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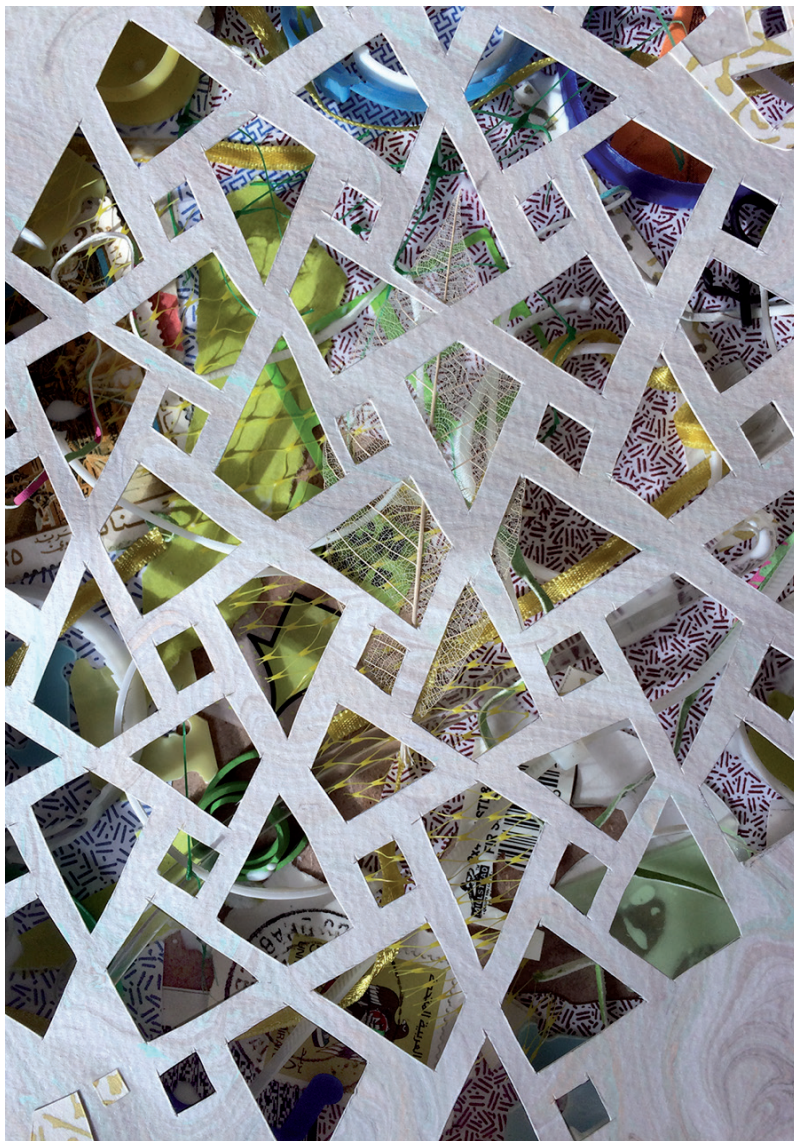
# ALJADID

A Review & Record of Arab Culture and Arts

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# Syrian Regime Dresses-Up Image with Choreographed Demonstrations

BY ELIE CHALALA

The heart wrenching images from Syria never stop engulfing the viewer with pain and helplessness as well as an anger that can distract attention from important details. One writer, however, by dint of her exceptional analytical ability, has been clinical enough in her observations to strike a balance between details big and small. Her name is Ala Shayeb al-Din, and her article, “Ajrafa” or “Arrogance,” appeared in An Nahar’s Cultural Supplement on June 15, 2013.

