

THE GLOBALIZATION OF ARAB WOMEN WRITERS

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In 1986, at the first International Feminist Bookfair in London, Arab women writers were introduced to the English-speaking world. The Quartet publishing house had risked publishing two books : Hanan al-Shaikh's 1980 controversial novel on the Lebanese civil war, *The Story of Zahra*, and the Egyptian Alifa Rifaat's *Distant View of a Minaret*, a collection of short stories about women whose lives are searingly empty. Nine years later, Arab women writers find themselves in the eye of the sun, both at home and in the West. In 1994, Hanan al-Shaikh came to America before proceeding to Australia on a Doubleday-sponsored speaking tour to promote *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, her novel about love and sex in a sand kingdom. She returned in November as the keynote speaker for the conservative Middle East Studies Association. In May 1995, Doubleday published her *Beirut Blues*, an epistolary novel evoking pre-war rural Lebanon against the backdrop of a violent Beirut.

Today, the trickle of fiction and poetry by Arab women that was flowing in and to the West has turned into a stream. My own experience is telling. I live in rural North Carolina, far from cosmopolitan centers boasting international bookstores. I learn about publications of writings and translations of Arab women by luck and happenstance and authors' generosity. What I thus know about and acquire is much less than would be the case for someone with my inter-

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ests living in London, New York or Paris. Yet, this spring alone my rural route mailbox has produced a regular yield of books by Arab women in Arabic or in translation. These include al-Shaikh's *Beirut Blues* ; two books by the Syrian Ghada al-Samman, her 28th book, *Al-'ashiqa fi al-mihbara* ('The Lover in the Inkpot), an anthology of poetry, that comes hot on the heels of a short story collection entitled *Al-qamar al-murabba'* ('The Square Moon)¹ ; another Syrian, Samar Attar, translated and published *Lina : A Portrait of a Damascene Girl* ; the Lebanese Emily Nasrallah's *Al-jamr al-ghafi* ('Sleeping Embers, for an analysis of this novel, see below) ; the Algerian Assia Djebar's third volume of her quartet, *Vaste est la Prison*² ; two books by the Lebanese Etel Adnan *Paris, When It's Naked* (1993) and *Of Cities and Women* (1993) and the Egyptian Nawal El-Saadawi's 30th book *Innocence of the Devil*³. The most recent shipment to rural route mailbox was a package from the London publishing house Garnet. To inaugurate their Arab Women Writers series, edited by the Jordanian novelist and author of *Nisanit* Fadia Faqir, they simultaneously issued four novels in English translation. These novels are by women from four different Arab countries. They are : the Lebanese Huda Barakat's *The Laughing Stone*, a novel about the Lebanese Civil War from the perspective of a gay man ; the Egyptian Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot*, about life and dreams in a women's prison ; the Palestinian Liana Badr's *In the Eye of the Mirror* and the Syrian Hamida Nana's *The Homeland*, the fictionalized story of the life and adventures of Leila Khaled, the Palestinian freedom fighter known in the West for having been one of the first to hijack a plane.

Twelve Arab women whose writings are attracting international attention. Yet, I could have mentioned others, like the Moroccan Leila Abouzeid, the Palestinian Sahar Khalifa, the Iraqi Aliya Mamduh and the Kuwaiti Layla al-'Uthman, all of whom Western presses are beginning to court. These are the new names that might be a goldmine in an increasingly sophisticated international book market that is on the

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lookout for the new and “exotic.” Arab women writers in the 1990s no longer have to limit themselves to small, specialized presses. The pioneers like Post-Apollo, Ragweed, Three Continents Press and Quartet are seeing their lists being gobbled up by the big boys in New York, London, Paris and Frankfurt.

What is being marketed internationally is a fraction of what is being produced at home in the Arab world. In 1986, the year of the first International Feminist Bookfair, the Palestinian-American critic Joseph Zeidan published in Saudi Arabia his bibliography of Arab women writers, *Masadir al-adab al-nisa’i fi al-‘alam al-‘arabi al-hadith* (Bibliography of Women’s Writings in the Modern Arab World). It contains biographical and bibliographical information from more than 300 sources for over 480 women who have written in Arabic between the 1880s and 1980s. Of these 480 women, almost 200 have written two or more books. Whereas during the first half of this century there were few women writing anywhere outside the literary centers of Cairo and Beirut, by the 1970s in every single Arab country women were beginning to write. To be more precise. Between the late 19th century and 1930, only twenty women had written (some in magazines only). About five women wrote per decade. This number then doubles to ten between 1930 and 1940, and during the next decade there are fifteen women writing. Between 1950 and 1960, their numbers more than double to 33 and between 1960 and 1970 this last number almost triples to 96. By the next decade, 1970-1980, which is the last full decade covered by the bibliography, 129 women are writing all over the Arab world, even in the countries of the Arabian Peninsula where education for women is new and not yet widespread. Zeidan is currently preparing a revised version of the bibliography which will contain information about more than 650 women.

