arab woman's mind living in exile, and like any exile forbidden from having any choice or liberty of action or speech.

She therefore, calls for utilizing women's education to «break the doors of the prison», so that this acquired knowledge will not be merely an indicator of prestige, but become truly functional.

When asked about the state of poetry in general in the Arab World and the problems facing women poets in particular, Suad as-Sabbah answers:

«The Arab poet writes in a general atmosphere of malaise and political instability. No poet in the world suffers as much as the Arab poet. The French poet sits on the banks of the Seine to write, the German on the bank of the Rhine, whereas the Arab sits on the edge of his wounds.»

As for the woman poet in the Arab world she is twice bound, first by her society, second by herself.

An Arab woman poet is constantly exposed, every word she writes is subject to scrutiny and criticism. She is not allowed to shout, for shouting is the privilege of men. She is not allowed to wander alone on paper unless accompanied by a male member of her family.

**An Arab woman poet does not have an easy life, she is constantly writing against the law of gravity of her society and of history.»**

**Wafa' Stephan**

## Leila Abou Zeid

### Morocco



Leila Abou Zeid is a new name in the feminine literary circles of Morocco.

Journalist, radio broadcaster and writer, she has already published three books.

The first «**Bid'u Sunbulatin Khodr**» (Few Green Wheat Stalks) was a mixture of testimonies, travel reports and stories. It was written during her stay in England where she studied journalism.

Her second book was a biography of the late Moroccan king Mohammed the Fifth.

«**Aam al-Feel**» or the Year of the Elephant is her last novel. In it, she tells the story of the last years of fight against French colonialism in Morocco, through the eyes of a young woman, Zahra.

The novel tells the story of a disappointment, that of Zahra's with her life and with the newly won independence of her country. For after 20 years of marriage Zahra receives her divorce papers from her husband with whom she had fought side by side during the resistance years. After being a committed resistance fighter, he secures himself a high position in the new independent state and forgets the high ideals he fought for. He moves into a luxury home, buys a car and decides to find a new wife, one that would suit his present life style.

As for Zahra, she remains the same woman who learnt to read and write in literacy classes. She goes back to the city that she had left as a youngster, and finds that people have changed.

In the country she helped build, she finds herself

without a job and after begging for one she ends up being a maid in the French Cultural Centre! This irony of fate makes her declare: «there is no escape from the French».

Leila Abou Zeid says about her novel: «Independence for Moroccans was the door of paradise. They believed it would solve all their problems, that it would bring everything: health, work, education and even money for everyone. People used to say that the income from the phosphate will give every Moroccan 10 dirhams per day without he/she having even to work! But reality was very different.

After 26 years of independence many unexpected problems appeared: inflation, bribery, theft.... so the hopes of the majority of the people vanished.»

Leila adds, «Zahra was a symbol of these crushed people, who are sought after only when needed to be sacrificed.»

She states that because she is a woman, she is better at depicting a woman's, rather than a man's, internal world in her stories.

As for those who claim they can write about men and women's internal worlds alike, she believes them to write «from the outside» and says: «It is impossible to write about a world one ignores. Therefore only women can genuinely write about women; thus the validity of talking about women's literature.» However, she points out that in the Arab world, there are not enough women writers yet to be able to truly differentiate between feminine and masculine literature.

**Al - Watan Al - Arabi,**

No. 358, 23-29 Dec. 1983, P. 60)

## French Minister Feminizes Language

Yvette Roudy, France's Women's Rights Minister, has started a campaign to reduce sexism in the job market by preparing school children of both sexes for all types of professions.

She has appointed a government commission to «feminize» the jobs which have traditionally been held by men, moving to close the gender gap at the top, as a growing number of women move up the professional ladder.

«It is a problem of giving women back their identity, of doing women justice,» Roudy said. «Women had in a sense surprised the language by gaining access to jobs where no one had expected them generally in prestigious professions described only by masculine nouns».

While a female nurse is «une infirmiere» and her male equivalent «un infirmier», for example, a lawyer is «un avocat», regardless of sex.