A Syrian author, Shayeb al-Din writes and comments on the shocking and detestable attitudes that humans display when presented with tragic and horrific circumstances. One occasion for such commentary occurred following the massacre in Jdeidet Al Fadel on the 21<sup>st</sup> of April 2013, where more than 483 people were burned alive or knifed to death over a four-day period. This terrifying massacre became even more appalling when a group of Assad loyalists celebrated

a pre-conceived plan, with many regime loyalist reactions deliberately choreographed to send a political message. One need only consider the images portraying their behavior, images that have remained more or less consistent for the past two and a half years. The dresses worn by the women, for instance, look more like uniforms, while their yellow color becomes significant in its association with Hezbollah. This leaves little room to doubt the deliberation given to these costumes. As recently as two years ago, photos of the pro-Assad Syrian voters in Lebanon also conformed to this analysis, as if they too wanted to send a sectarian message by distinguishing themselves from the images of the largely veiled refugees. The orchestration of pro-Assad’s supporters, marching to the Syrian embassy in Al Yarze to cast their votes in the Syrian presidential election, recalled the reactions that Shayeb al-Din observed during the 1913 massacres in



Syrian Women demonstrating in support of Bashar al-Assad (images in both columns are web-based)



Jdeidet Al Fadel, with both scenes carrying the same political message.

the event by organizing “festivals” to cheer the “courageous” Republican Guards and the *Shabiha* (pro-Assad thugs) on their victory over “the terrorists,” when in actuality they had committed unspeakable cruelties against civilians.

Following the massacre, Shayeb al-Din reported that photos of young women dancing the dabke circulated in the pro-Assad media. This conduct raised “many critical, baffling and difficult questions as to how mercy could disappear from the hearts of some to such an atrocious extent?”

Most observers overlook, consciously or unconsciously, details that appear to be secondary and instead become caught in what can be called the larger picture: the daily death counts, the ostensible reasons for a given massacre, the types of weapons used, and the role of regional and international powers. But Shayeb al-Din avoids the tendency to allow the sweeping impressions to carry her away. Nor does she become mired down in the minutiae. She notes in her article that the Assad killing machine appears to be working according to

The symbolism of these contrived similarities in the appearances of regime forces and supporters is not lost to Shayeb al-Din either. The images of Assad loyalist women, with their heads uncovered, suggested that they were the frightened minorities targeted by a Sunni extremist majority. They carried red flags, the legitimate symbol of Syrians, as opposed to the green flags raised by those lawless Others, wore Western-style dresses, sometimes sported tattoos, and, of course, displayed t-shirts bearing images of Bashar al-Assad, or slogans such as “we love you.” They gloated and displayed malice towards their enemies, while showering praise and glory on the leader, the army, and the police. Even their deceptive smiles constituted a deliberate attempt to irritate and instill envy in their rivals.

The details of these and other photographs clearly reveal the sectarian nature of the regime, its arrogance, and its repressive character, all engendered by contempt, as well as a methodical prejudice and chauvinism.



## Essays & Features

Shayeb al-Din notes: “By using comparative terms we can illustrate this more clearly. When we compare the anti-regime demonstrations with their loyalist counterparts, the world of arrogance comes into focus most clearly. In the anti-regime demonstrations, the people are rebellious, angry, spontaneous, and unconcerned with what they might look like if photographed, since they are more preoccupied with their sincere indignation, and worries that regime bullets might pierce their chests at any moment. In the vast majority of cases, they are simple, poor, marginalized, come from rural areas, are dressed modestly according to tradition or locale, and carry slogans of social justice, equality, freedom and dignity.”

By contrast, the pro-regime demonstrations emphasize their patriotism and loyalty to the Assad family by using racist and exclusionary slogans which deny the presence of the Other. They imply that the opposition rebels are composed of foreign agents and traitors, a “fact” which then justifies their deaths. At the same time, the pro-Assad groups strive to appear “civilized and secular,” with their “yellow uniforms,” t-shirts, and red flags, while the demonstrating rebels are portrayed as scum, extremists and terrorists.

The message is clear. They want to convey that they, and only they, constitute the legitimate forces, “protected by the state’s army.” They would appear the strongest, the ones who will stay forever. One can discern this through body language, facial expressions, and the focus on their dress, which makes them appear an “urban and modernist [force]...confronting the backward, [and] barbaric.”

Even the sunglasses they often wear convey a similar meaning. In the pro-Assad demonstrations, those glasses represent an identification with the arrogance and overbearing attitude visible in photographs of the “royal ruling family,” in which Assad, his son, and his brother are wearing sunglasses. These images, which play with ambiguity, have penetrated the consciousness of people in every corner of Syria, and “are psychologically designed to instill fear in their recipients and project a sense of inferiority onto them.”