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How have critics dealt with this growing literature ? Until recently, few were at all interested and those who were generally tried to frame Arab women's writings chronologically within totalizable stages each with its own sense of closure. A vignette from Iraq is suggestive. In 1979, the Iraqi critic 'Umar al-Talib published an essay about women story writers in Iraq in which he traces the more or less unknown history of women's literature in Iraq during the 20th century. Dalal Khalil Sifri was the first to publish. Her 1937 moralizing stories entitled *Hawadith wa 'ibar* (Events and Warnings) tell the story of the good daughter who learns how to become a good wife and then a good mother. Eleven years later, Maliha Ishiq was the next woman to publish. Her consciousness-raising *'Aqli dalili* (My Mind is My Guide, 1948) provides a rejoinder to its didactic predecessor as it follows the tragic descent of a good daughter-wife-mother into the hell of despair. Four years later in 1952, Ishiq published another novel. *Ra'ia* (An Awesome Woman) was about women's importance to the construction of the Iraqi state. During the 1950s, women like Harbiya Muhammad and Safiya al-Dabuni wrote about mean men and their resilient if diminished women. After the July 1968 Revolution, al-Talib finds that many more women wrote, particularly about women's effective participation in the revolutions of 1958 and 1968. Although some like Daisy al-Amir in her *Thumma ta'udu al-mawja* (Then the Wave Returns, 1969) and May Muzaffar in her *Khutuwat fi layl al-fajr* (Steps in the Night of Dawn, 1970) still wrote of the problems of women in contemporary society and particularly of the alienation of educated women, al-Talib accounts for this counterrevolutionary fact by suggesting that these women probably wrote these books before the revolution and only published afterwards (al-Talib 1979 : 76). For al-Talib, the 1970s see the emergence of a new problem, namely women's political commitment and the need for them to link their agenda as women to that of the nation. This is one man's story about one country which has not figured large on the screen of Arab women's

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writings. He has discerned clear stages that relegate all of the writings to women's personal concerns. However, had al-Talib included poetry, he would have had to modify his findings. The necessary inclusion of Nazik al-Malaika, the one whom many credit with the introduction of free verse into Arabic poetry, would have compelled him to counter common wisdom that al-Malaika had been an anomaly. He would have had to acknowledge the fact that something was happening in Iraq in the middle of this century that welcomed some women into its literary circles, and not because they wrote about women for women.

Like al-Talib, both Joseph Zeidan and the Egyptian critic Sabry Hafez have also tried to organize, package and explain, perhaps even to contain and control Arab women's writings. Each has detected a chronological development from the poor to the good, from imitation through identity-formation to nationalist preoccupations ; from the personal to the political. Modernization is good, and particularly for women. In *Arab Women Novelists. The Formative Years and Beyond* (1995), Zeidan divided the women's writings between the 1980s and 1990s into three : "The Pioneering Generation," "The Quest for Personal Identity" and "The Quest for National Identity." Sabry Hafez espouses such a positivist taxonomy, and he goes so far as to adopt the American feminist critic Elaine Showalter's tripartite "feminine-feminist-female" frame (Hafez 1995). He produced a neat story about women writing about themselves. These women are thus generally marginalized because they do not seem to be dealing with major issues. A very few women are singled out for special praise and are patronizingly invited into the hallowed circle of the real literati. These exceptionalized women become honorary men, and the sisters, who made their appearance possible, can be ignored. The canon remains basically untouched, if nicely adjusted to display the political correctness of the avantgarde critic.

Another kind of criticism is called for, one that pays attention to the context. When we were organizing the entries we had chosen for in-

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clusion in *Opening the Gates. A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, Margot Badran and I realized how important the anthology's typologies were going to be. After rejecting chronology, thematics, life cycle and regional categories we chose to arrange the pieces according to the degree of feminist consciousness displayed in the text. In other words, were the protagonists aware of unjust treatment because they were women ; or, did they reject such behavior without thought of the consequences or of further steps to be taken ; or, were they determined to do something, to act to change whatever they found unacceptable in their situation ? Colleagues and friends had seemed skeptical about such a framing strategy, arguing the difficulty of assigning pieces. But it was precisely this difficulty and the almost arbitrary, subjective element involved in making the choice that convinced us that this typology was appropriate. It did not allow for the easy relegation to totalizing categories, but was designed to be thought-provoking so as to allow the reader to challenge our judgment of the meaning of the piece in terms of feminist consciousness. Above all, we had come to realize how the placing of the pieces into one section and not another opened up a new way to view the development of women's self - and civic awareness in their lives as well as in their writings. At the end of the process, the largest section was "Activism," comprising many pieces from the earliest period. "Rejection" was the slimmest section and "Awareness" contained many of the most recent writings. Was *Opening the Gates* reflecting a pessimism about backlash or lack of will to build on the achievements of foremothers ? No. A closer look at the text reveals that different things were happening in different places during a single time period ; clearly, women's preoccupations fluctuated from one period to another, from one country to another, and indeed from one woman to another during the same time and in the same place. Women were responding to each other, testing local possibilities, plugging into transcultural concerns. Individual women writers might range across a spectrum of topics, sometimes writing of