Women professionals have sought to cope by inserting «Madame» before their titles, but this has created many problems. When Roudy herself took office in May 1981, she disliked being called «Madame le Ministre».

The French language is currently in an incredible state of disorder, Roudy says: «We no longer know how to refer to certain people; we need innovation, and since it

is a delicate terrain, we have entrusted the work to a panel of experts».

The commission appointed by Roudy includes feminist writers, linguists, journalists and a member of the Academie Française, the guardian of French language and culture. But although the panel is not expected to announce its proposals soon, passions are already running high with a series of ironic and outraged reports appearing in the French press.

This does not seem to deter Roudy, 55, who has made women's rights more solid in France than in any other Western European country during her three years in office. She says a title can carry heavy symbolic weight and is prepared to ride out the storm. She is convinced that respect for the inner logic of French will win out over mental resistance to change titles among both men and women.

France is one step behind Quebec, where officials have encouraged the use of «feminized» job titles since 1979. In Quebec, a women lawyer is «une avocate», a writer «une écrivaine». But Roudy says her commission will not simply adapt the Canadian model.

«France will find its own system. I am not making this into a fight, but rather a subject for reflection and debate», Roudy declared. «I want people to think about it seriously and I believe common sense will prevail».

(The Daily Star, June 5, 1984, p. 5)

## New Women's Journal in Sudan

Ahfad Women's College at Omdurman - Sudan is producing a new semi - annual publication called «The Ahfad Journal».

The Ahfad Journal focuses on the status of women in developing countries and the role of women in development. It publishes original research reports, literature reviews, historical and critical analysis reviews, and book reviews as well as contributions to the family sciences, psychology and the social sciences, preschool education, and organization management.

In the June issue of 1985 a section entitled «comments» will be added to give readers an opportunity to express their opinion and remarks.

Articles and manuscripts that fall within the scope of the Ahfad Journal may be submitted for publications. For further information write to Lee G. Burchinal, Editor, Ahfad Journal, P. O. Box 167, Omdurman - Sudan.

## Claire Gebeyli Awarded Edgar Poe Prize

The «House of Poetry» in Paris has awarded the 1985 Edgar Poe Prize for best foreign poet writing in French to poet and journalist Claire Gebeyli<sup>(1)</sup>. The prize, given for the first time to a lebanese poet is for Gebeyli's latest work «La Mise à Jour» (1984) which is about her experience of the war.

Gebeyli's previously published work includes «Poesies Latentes» (Beirut 1968), «Memorial d'Exil» (Paris, 1975) and «Billets» which appeared every Thursday in the French-Language newspaper l'Orient - Le Jour (Beirut, 1982)<sup>(2)</sup>.

(1) See Al-Raida, Feb. 1 - May 1, 1984, p. 4 and Aug. 1, 1984, p. 6-7.

(2) See Al-Raida, Nov. 1, 1983, p. 5.

## Contemporary Lebanese Women Writers<sup>☆</sup>



by Dr. Nazik Saba Yared

**This lecture, says Dr. Yared, does not deal with Lebanese women poets, nor with Lebanese women who write in French and English, nor with women who write children's books. It discusses women writers most representative of the different genres, subjects and trends in contemporary Lebanese feminine literature and two outstanding female critics:**

**Rose Ghorayyeb and Khalida Said.**

<sup>☆</sup> This article is an abridged and edited version of a lecture given by Dr. Nazek Saba Yared at the Goethe Institute in Beirut on 24/1/85. Dr. Yared is a lecturer in Arabic at Beirut University College. (see *Al-Raida*, No. 30, p. 10).

**Rose Ghrayyeb**, older of the two, known through such works as *«Aesthetic Criticism and its Role in Arabic Criticism»* (1952) *«Introduction to Modern Criticism»* (1971), has introduced Arab readers and students to subjects little covered by others.

**Rose Ghorayyeb** has also written some very valuable studies on Gibran Khalil Gibran and May Ziadeh - whose works had not been previously analysed - with scrupulous objectivity and intelligence.

