

Alicja Oleksy

**The Secret Doors: Uncovering the History
of Arab Women Writers**

According to Bouthaina Shaaban¹, professor of literature at Damascus University, the story of Arab women novelists reflects, in many ways, the story of most women in different disciplines. It is the story of abundant creativity with very few rights or sometimes no rights at all. It is the story of a history locked in dark rooms or forgotten on library shelves. It is the story of a group of women who are absented from the literary scene simply because their creativity and attitudes proved to be different from men's, who were, and still are, the 'main-stream' and the only arbiters who decide what is valuable in literature and what is not. It is a story that went unnoticed for a hundred years because, as men related it, there was only one version of the official history of Arabic literature.²

This statement, however strong it seems to be, undeniably reflects the real history of Arab women's literary creativity, which despite its long and impressive tradition dating from the pre-Islamic and Islamic period, has never gained much attention from the critics who had not devoted neither time nor energy to such a marginal and unimportant—in their view—topic as women's writings.

That marginalization and purposely disregarding of women's creativity was, after all, characteristic not only for Arabo-Islamic culture but also for all patriarchal societies, including the Western ones. For patriarchy, in general, is a social order in which women's interests are subordinated to those of men and which structures particular norms of behaviour, patterns of expectations

¹ Some of the Arabic names mentioned in this article are given in their English version as they appear in English sources from which they have been taken.

² Bouthaina Shaaban, fragments of her lecture given on November 19, 1999 at the AMEWS Business Meeting, which took place in Washington DC, USA, as a part of the annual Middle East Studies Association Meeting.

and modes of expressions. That assumption qualified the women's out-of-home activity, both in East and West, as unsuitable and even blameworthy. The Western women, thanks to political and social changes followed by equality of women's rights as well as the birth and the extension of the feminist movement, defeated the educational and professional stagnancy, in which they stood, much quicker than their sisters in the East. As Sabry Hafez, professor of modern Arabic literature and drama at the University of London, claims the patriarchal nature of both Arab society and its traditional literary establishment has made it extremely difficult for women's discourse to emerge within the tradition, in which classical, predominately male-controlled and male-oriented, literature had grown.³ Although it was women who, even before the process of recording Arabic literature began, conveyed the stories of oral tradition from one generation to another and kept the heritage of Arabic storytelling alive, their literary output either has not been noticed at all, because of its 'poor' value, or has been spotted but only if it was dedicated to men. After all, it seems odd that Arabic literature, which is known to be one of the oldest literatures in the world and which for over fifteen centuries consisted mainly of poetry, recorded only a few names of famous Arab women poets. What is more, the subject of their work was always bemoaning dead relatives or praising a male counterpart. The poetry of Al-Hansā' (575-664) for instance, was approved and appreciated by the establishment and critics not only because of its literary value but also because she devoted her powerful elegiac talent almost entirely to immortalizing men (her two brothers) and urging her tribe to revenge them. On the other hand, The Arabian Nights—the example of literature which created the most influential and most famous female literary figure—Sheherezad, has been excluded from the literary canon and banished into the marginal domain of folk and oral literature, and even banned on occasions. It is ironic that such a rich and sophisticated literary work has been omitted from the literary canon for centuries, yet survives and continues to play a significant role throughout the whole Arab community. Sheherezade was not merely the prototype of all women, but more specifically woman who through her exhaustive knowledge of human nature and literary accomplishments not only saves her life and also lives of her sisters, but succeeds in 'humanizing'

³ Sabry Hafez, *Women's Narrative in Modern Arabic Literature: A Typology in: Love and Sexuality in: Modern Arabic Literature*, ed. by Roger Allen, Hilary Kilpatrick, London 1995.

her misogynic husband.⁴ Right up to the present day she remains also for many women writers both the symbol of the triumph of the word, intelligence over male physical power and the archetype of all women writers and poets.

The history of modern Arab women writers begins in the end of nineteenth century simultaneous with the rise and development of Arabic feminist press.⁵ The number of the literary works written by women has increased rapidly since that time. What is more, according to research conducted by Bouthaina Shaaban the first novel in Arabic literature was written by a woman rather than a man, as previously assumed (sic!). Although it has been the general consensus in the Arab world that the first modern novel in Arabic literature was *Zaynab*, by the Egyptian writer Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal (1914), Shaaban claims that it was 'Afifa Karam, a Lebanese woman, who wrote the first novel in Arabic (1906). It was *Badi'a wa-Fu'ad*, published by "Al-Huda" newspaper.⁶ What is more, Shaaban discovered also during her research that before 1914, the alleged date of the 'first Arab novel', Arab women had already written and published over ten novels—among them *Ḥusn al-'awāqib* by Zaynab Fawwāz (1899), and *Qalb ar-raḡul* by Labūba Ḥāšim (1894)⁷, as well as the immense amount of short stories and tales, such as those written by 'Ā'iša at-Taymūriyya (1840-1902), Mayy Ziyāda (1886-1941), Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif (1886-1918) and Farīda 'Atiyya (1867-1918).⁸

⁴ Mona Mikhail, *The Role of Women in Arabic Literature*.