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themselves, sometimes of what was happening to the men and women in their communities. Women, like men, think and write about more than one thing at about the same time, this is particularly true in the course of a career.

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A case in point is the work of the Lebanese Emily Nasrallah, whose oeuvre spans a broad array of topics, sometimes from a feminist perspective, often not. She has published five collections of short stories, two volumes of a women's biographical dictionary and *Al-jamr al-ghafi* (Sleeping Embers, 1994) is her seventh novel. She has two more collections of short stories in press as well as the third volume of her compendium on women pioneers in the East and in the West⁴. The Beirut publishing house Mu'assasat Nawfal publishes everything she writes. Within the past six years, three of her books have been translated into English, two into German and one into Danish. Nasrallah has become popular in the Arab world, and the esteem in which she is held has led to her participation in international events and to her invitation to become a member of international P.E.N.

Born in 1938 in a southern Lebanese village with few models of women who had gone against the grain of traditional rural life, Nasrallah even as a young girl wanted what her brother had been promised : a serious education. She could not persuade her parents, so she contacted a rich uncle who had emigrated to the United States. Like most emigrants, he responded favorably to his niece's desire for education, so at the tender age of nine she left Kfeir to attend school at Shweifaf. This break from her place of origin was to mark most of her works, as it has marked her life, with a sense of nostalgia for a place she knew she had to leave, to which she knew she could not return, but for which she never stopped longing.

Tuyur Ailul (September Birds, 1962) was her first novel. It tells the

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fictionalized story of her own amputation from home and family. It explores the pain and joy of leaving the confinement of the village. The village is full of sensuous intensity and tumultuous love affairs, but for the women these romances are destructive. A village girl called Mirsal lyrically describes this love as “a bunch of magic ropes hanging down from life’s towers. Each of us grabs hold of an end. The storms play with the ropes, so that those who are hanging appear like slaves suspended in mid-air, fearfully awaiting the moment when the rope will escape them or be cut. Yet, our survival depends on our devotion to this magic rope.” (Nasrallah 1979 : 238) Love as magic, but love also as anxiety and destruction. The answer is to leave for the city, Beirut usually, where it is possible to dream of carving a future different from the one given to other village girls. This is what Muna does. But she learns that there is a price attached to change. It is a price she will pay for the rest of her life, as she searches for a place she may call her own, a place that will give her some reassurance about identity and belonging. Ironically, however, it is the very impossibility of finding such a place that gives her existence meaning. Muna predicates her life on the need to lose the comfort but also the stultification of the village so as to breach the walls of this prison-home and to find freedom.

Nostalgia is the emotional frame for most of her pre-civil war stories and it is closely connected with emigration. Nasrallah reveals the ways in which Lebanese society is structured around the expectations that its sons, and sometimes its daughters, will leave the country to seek fame and fortune elsewhere, and usually not in the Arab world. The regret at this drain of the country’s human resources becomes increasingly evident in Nasrallah’s writings as she warns of the problems inherent in the expectation that half of the children born on Lebanese soil will not grow up on it.

Between 1962 and 1975, the year of the outbreak of the civil war in Lebanon, Nasrallah published two novels and two collections of short

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stories. Both novels, *Shajarat al-Difla* (The Oleander Tree, 1968) and *Al-rahina* (The Pawn, 1973), have a feminist focus. They tell the sad stories of village girls whose marriages have been arranged. In *Oleander*, the heroine accepts her destiny but then commits suicide ; in *Pawn*, Rania actually returns to the village from Beirut to marry the man to whom she had been promised at birth and whom she does not love. Both women choose to follow customs, regardless of the cost. Many of the short stories of this period also concentrate on strong and decisive women. Yet, however strong these women, they are not able to overcome their circumstances.