In addition to these studies is her *«Breezes and Storms in Contemporary Arab Women's Poetry»* (1980), which is the first book that analyzes the poetry of female Arab poets, pointing out its flaws, beauty and innovation.

Another outstanding literary critic is **Khalida Said** whose articles are published in literary journals such as *«Shi'r»* (Poetry), *«Mawaqif»* (Standpoints), *«Fusul»* (Seasons) and others.

What is new in **Khalida Said's** work is that she introduces Arab readers to «difficult» literature, i.e. literature that differs from the classical or romantic style they are accustomed to. She points out the depths and hidden meanings behind the words, symbols and imagery in the «new, strange and ambiguous» poetry of contemporary poets like Unsi al-Hajj, Badr Shaker as-Sayab and Said's husband, Adonis. Her latest articles are very much influenced by modern semantics and structuralism.

Yared points out that women writers of Lebanon have not written many autobiographies. One of the rare ones is that of **Anbara Salam el Khalidi's** *«A Trip in Memory from Lebanon to Palestine»* (1978), (see *Al-Raida*, No. 26, p. 2-3).

However, autobiography plays a key part in many of their novels. For example, **Emily Nasrallah**, who wrote her first novel *«Birds of September»* in 1962, relied a lot on her childhood in the village to depict the theme of migration. Twenty years later she took up the same theme in *«Going Against Time»* (1981), picking up the threads she had left in her first novel.

The main theme of Lebanese women novelists is themselves, and the problems women face in general, states the lecturer. She cites **Leyla Baalbaki's** two

novels: *«I live»* and *«The Deformed Gods»* and her collection of short stories *«A Spaceship of Tenderness to the Moon»* **Emily Nasrallah's**; *«Oleander Tree,»* *«The Hostage,»* *«Those Memories,»* *«Women in 17 Stories»* **Hanan Ash-Sheikh's** *«The Devil's Steed»* and *The Story of Zahra.»*

These stories, says Yared, are the means through which these women writers delved into their own depths, to find out and to show us the truth of woman's deepest self. However, they only dealt with the various implications of love and marriage, which are only two among the many phenomena in a society that binds woman, that gives her little respect and that does not consider her as having equal capacities as man.

**Leyla Baalbaki's** books, for instance, are a fierce revolt against people's hypocrisy and lies. They rage against a society which refuses to grant women equal rights to men and deprives them of their freedom and independence, considering them mere instruments created to satisfy men's pleasures and desires. The reader is taken aback by her courage and outspokenness in describing these sexual desires; after all, she wrote these works back in the fifties.

Moreover, her revolt against man and society leads her to utter disrespect, refusal and defiance. Facing her father, Lina Fayad, the heroine of *«I live,»* says: «I felt a growing desire in my shoe to rub his nose in the mud and to obliterate him». The violence of these words reflects her hatred and revolt, says Dr. Yared. Traditional marriage in the young heroine's opinion is a form of slavery and a humiliation to women. This is why she hates her mother as well: «My poor mother! All she knows about life is to share a man's bed, cook for him and bring up his children». Lina has no respect for any woman who offers her body, liberty and life in return for financial security. When describing the relationship between Lina and her communist boyfriend Baha', **Leyla Baalbaki** shows us how the young men who claim to be «progressive» are as conservative and reactionary as their elders with regard to women.

**Baalbaki's** revolt goes even further, for she rejects such moral and intellectual values as love, friendship, respect for knowledge, culture and professors. Unfortunately, because of this desire to provoke, we find in **Baalbaki's** novels unconvincing exaggerations, tedious repetitions, long exposés and simplistic declarations.

Emily Nasrallah's novel, «The Hostage», (1974) and Hanan Ash-Sheikh's, «The Story of Zahra» (1980) are both artistically superior and more mature than Baalbaki's novel's.

Nasrallah's novel tells the story of Rania who was a hostage and victim of backward marriage customs, and who married a rich old man against her will.