The widespread images of the Assads which appeared after Bashar inherited the “republic,” should be considered in the same context. They portray Assad, his wife, and children, as a sporty family, “happy, modern and understanding of the enslaved people.” This promotes the image of a young reformist son, “transcending the regime of the old father.” These photographs also suggest that the children of the family should be taken as models for all of Syria’s children. Further, the images portray the first lady as a “good looking woman” who is “open to anything new.” Again, this implies that the women of Syria ought to look through this lens and repress their femininity

in favor of her own eternal, beautiful presence.

This same arrogant perspective also applies to photos of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) when contrasted against those of the “official army,” that is the Syrian Arab Army. Although the FSA lack good uniforms, such as helmets or bullet proof vests, and their outward appearance – with their untamed hair and scruffy beards – bears the signs of neglect, this only indicates the difficult conditions with which they must live. Further, these images exploit the FSA’s lack of conventional and “advanced” technologies, such as planes and tanks, in an attempt to deepen the impression of an army of “displaced terrorists and beggars.” In reality, we are faced with two contradictory worlds. The first world is that of an oppressive, mercenary, illegitimate and unpatriotic regime, which has encouraged the invasion of Syria by its sectarian “allies” from

Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon (Hezbollah). The second world is peopled with rebels who champion a popular, just, and national cause. They stand alone in the revolution, unsupported by others, and yet still fight with the spirit of freedom.

The disdain manifested in these carefully orchestrated images offers just one example of the oppression and abuse that the Assads have inflicted upon the Syrian people for so many decades. Arrogance constitutes one of the solid bedrocks of this dictatorship, and it would not be far from the truth to say that

this attitude remains one of the most important and deeply-rooted causes of the revolution. The regime’s arrogance, as well as its complete lack of decency, love, and tolerance, has devastated the lives and crushed the dreams of the Syrian people. Few, if any Syrians have escaped the psychological, spiritual, and emotional consequences.

Finally, Shayeb al-Din notes that the regime images serve two functions: First, they act as a “reminder” of a humiliating past in which Assad and his loyalists exploited and lived off of the Syrian people. Second, they act as “agitating” agents that prohibit any thought of retreating from the revolution, because retreat would only bring a reality more vengeful and enslaving than the one the revolutionaries knew before. Here, death offers the more merciful path. In truth, these images, and the arrogance they represent, give meaning and clarity to the widely used slogan “Death Instead of Humiliation.” **AJ**

*This essay is largely based on an Arabic version by Ala Shayeb al-Din, “Ajrafā” or “Arrogance,” which appeared in An Nahar’s Cultural Supplement on June 15, 2013. The material for this essay was translated by Elie Chalala and Joseph Sills and written and edited by Elie Chalala.*



Art work by Tammam Azzam from “The View from Inside”

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# Novelist Salwa Bakr Dares to Say it Aloud on Revolution's Successes and Failures

BY ELIE CHALALA

One may ask why write about Salwa Bakr now? I have an easy and straightforward answer: By mere coincidence, Ahmad Ali el-Zein interviewed Salwa Bakr on his weekly program, Rawafed, which broadcasts on Al Arabiya satellite TV. The interview, which ran in two parts, featured the Egyptian novelist, who openly, candidly, and courageously, offered provocative views on the state of the Arab world politically and culturally — views worth taking note of.

El-Zein asked Bakr the question on everyone's mind: how did all this violence and extremism that has swept the Arab world come about? "From what womb" did it emerge? She did not hesitate when telling the interviewer that *al-Istibdad al-Siyassi*, or political repression, had birthed it. This repression planted the seeds that grew into a wave of violence, for when repressed people become desperate, they search for solutions in other worlds, in the heavens, the metaphysical, the religious, and the superstitious.

Bakr did not forget to assign a role to the external and historical conflicts between the Arab world and the West, even going back to past hostilities between the Muslims, the Arabs, and the Crusades. However, the historical did not sidetrack the novelist from the centrality of political repression, for she held the promotion of only one discourse and one repressive regime voice is accountable for much of the Arab world's problems.