In *al-Yanbu'* (The Source) written before the war but not published until 1978, legends and fairytales blend into a personal mythology that passes its magic wand over everything, turning rocks into butterflies and beggars into saints (Nasrallah 1978 [I] : 201, 187). The lyrical tone in which the stories are written may be appreciated in the following excerpt about a girl seeking her love : "The guards tried to stop me and I turned into a cloud and rained down a cool drizzle. They opened their mouths and drank and slaked their thirst, and the flames of their spite against me eased. When I, the cloud, reached the top of Mount Hermon I sprinkled the rocks with a light, white rain, and the snow piled up and became a shining white turban for the Old Man of the mountains." (Nasrallah 1978 [1] : 135-139) But into this mysterious context of mountains reachable only by dreams and clouds, Nasrallah introduces the language of war. In a 1972 story, variously entitled "A Little Dream" or "Lord, Save Your Servants from the Horrors of War," Nasrallah writes of a girl who has a premonition of war. She pretends to have had a vision of the Virgin, hoping thus to prevent her mother from leaving to go and work in Beirut. She succeeds, but the unexpected outcome is that she is sought far and wide as a holy woman, and she ends up believing in her own ruse. In "The Wait" (1973), villagers are waiting for the return of two young men who have been lost on the magical Mount Hermon. They see "a bird

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with wings of fire pass over the village, ripping the silence, and sowing anticipation and fear.” The story ends, after a reference to flames and shelters, with the gory picture of a woman whose “abaya was torn. Napalm had burnt her body. She ripped the white turban that crowned his head (referring to the summit of Mount Hermon) and the blood poured out of his neck.” (Nasrallah 1978 [1] : 147) In “Because of Her Eyes” (1974), a young man is described as stretched out on the ground with “the wound in his right side bleeding calmly to slake the earth’s thirst.” (Nasrallah 1978 [1] : 177) The implicit references to war become explicit in “The Miracle,” a story she wrote in June 1975, namely two months after the outbreak of the war. It is the only story not to be situated in the country, but in the city of Beirut. Slipping between dream and reality, it tells of a jinns’ wedding and the falling of a bomb.

For fifteen years, Nasrallah wrote about the war and its impact on the civilians in Beirut, particularly the women. Her writings insist on the need for the Lebanese to stay and not to continue their exodus with vague promises about returning. The war allowed her to reconfigure the nation as a village, a place of intimate belonging for all. Thus, she recuperated, even if only partially, her original loss of home and roots as the boundaries between Kfeir and Beirut became porous.

When we met in 1980 and then again in 1982, we talked at length about what writing during the war meant to her. She told me that in the early stages of the violence she had turned to writing children’s books like *Al-bahira* (1977) and *Shadi al-saghir* (Little Shadi, 1977) because she had felt that at least one possible solution to the strife that was tearing her country apart was to educate the children differently. Education should begin in the home, with parents responsible to inculcate those values that would lead to a strong, united society.

While working on this educational project, she was mulling through the meaning of the war in her life. One of the results of her musings came out in a conversation between two women that she entitled *Tilka*

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al-dhikrayat (Those Memories, 1978). Throughout an endless night, these two friends try to talk of their experiences of the past two years. Hanan had left for London at the beginning of the war, and she returns during a lull in the fighting. She wants to learn from Maha what it had been like to stay. She needs to experience the war vicariously. But Maha cannot oblige her former friend. The more probing Hanan's questions, the more Maha retreats into silence. Hanan's inability to relate to what she has been through makes her realize that something has changed : her sense of time. Where before, the present had been the space for dreaming about what was to come, the war has forced her to live intensely in the present. In contrast with the pre-war existence, life now could not exceed the day-by-day. Like a dying person, she had given up dreams of a fairytale past as also of a future where miracles will be possible. What she retains are memories that fix that presentless past as a somewhere where dreaming and hoping had been possible. It is out of the pain of this lost past that the future must be built. The war seems to give a focus to what before had been a blur. The war had revealed how hollow had been her former values (Nasrallah 1978 [II] : 90, 109, 42, 47, 196, 198).

Maha rejects Hanan's sick curiosity about the war, the assumption that it had been an interlude after which all could return to the way they had been before. Maha realizes that something between them has broken and that communication is no longer possible. In *War's Other Voices*, I analyzed this break in terms of loss of identity, of citizenship even, on the part of those who had left Lebanon during its time of greatest need. Thus, I connected *September Birds* and *Those Memories* with her 1981 novel, *Al-lqla' 'aks al-zaman* (Flight Against Time) to elaborate the discussion about emigration and its dangers to the nation and its citizens. *Flight* is the first of Nasrallah's longer works set outside Lebanon, in a Lebanese emigrant community in Prince Edward Island in Canada. The experience is told through the eyes of an old peasant couple who have finally been persuaded to visit their chil-

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dren. They go through the trauma of preparing for and then undergoing the trip. The anticipated joy gives way to despair as they understand that their children had no intention of returning home, that in fact they were no longer Lebanese. When Radwan the father watches Canadian television and sees images of Lebanon on fire, he determines to return, dreading the cold death he would otherwise suffer in this cheerless place. Within a few days of his return, alone, he is killed by some militiamen. But this is not a tragedy, for those who attend the elaborate funeral notice a slight smile. Those who wish to retain their Lebanese identity must remain on the land even if this remaining should cost them their lives.