The theme of the story is not new, but the author uses a symbolic style in telling it. To start with, the name chosen for the main characters are symbolic. The hero's name, «Namrood», suggests power and strength in Arabic. That of the heroine derives its origin from the Arabic verb «rana,» which means to contemplate quietly. Her name thus symbolizes two things: her contemplative emancipation which is a dream (i.e. cannot be realized) and her incapacity to realize this dream. The author also shows us that education pushes a woman to rebel against her drab reality; Rania's university degree «became a path to revolt.» Moreover, the university graduate, Marwan, is in Rania's eyes, the ideal husband for a conscious and educated woman because marriage with him would be based on equality, mutual love, respect and understanding. But although the reader might expect that love and liberty will triumph after Rania becomes aware of the backward traditions enslaving her, she in fact leaves Marwan to go back to Namrood.



Emily Nasrallah

The «Story of Zahra,» by Hanan Ash-Sheikh, is also about woman as victim, although it differs completely from Emily Nasrallah's «The Hostage.» Here too we find that the heroine's name is symbolic. «Zahra» means flower: the seeds and beauty of life. What is the story of this flower?

She is a flower trampled and crushed by men. The novel shows however that backward norms and traditions play a big role in Zahra's tragedy. Moreover it is the man who sticks to those norms and traditions: he overlooks them when he wants to love a woman, then suddenly clings back to them and kills her if she becomes a threat to his independence or what he considers his «honor.»

To dramatize this reality, Hanan ash-Sheikh has divided her novel into two parts. The first part is the story of Zahra who was loved by a married man who lies to her and takes advantage of her love and naiveté in order to satisfy his sexual desires. Zahra is then obliged to get an abortion and her life becomes a nightmare haunted by fear: fear of her father, then of her husband. She becomes numbed, even crazed by fear, incapable of love and of having normal relations with her husband, who finally divorces her.

The second part of the story takes place during the first years of the war in Lebanon. Here Zahra is confronted by the horrors of this war; she sees how property is looted,



innocent lives are taken and how all moral, religious and human values are disappearing. We hear her say: «The war has swept away beauty, riches, fear and traditions, exactly as it has done with the corpses»!

So this time Zahra yields to her sexual desires out of her own free will, and not as a prey man. But when she tells her lover, a sniper, that she is pregnant and cannot abort the child, he kills her, although he is the father of the child.

The novelist's technique is a mature one, states Dr. Yared. In the first chapter the heroine, who is also the narrator of the story, recalls some vivid, but vague and disconnected memories of her childhood. As she grows

older these memories become clearer to her and to the reader and we realize that her mother used to meet a secret lover and take her little daughter with her in order to allay her husband's suspicion.

Zahra is the frightened witness and victim, first of her mother's treason, then of her father's wrath, when he discovers the truth and beats up Zahra for having withheld it. In fact the story of Zahra can be summarized as the intermingling of sex and fear with the resultant feelings of solitude and loneliness. Furthermore, the greatest part of the narrative is in the form of a monologue, which accentuates Zahra's solitude and incapacity for communicating with society.

If woman loses her identity, personality and happiness whether she yields to the customs, traditions and norms of society or revolts against them, where is she to find happiness and fulfillment, asks Dr. Yared. She might, Dr. Yared suggests, find the answer in **Hanan ash-Sheikh's** novel, «**The Devil's Steed**» (1975) and in **Emily Nasrallah's**, «**Those Memories**» (1980), despite the difference in their style. Moreover, she adds, I don't think I'm mistaken in saying that both novels are camouflaged autobiography and in both the heroine is in fact the narrator».

In sum, what the three novelists, **Leyla Baalbaki, Hanan ash-Sheikh and Emily Nasrallah**, have in common, despite a great difference in style, are two major points: They all deplore the miserable and empty life of the woman who is considered only as a sex object and a mother and they all show that a conscious woman has to struggle to change her life. However, we feel that Lebanese women novelists consider women's deliverance to lie in a marriage based on true love, equality and mutual respect for if the continuity of life depends on the physical relations between both sexes then the happiness of this life depends on the moral, mental and spiritual relations between them.

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