El-Zein sought Bakr, as an early participant in the Egyptian Revolution, for her assessment of whether the popular uprising succeeded. She pointed out that while the goals of the revolution, defined as freedom, human dignity, good standards of living, social justice, and human integrity, had not been accomplished, the revolution constituted a human process and not a drama nor a play in three parts. The novelist maintained that what had unfolded represented the first phase of that process, with more yet to come. She wanted the viewer to keep in mind that the revolution had led to the downfall of taboos between classes, between the powerful and the weak, between the ruler and the ruled, and between men and women, significantly raising the ceilings of ambition and aspiration for the Egyptian people. No matter what else still needed to be achieved, the revolution had overturned these deeply rooted taboos within society.

El-Zein raised an important question about how some groups lost what he called their "holiness" during Egypt's revolutionary upheaval. Bakr immediately understood the allusion and concurred, associating the holiness with the ideology of political Islam and its prominent organization, the Muslim Brotherhood. This group lost its "sacredness" during the first year of its tenure of ruling Egypt.

Another mask of "holiness" that has fallen concerns the transformation of the Christian Copts from a religious group — numerically speaking — into a major force in Egyptian society.

Shedding their status as a minority defined by their numbers, they instead became a group that fought and died alongside Muslim Egyptians. Perhaps this represents the first instance in a very long time that Egyptian Copts participated in politics outside their church. Bakr recalled one of her country's historical periods when poor Coptic peasants fought alongside Muslim peasants rebelling against the Caliphate, or the state. Ironically, because the church used to own land and capital, at that time their religious leadership had allied itself with Egypt's ruler and Muslim upper classes. This became the topic of one of Bakr's novels, where she questioned the characterization of the Coptic revolution as Christian, claiming to the contrary, that the Copts and the newly settled Arab tribes during the seventh century rebelled together against the Muslim Caliphate.

El-Zein asked Bakr, a prominent member of the Egyptian intellectual class, about the role of her colleagues in the Arab Spring and the Egyptian revolution. The novelist did not have kind words for Arab intellectuals, expressing her dissatisfaction of their preoccupation with the past, and labeling their discourse as *fikr madawi*, confined to analyzing and interpreting the past. Bakr considered this phenomenon as flight from the present, as well as a failure to accurately read and explain it. The novelist found this problematic because these intellectuals have criticized and interpreted the past at the expense of analyzing the current moment. In her view, they did not dare to face and interpret the present, leading her to question how many actually challenged the political repression under Mubarak. Bakr's criticism of these past-looking intellectuals included major pillars of Arab culture and letters, such as the Moroccan Mohammed Abd al-Jabberi, the Algerian Mohammed Arkon, and the Syrian Tayeb Tazzini (whose current silence remains deafening, at least for me) after his brief detainment early in the Syrian revolution.

Another question focused on Bakr's career as a novelist, to which she answered that she did not think of herself as a career novelist, nor did she see herself as someone who wrote for the sake of writing. Instead, she saw writing as a hobby. Nor did she concern herself with the commercialization and promotions of her novels, crafts which she confessed to have not mastered. She trusted that, in time, the reader would be able to judge the quality of her literary works, and thus concerned herself not with the present moment, but rather with future judgments. Bakr compared literary production to gold, meaning that the more time passes, the more value literature acquires.

She was asked to explain the large quantity of novel publications in the Arab world. Once again, Bakr pointed at political repression as a clue, especially when repressive regimes, under which most Arab intellectuals live, curtail freedom of expression. She indeed found the large number of published Arab novels amazing, for half of the Arab world remains illiterate, something that hits home, since Egypt constitutes half of that population. According to statistics, the average Arab reader reads no more than a quarter of a page annually. Thus, the novel, in Bakr's view, becomes the vehicle through which these intellectuals express opinions they cannot openly air through other political means such as political parties, unions, media.

In the second part of the interview, Bakr discussed questions of gender and women's issues. She came across as a feminist,



## Essays & Features



Salwa Bakr by Zareh for Al Jadid

*“From what womb” did the ongoing violence emerge? Bakr did not hesitate when telling the interviewer that al-Istibdad al-Siyassi, or political repression, had birthed it.*

Bakr defined the problematic of gender in society as a contradiction between women’s actual conditions and the values and concepts of the distant past. Women act as participants in all domains of Egyptian life, with many of them educated, and 22 percent of Egyptian families supported by females (the numbers could be much higher since these figures are not up to date). Thus, the women who make all these contributions in and outside the home are, ironically, being judged according to centuries-old convictions and beliefs.