For a decade after the Israeli invasion of 1982, Nasrallah wrote short stories only, most of which she published first in magazines like *Fairuz*. Over the following eight years, she collected them into three volumes : *Al-Mar'a fi 17 qissa* (Women in 17 Stories, 1984) ; *Al-tahuna al-da'i'a* (The Lost Mill, 1985) and *Khubzuna al-yawmi* (Our Daily Bread, 1990). These stories examine the impact of the invasion on women in Beirut. She celebrates their resistance to the senseless violence and their survival as a testimony to their commitment to their nation. We sense a new kind of emptiness as protagonists float around in a context of threat, both real and imagined. Some are clearly driven mad, all are alienated from their surroundings. Even though they and their neighbors may have not left their homes, some protagonists discover that they no longer know who their neighbors are. Women ask themselves as they let themselves into their homes, whose key is opening whose house that they thought was theirs ? Where is everyone disappearing ? Who are the new sacrifices to the endless violence ? These stories are haunted by the anonymity of the victims, as can be read in the following excerpt from "That Scream in the Dark" : "It was a wounded man calling for help. I did not know how seriously he was hurt, but the woman's voice that followed and her terrified scream killed what hope was left in me. The hit was fatal. Who might this

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man be who was calling for help in the middle of the night ? Who was the sniper's new victim ? Who ? But then what difference would it make if I knew the name ? It was enough that it was the scream of someone in pain, and his pain tore through my body." The only stability is found in connection to the land and in communion with others who share that sense of connectedness. We read the beginnings of an imagined community that does not need to go back to some origin to find its identity.

Nasrallah's most recent publication is her first novel since *Flight*. At first blush, *Sleeping Embers* appears to be the novel that she had long wanted to write. She had told me in 1982 that she was waiting for the moment when it would be conceivable to speak about *The Return of the September Birds*, of the emigrants who had gone to seek fame and fortune outside the confines of their society. However, the lack of response from these emigrants during the war extinguished the hope. But perhaps now, three years after the official ending of the war, things might have changed ?

The novel opens in the village of Jurat al-Sindyan, the stage for her pre-war novels. An emigre has returned with Buick, big bucks and bad Arabic : the days of Gog and Magog have come. Uncharacteristically, this emigrant was not a man but a woman. Nuzha had been the second wife of Abdallah the rich emigrant. 25 years ago, he had picked her after his first bride Layya had not bled on the wedding night. Nuzha had been sixteen years old and he fifty. This had not been the problem ; the scandal was that she had decided without first consulting her parents ; and he had married a girl who was not from his village. The ambitious Nuzha had dreamt of just such an eventuality, and she did not care if this swooping eagle was old, what mattered was to get out of her village prison. She left the south with her husband and also her admirer Jibran, her husband's nephew, for America. Jibran could not tolerate being close to Nuzha, who loved to flirt with him. At first, he was jealous and then angry. Finally, he did the unprecedented and re-

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turned to Jurat al-Sindyan, where he remained a bachelor, living with his sister.

The novel is set in the time of Nuzha's return, but with constant flashbacks to the period of her betrothal 25 years ago, and occasionally even to earlier periods. Into this timeless realm of cardamom-scented coffee and thyme, under the shadow of Mount Hermon, steps the "American." Jibran opens his house to throw a welcoming party for Nuzha, and it is the first time that he has done so since his return from America. The guests come with anxious questions about their emigrant families, their heads filled with the dreams of profit and escape that had motivated Nuzha 25 years ago. This is particularly the case with Dib. Exactly like her a quarter of a century ago, Dib does not worry about the age difference between them, that she is fifty and he only 35, that as his father said in disgust she could be his mother (Nasrallah 1994 : 327). Nuzha toys with the idea of this unlikely match, but she is really interested in Jibran. She had come back after Abdallah's death, hoping that Jibran still loved her and that it was this love that had prevented him from marrying.

Nuzha stumbles around the village, trying to make up for the hurt she has involuntarily caused, but in the process causing more. She visits Layya to tell her how lucky she was that Abdallah did not marry her, because she has a big happy family and she, Nuzha, has remained a virgin. But for Layya despite her present contentment, the memory of the public rejection remains a wound sore to the touch. Nuzha sees the servant girl Ramziya and wants to give her the opportunities that she herself had enjoyed. She offers to take her to America where she will become rich. More, she wants to adopt her, as though Ramziya had no mother of her own. Yet, Ramziya is the only person in the world that Salma has, and this suggestion has put a wedge between the mother and the daughter, even if for the time being Ramziya does not leave the village. Nuzha raises also the hopes of Dib that he might escape the village. Nuzha stays with Jibran and Almaz, hoping against

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hope that the former love might be rekindled. But all that is rekindled is the pain of memory. Umm Hani, the village gossip, is suspicious of Nuzha's intentions who she is sure "has not come to visit, but to stir up embers that had been sleeping for years under the ashes." (Nasrallah 1994 : 307, 316) At times, even the author seems to share the villagers' anxiety, describing Nuzha as calculating and vengeful when she recognizes that she has lost the influence she had once enjoyed.