⁵ The first feminist journal "Al-Fatāt", edited by Syrian—Hind Nawafal, appeared in Alexandria in 1892. It was soon followed by similar magazines published in the largest Arabian cities: Cairo, Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad. These journals published women's poetry, prose and literary criticism and concentrated on issues related to woman's life, literature, rights and future. Most of these magazines devoted regular space to Western women and the relation between their and Arab women's liberation. They stressed the necessity of learning from other women's experiences, both in the East and West, without alienating themselves from the roots of their Arab culture. In the period of the highest development of the Arab women's press there were, only in Egypt, more than 25 Arab feminist journals owned, edited and published by women, all before the First World War.—Bouthaina Shaaban, *The Hidden History of Arab Feminism*, "MS. Magazine", May/June 1993.

⁶ Bouthaina Shaaban, *Arab Women Writers: Are There Any?*, "Washington Report on Middle East Affairs", February 1993.

⁷ Bouthaina Shaaban, fragments of her lecture, op.cit.

⁸ Marilyn Booth, Introduction in: *My Grandmother's Cactus: Stories by Egyptian Women*, Texas 1999, and Sabry Hafez, op.cit.

Most Arab women writers began their literary creativity by exploring the intricacies of their lives as women, of their families and of family relations—in other words, they concentrated on the problems most familiar to them. Until the 1950s, the concept of Arabic women's literature, as expressed by Syrian novelist Widād Sakkinī, was the literature in which a woman writer expresses her inner feelings and subtle sensitivity in female spheres which are out of man's reach... Women's literature describes female habits and models of thinking which no man writer, however talented he might be, could reach.⁹

The literature written by Arab women, its subject matter and style, reflected in many ways historical, social and political changes in Arab society and therefore it can not be analysed in isolation from these factors. Thus, before the First World War Arab women's novels, apart from dealing with the women's issues such as the portrayal of domestic bliss and the joy of its protective enclave, were trying to create bridges between the Arab and the Western culture and defeat the root of misconceptions and stereotypes. What is more, Arabic literature of that time stayed under the significant influence of European and American literature which was visible also with regard to women's creativity.

In the early twentieth century, with the rise of organised nationalism and the struggle against imperialist control, writers turned their attention to their own time and place, focusing on public issues and 'the women question' among them. As the majority of Arab countries were fighting at that time against the foreign mandate and foreign occupation, its literature was dominated by idealization of the beauty of the country and the romanticization of patriotism. Simultaneous with that literary tendency another one was quickly arising—the feminist narrative. Arab women's consciousness of female identity, anxiety for equal participation in social, cultural and political life, as well as eagerness to break down the male monopoly on 'right-wrong judgement' were reflected most visibly in their narrative, which in the first half of twentieth century entered a more feminist phase.

In the 1950s and 1960s Arab women's literature was flourishing and the number of women writers was constantly increasing. That effect was a fairly natural result of political stabilization in Arab countries, the spread of education (much more available to girls and women), progressive urbanization and the rise of the middle class. Arab women writers being aware of their

⁹ After Bouthaina Shaaban, *Arab Women Writers: Are There Any?*, op.cit.

new, much stronger position in the literary scene started to produce literature that greatly resembled that of earlier Western feminists. They began writing about their own lives often in first-person narration, a sign that they were breaking away from the established literary traditions to which the previous generation had adhered so closely. Their writing was characterized by protests against male domination and by an insistence that they held accountable for this situation. Key themes were individualism, the drive to assert a personal and distinctly female identity, and demands for the social, sexual, and political rights of women.¹⁰ During this new phase, feminist visions, aspirations and outlooks were expressed in the works of Colette Ḥūrī and Ġāda as-Sammān in Syria, Nawāl as-Sa‘dawī in Egypt, Khanata Banuna in Morocco, Assia Djebar in Algeria, Sahar Ḥalīfa and Samīra ‘Azzām in Palestine, Laylā al-‘Uṭmān in Kuwait, Laylā Ba‘labakkī in Lebanon and many more rising novelists and short story writers.

