

"Woman" by Suhayr al-Qalamawi demonstrates that a woman does not need the protection of a husband or a male relative to survive—she can make it on her own. In Samiya Ar'ut's story "The Collapse of Barriers," the heroine is trapped in an elevator with a male operator, a situation that temporarily removes the barriers between them. As soon as the elevator begins to move again, she regains her composure and reasserts her position of master, rather than servant, vis-à-vis the elevator operator. In "A Moment of Contemplation" by Nuzha Bin Sulayman, a marital dispute between the protagonist, who suffers from the strain of juggling a job and a family, and her husband ends on a note of conciliation, friendship, and affection.

The burst of literary activity by women in contemporary Arab society is mirrored in "I Will Try Tomorrow" by Mona Ragab. In this story, the protagonist is a writer and the mother of two small children. She knows how precious the moments of inspiration are and how delicate the creative process is, yet she dutifully attends to all her tasks and tries to balance the various demands on her time with patience and a sense of humor.

While there is a marked increase in Arab women's participation in public life, and a growing level of awareness on their part, both collective and individual, the process of liberation is not complete. In their struggle for freedom and equality, Arab women writers at times encounter hostility and resistance and at other times solidarity and support. The depth of their vision is reflected in the fact that they perceive the liberation of their gender as inseparable from the rebirth of Arab society in general and the Arab man in particular.

Modes of Writing

The question of whether Arab women authors write differently from their male counterparts has stimulated a great deal of critical discourse. Some critics argue that the elements of imaginative literature do not differ from gender to gender. What differs is the concerns of each gender, resulting from their specific experiences and impressions of life and society. Hence one should not look for a distinct type of literature with particular qualities in women's writings, although one should acknowledge that women have different interests owing to their different social and psychological circumstances.²⁰

A rather opposing view is expressed by Yusuf Idris (1927-91), one of the most influential modern writers in Egypt and throughout

the Arab world. In an article on women writers in the Arabian Peninsula, he offers the following impressions:

Over the last few years, collections of short stories have started reaching me from Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf States. It is true that most of them are by male writers, but a good number are by female writers. This is really amazing; the Arab woman in Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf States is almost secluded from public life. Many women there work as physicians, teachers, and bank employees (there are special banks for women), but their existence as an independent entity, and as a political or social force, is almost completely on the periphery of public life.

Yet the Arab woman there is a live being, educated, well-informed, and moved by all the desires and aspirations of the human soul. However, her desires and aspirations have a very low ceiling which she is not allowed to break through. Because of this, she channels her energies into writing. She finds an outlet in it, and speaks through it. Her writing may take the form of either poetry or prose, but the short story takes up the largest share.

One day not very long ago I applied myself to reading these collections of women's stories, poring over them not like a casual reader but like an expert who knows, or claims to know, the oppressive force which brings the word out from the depths of the soul and onto the page.

And after I had finished reading a number of collections, I discovered that I was not reading short stories in the accepted sense of the word *story*, or even in the modern sense; I was reading something different, or a different kind of writing, which is not a story and not a poem, not a tale and not scattered thoughts. It is a new and strange kind of writing that the Arab woman who remains distant from the course of events has invented in order to do with it something that will affirm to her that she is a live being, indeed a person who possesses the power of action and reaction. It is a literary action arising under an overpowering feverish pressure that interferes with the creative process to the extent that the writing appears like a puzzle to the reader. She wants to say something and yet she does not want to say it. She wants to express something, and at the same time she does not want anyone to grasp her expression—I might almost say her secret.

And thus I found myself giving a name to this kind of writing by female writers from Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf States: *the short story from behind a veil*.²¹

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