Sleeping Embers is Nasrallah's first attempt to link emigrant with local communities from the Lebanese perspective, and particularly that of women. The reader is able to enter the worlds of both and to see how impossible it is to bring them together. Too much has happened after the emigrant's departure for there to be any real possibility of conciliation, of communication even. Nuzha's return had been full of hope that by-gones might become by-gones and that somehow she might turn the clock back a quarter of a century and start again. However, every step that she takes is watched over by the anxious villagers who mistrust her open and free behavior, who cannot understand what it is that she wants, but who feel sure that she does not wish them well. Her good intentions are consistently misconstrued. The only good emigrant is the one who stays away and who pays the family regularly, but from afar. The villagers seem glad to accept this long-distance charity, but cannot deal with the return of the emigrant. Does not the return somehow mean failure ?

The novel ends with Nuzha getting back into her blue Buick and driving off in the early dawn with all of the villagers watching and thinking about the strangeness of the visit. Of all Nasrallah's novels, *Sleeping Embers* is the most complex. The author seems to be working out through the characters and their confrontations with each other her own position on emigration. The urgent appeal of the earlier works to the emigrants to return and to assume their responsibilities to the needy country have been mitigated by her realization that the intention to leave one's birthplace and the decision to live abroad carry in-

delible consequences. Those who return will always be foreigners however much they believe themselves to be Lebanese. The time away will have made them forget how to behave, will have closed off the possibility of belonging once again to the community they had left. When Nuzha leaves Jurat al-Sindyán in a cloud of dust, Dib and Ramziya are the only ones to hope to see her again. Unlike *Flight Against Time*, where the main character returns from Canada and dies contented to be back on his native soil, all those who leave and then come back to Jurat al-Sindyán in *Sleeping Embers* have been transformed by their experience in such a way that they have become misfits. For the women it is the most difficult. Whereas Jibran stays but in a taciturn isolation, Nuzha as a woman would not be able to find even that space of painful retreat. For those who have left Lebanon and who try to convince themselves that the soul of Lebanon is not restricted to its soil, but that they can continue to claim Lebaneseness even on the other side of the globe, Nasrallah says definitively NO. And in this novel, it is not the war that has excommunicated these emigrants, it is the villagers, those who were left behind when the ambitious packed their bags and left for greener pastures. It is remarkable that after writing about the war for twenty years, this novel does not breathe a word about it, as though it had not happened. Realization about the alienation of the emigrants may have come about as a result of the war, but this novel does not allow the reader to surmise that it is anything but the fact of emigration that has entailed loss of identity.

Emigration has become an increasingly common topic, particularly for Arab women, e.g., al-Samman's *Square Moon* and al-Shaykh's *Beirut Blues*. Ghada al-Samman's supernatural stories are the first to restrict themselves to emigrant life in Paris. She describes women trying to adjust to their new life almost as though it were on a different, supernatural order from life in the Arab world. Like Nasrallah, Hanan al-Shaykh follows the return of a woman to her native village. But in this case, we see the reactions to her departure from her Bekaa village

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and then her return through Asmahan's own eyes. She is aware of their rejection, but then takes refuge in anger and frustration. They were ungrateful to her landholding family, their exploitativeness is glossed over. Nasrallah's approach is quite different. She is painfully aware of how self-evident and easy seems the choice to leave one's native country, especially when for whatever reasons it is no longer able to provide a satisfactory livelihood. She examines the negative effects that the human drain has had on the community that is left behind from its perspective. The story she tells from such a vantage point does not accord well with Western expectations of what life is like in the Arab world. Neither exotic nor romantic nor particularly oppressive to women, these rural communities are a bit like rural communities in many parts of the globe. They live healthily if dully on the edges of history. On rare occasions, the monotony is interrupted by the arrival of a Native Son or Daughter. The encounter benefits neither and is soon cut short. These stories should have universal appeal, reflecting as they do universal experiences and emotions. Yet, the international literary markets have not snapped her up, and her English translations are produced by the relatively unknown Ragweed Press located in Prince Edward Island, home to Lebanese who emigrated from Nasrallah's village. Perhaps they are not looking for universal themes in the writings of contemporary Arab women, particularly not when these themes reflect resistance to the West.