In the 1960s the first of so-called ‘women’s war novel’ also appeared. This literary genre has been initiated by Egyptian—Laṭīfa Zayyāt and her novel *The Open Door* (1960)¹¹ and was soon followed by other women writers, such as Laylā ‘Usayrān—*The Birds of Dawn*, Balqīs al-Humanī - *Passing by the Sorrows*, Ġāda as-Sammān and Hudā Barakāt.¹²

In the last half of the twentieth century Arab women writers have not only entered the field of literature in ever increasing numbers, but have also distinguished themselves with an impressive richness and diversity of their writing. They have demonstrated their talents most visible in the genres of novel, short story and poetry. On the other hand, more and more Arab women’s literary works have been published in English translations and have caught the prominent attention of western readers. The first Arab woman writer who stirred up the interest of Western readers was the Egyptian feminist Nawāl as-Sa‘dawī. Her non-fictional book *The Hidden Face of Eve* (*Al-Wağh al-‘ārī li-l-mar’a al-‘arabiyya*, 1977) appeared in English in 1980, instantly becoming a ‘classic’, as well as her next novel *Woman at Point Zero*, translated from Arabic in 1983. Since then thirteen of her books have been published in English translations, making her the most visible of Arab women writers.¹³

¹⁰ Joseph T. Zeidan, Introduction, in: *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond*, New York 1995

¹¹ Bouthaina Shaaban, fragments of her lecture, op.cit.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Amal Amireh, Problems and Prospects for Publishing in the West: Arab Women Writers Today, “Al-Jadid”, vol. 2, no 10, August 1996.

Nawāl as-Sa‘dawī certainly opened for Arab women writers the door to the West, however her immense success in that matter also generates some skepticism. Thus, some critics believe that the Western enthusiasm for her works is not innocent and disinterested. They argue that she is acclaimed so much not because she champions women’s rights, but because she tells Western readers what they want to hear. In this view, the West welcomes her feminist critique of Arab culture because it confirms the existing stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims as backward, misogynist and violently oppressive.¹⁴ In fact, apart from the Western popularity of As-Sa‘dawī’s novels and their literary value, which are both unquestionable, the suspicion that Arab women’s books are manipulated by Western markets in order to meet the expectations and the assumptions of Western readers, seems quite real. For example, when the memoirs of the Egyptian pioneer feminist Hudā aš-Ša‘rawī were translated into English, the original title their author gave to them, *My Memoirs*, was replaced with the more provocatively loaded one: *Harem Years*. Fadia Faqir’s *Nisanit*, which is about the Arab-Israeli conflict, appears with a woman draped in black from head to toe on its cover—although this cover has nothing to do with the novel’s content. The changes are not limited to titles and covers, however. As-Sa‘dawī’s English translation of *The Hidden Face of Eve* emphasizes female genital mutilation more than the Arabic original does. What is more, also reviewers of Arab women’s books seem to take their cues from the titles and covers. Unfailingly, they read these novels as sociological and anthropological texts that “reflect” the reality of Islam and the Arab world and “lift the veil” from what one reviewer called the “unimaginable world of Arab women”.¹⁵ The blurb on the back-cover of Rifaat’s *Distant View of a Minaret* states that the stories “admit the reader into a hidden private world.” The one on Al-Shaykh’s *Women of Sand and Myrrah* declares that “little is known of what life is like for contemporary Arab women living in the Middle East” and promises the reader that al-Shaykh’s novel will provide a glimpse behind this “still-closed society.” The heroine of one of al-Shaykh’s novels is said to be always passive “in the best tradition of Muslim womanhood.”¹⁶

Of course all these examples, mentioned above prove nothing else but the fact that the stereotype of Arab woman ‘imprisoned behind a veil of pow-

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Maureen Harrington, *Veil Lifted to Reveal Unimaginable World of Arab Women*, “Denver Post”, February 13, 1994, after Amal Amireh, op.cit.

¹⁶ Judith Atwater, *A Muslim Woman’s Powerful Story and a Search for Self*, “Rocky Mountain News”, March 27, 1994, after Amal Amireh, op.cit.

erness' is still alive. In Western eyes, the Arab woman remains docile, male dominated, speechless, veiled, secluded, subdued and, above all of this, closely unidentifiable and mysterious being. Although this situation has been changing lately, mostly due to the academic studies and anthropological and literary research on Arab women, their status, as well as their cultural and professional share in Arabic society, that distorted image of Arab woman seems still far too strong to be eradicated in our lifetime. That is why the battle against the stereotype of 'veiled and helpless' Arab woman must be continued and present-day Arab women writers undoubtedly play in this war significant role.

The literary creativity produced by Arab women and so-called 'feminist writing' are nowadays most swiftly developing and evolving part of modern Arabic literature. The literary historian Joseph Zeidan lists 480 Arab women writing between the 1880s and the 1980s.¹⁷ What is more, last year, 150 women writers and twenty-six publishers from throughout the Arab world converged on Cairo for the first Arab Women Book Fair, which exhibited more than 1500 titles.¹⁸ Thus, Arab women writers' works are not only visible representation of modern Arabic literature but also appreciated pieces of art, which literary value is both unquestionable and more and more rewarded.

¹⁷ Amal Amireh, *op.cit.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*