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What has been the critical response to Arab women writers ? Some critics, although as recently as ten years ago they had contemptuously dismissed Arab women's writings, are today paying attention to this new contingent of litterateurs. Some even are enthusiastic, racing each other to be the first to "discover" a new talent - for the past four years the Egyptian Salwa Bakr has been a favorite. And Edward Said has given the nod of approval to Hanan al-Shaykh. Perhaps this is why

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Roger Allen's re-edition of his 1982 *Introduction to the Arabic Novel* adds one woman - Hanan al-Shaykh - to the array of men's novels.

However, other critics still write of the women only to disparage their writings. El-Saadawi is a particularly popular target. Critics rant on about why women's writing is so poor, about the fact that their Arabic is beneath contempt - the francophone women seem to be spared this particular kind of criticism - about the self-indulgent feminism of their project that renders it nothing more than autobiography. When exceptions are pointed out, indeed when it is made obvious that most writers' first novels are often an embarrassment that they later dismiss as juvenalia, these critics acknowledge the exception and then go on with business as usual at the next academic convention.

Why should their attitudes matter ? Because for the time being they have the power to block new research and literary directions. Recently, I received reviews of a proposed anthology on African and Middle Eastern writings that I am co-editing. One of the reviewers told Prentice Hall that my 30 %-40 % inclusion of women writers is excessive, representing "the way one might like things to be, it is NOT in any way a reflection of the critical tradition in the region itself and conveys a somewhat false impression to Western readers regarding the prominence of women writers." He goes on to say that women writers *should not* "serve as the sole author from their country or region... (since) their very inclusion serves to exclude other writers (mostly male, I freely admit) whose literary merit is regarded by critics in the region itself as being of greater significance." Exactly. What's wrong with that ? Why should a woman writer not be the sole representative for her country in an anthology of Arabic literature ? Men are all the time. These women are being awarded prizes, they are being translated into all languages of the globe, they are moving in international literary circles. If these women are not good enough to represent their countries, are not well enough known and admired, why do their telephones not stop ringing, why are they so often on the road ?

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Readers, however, are another matter. That is why the translation industry has begun to adopt Arab women writers. For these women, there is a price to be paid, the price for which all globalizing projects must budget : how to balance the benefits of participating in late capitalism with the dangers of the “identity,” “pure origin” sell-out ? In other words, how does the woman who once wrote viscerally out of the need to express her own, and thus perhaps her community’s urgencies now confront the writing project when she knows that even if she writes in the most obscure of Arabic vernaculars, she may see this once almost inaccessible text quickly translated into at least one U.N. language ? How is she read ? How is she marketed ? Surely, the difference between *The Story of Zahra* and *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, with its appeal to exoticised notions of how Arab women behave in their special spaces of segregation, is not just the date of writing and the geographical situation of the writer, but rather it reflects al-Shaikh’s understanding of her new global location and status. The same might well be true of Emily Nasrallah, even though the certainty of translation is not as great. Her *Sleeping Embers* may be targetted at the villagers of Jurat al-Sindyán, but surely it is also written for emigrants, those who have left their native land and do not understand how traumatic was their leaving, at first for the villagers, but then for themselves, should they ever want to return.

It is not merely the matter of being translated that counts, the competing with English and French writers for their national prizes, and the increased awareness of the transnationality of the literary project, it is also that to become a writer of a world literary text means to become part of a community other than the one into which one was born, to write for it as much, if not more, than one used to write for one’s birth community. This is not necessarily a bad thing, for the needs of a community may be more readily answered if they are more broadly framed, seen to be part of a larger problem. We might well ask whether Djébar while she was writing the three volumes of her quartet⁵

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was thinking only about the situation of Algerian women after the war of independence ? Or, was she looking around her in Paris and, recognizing her own condition of regret for a past silence during a period of national, revolutionary upheaval to be that of many of her neighbors, she was then writing a story that might have been that of her Iranian, her Cambodian, her South African or even her North American friend ? Does this globalization of Algerian women make these novels more effective ? Or, does the celebration of an Arab woman's writings in the West necessarily contaminate both the writer and the message so that the advantages gained from reaching a broader readership is outweighed by the dangers of cultural betrayal ?

This contamination is a dilemma for women nationalists who struggle to maintain the balance between allegiances to nation, culture and gender. Any slip too far in any one direction is quickly labelled betrayal. For instance, Sahar Khalifa who writes for her Palestinian people in the occupied territories, is finding herself chastised and criticized from abroad. After the usual complaint about poor Arabic, in fact no better than what a highschool student could have produced, she is condemned for her obsessive feminism which threatens nationalist cohesion. Her insistent argument about the necessary simultaneity of the social and political revolutions is ignored to criticize her intolerable focus on the rights of women. Long-distance nationalists, à la Anderson, comfortably ensconced in their western armchairs, tell these nationalist women what they should, and above all what they should not, write.

As Joanna Russ wrote a decade ago, the urge to suppress women's voices is universal, and even by those who claim to be interested. This is how the 6th century poet al-Khansa' has been and continues to be silenced, with the exception of her elegies. Suzanne Stetkevych has written about *jahili* and *mukhadrami* women poets, assuring us that we have already been told is indeed correct, namely that women only wrote elegies particularly ones that focused on *tahrid*, or the instigation of men into action to exact blood vengeance *for the death of*

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male kin. The fact that women like men have given us fragments that might indicate that their corpora were more extensive than what we have received after the passage of fourteen centuries, apparently means nothing. Whereas the men's fragments were clearly part of something else, a something else that is worth investigating so as to uncover what it might be, the women's were not. How does she know this ? Because they were women (Stetkevych 1992 : 161-205). However, with all the archival research on women produced over the past fifty years and currently under way, scholars cannot continue to affirm that all that remains extant of a woman's oeuvre after fourteen centuries is the sum of all that she wrote.

What is at stake is the survival of important texts, particularly those that do not necessarily support *status quo*. Even with the limited experiences that I have had over the past fifteen years of working with Arab women's writings on war, I know that *every single day* women's writings are being lost, if not suppressed. A book that is not paid critical attention - maybe because the author is not plugged into influential critical circles - risks being lost within a few months of being published. Today, however, Arab women from Iraq to Algeria are exploring the gaps and silences that were the only chronicle of women's experiences. They are creating new frameworks for intervening in the canon of Arabic literature. It is our responsibility as readers and teachers to make sure that these interventions are heard, their writings preserved.

1. Her publishing house is about to issue the third edition of the 1992 publication of Ghassan Kanafani's love letters to her. This third edition has a 40-page appendix with short extracts from over 150 negative and positive reviews that have appeared all over the world during the past two years. She is now awaiting the University of Arkansas publication of the prize-winning English translation of her pre-civil war *Beirut 1975*, that many credited with prognosticating the war. Although it is the first entire book to be translated into English, several of her works have appeared in major European languages.

2. Although she has been writing and publishing since the Algerian War (1954-62) until the early 1990s it was only her first novel *La Soif* (1957) that had been

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translated into English and then by an obscure press which allowed it to disappear from the market. Now, however, the first two volumes of her quartet which came out in 1985 and 1986 have been translated by Dorothy Blair into English and published by Heinemann under the titles *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* (1993) and *A Sister to Scheherezade* (1992).

3. Most of el-Saadawi's have been translated into English as well as Japanese and major European languages. Appearing in English in the mid-1970s, she was one of the first Arab women to be translated. She is currently a visiting professor in the Asian and African Languages and Literature Department at Duke University. She came to the United States, because in 1992 she learnt that some religious extremists had placed her on their death list, a death list that had to be taken very seriously since it had already disposed of Farag Foda. They also published an entire book entitled *Nawal al-Saadawi fi qafas al-ittiham* (Nawal el-Saadawi in the Witness Stand, 1993) that analyzes numerous of her writings, declares her guilty and condemns her to death.

4. This biographical work on famous women is a very popular genre in feminist writing, providing as it does models for ideal behaviors and successful careers (see Marilyn Booth's work on Zaynab al-Fawwaz).

5. The quartet is an autobiographical/fictional study of Algerian women's actions during periods of nationalist resistance and their silence about this participation. Djébar opens a window on to the lives of women who had been lionized by Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon in the 1960s, but whose voices were rarely, if ever, heard. Without their voices, these women remained abstract heroines who had sprung up, Venus-like, from the waves of the Algerian maquis. Djébar's quartet gives reality to these women's struggles and frustrations and links them to their foremothers who, despite the absence of any documentation, must have also resisted the French in the 1830s.

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GLOBALISATION DES ÉCRITS DES FEMMES ARABES

En 1986, à la Foire Internationale du livre à Londres, les femmes écrivains arabes furent lancées dans le monde anglo-saxon. Depuis lors, traductions, congrès, tournées, conférences se multiplient et l'écrivain arabe - Nawal AL-SAADAWI, Mona AL-SHAYKH ou Emily NASRALLAH par exemple - est sollicitée partout. Pourtant elles ne représentent qu'une fraction de celles qui écrivent et qui ne sont pas connues. Il faudrait modérer ce courant, car l'écrivain « à la mode » écrirait pour plaire au public étranger et, en outre, l'œil condescendant du critique masculin continuerait à ignorer les autres. C'est la survie des bons livres qui importe. Il est bon d'écouter ces voix nouvelles, même si elles vont à contre-courant.

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