Bakr cited a significant incident that occurred while attending a meeting of the Higher Council of Education in Egypt, where the head of that organization reprimanded her, “Don’t raise your voice.” She answered, “Why are you saying this to me while other men are raising their voices. Why should I lower my voice?” Bakr offered this anecdote to illustrate the contradictions between accepting antiquated concepts and acknowledging the current roles and contributions of women to Egyptian society.

When it comes to the treatment of women in literary works, Bakr’s criticism did not spare some intellectuals whom she considered as “revolutionaries” and “modernists.” She described them as remaining loyal to the old discourse, and that they still saw and portrayed women as subjects of sex and reproduction, as opposed to equal and full citizens, enjoying the same rights and duties of men.

El-Zein asked Bakr the reasons behind the deluge of novel publications in the Arab world, especially when unaccompanied by a body of scholarly publications of literary and artistic criticisms. A legitimate question by all means. Bakr’s answer remained on the mark. She attributed this absence to sociological rather than literary causes: to provide an academic evaluation of the large number of Arab novels necessitates an academic specialist in the subject, but scholars, busy earning their livings, tend to have little to no spare time to perform this role.

The absence of professional cultural publications constitutes another contributing factor in a region of more than 350 million people, with those available can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Be they visual (TV) or print, like the cultural pages of daily and weekly newspapers and magazines, most publications tend to be non-professional, falling into the promotional and propagandistic advertising categories. In this environment, media attention tends to focus the spotlight on unworthy literary output.

Mr. Ahmed Ali el-Zein’s interview with Ms. Salwa Bakr offered a fresh and daring discussion of sensitive topics, especially in the post 2011 upheavals in Egypt and parts of the Arab world. The novelist’s insightfulness, boldness, and determination singled her out, as did her refusal to be intimidated when discussing key figures such as Naguib Mahfouz and Tawfic al-Hakim, men whose reputations and literary stature would make most Egyptian intellectuals think twice before criticizing them. **AJ**

but not in the conventional sense, since her activism cannot be positioned within the framework of traditional women’s activist organizations. Instead, she identified with a large segment of the female population, mainly with the marginalized. She tended to favor the great majority of women who fall into categories like the divorced, the war widows, and those deserted by their husbands. Unlike male writers who approach women from an opportunistic or self-centered perspective, focusing on them as lovers, mothers, wives and daughters, the novelist wanted to incorporate this marginalized strata of women into the map of literature.

Bakr noted an interesting phenomenon featured both in Arab and world literature, where the sister remains mostly absent, and when present, is viewed negatively, characterized as being disloyal, resentful, hateful, plain, and jealous of her sisters-in-law. The novelist observed such attitudes even in the works of Arab literary giants like Toufic al-Hakim and Naguib Mafouz.

Traditional literature tends to feature beautiful women, like those seen on television, who, consequently, appear quite different from the millions of featureless females found on the streets. Bakr introduced these women into the map of literature. She positively recalled the legacy of the Islamic scholar Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126-1198), who recommended that teaching and educating women could transform them into mothers of great military and fleet commanders. Illiteracy and ignorance, rather than inherent inferiority, then explains this undesirable status of women which leads to their exclusion from the work force, and subsequently results in a handicapped society

### Editor's Notebook/Elie Chalala

#### Al Nakba at 67: 'Generations of Catastrophes'

I rarely passed on an Al Nakba remembrance, an event which was pivotal in forming my political and moral consciousness during my early days in Beirut and in my academic diaspora. What has been aggravating me nowadays are those intellectuals of sorts who end up finding nothing in Al Nakba except a shelter to hide from their shameful silence on one of the most horrific "Nakbas" in modern Arab history. As May 15th approaches, I note a breath of relief among the *mumaneen* (rejectionists, pro-Syrian regime leftists) who suddenly awoke from their lethargic sleep and unleashed their activism in tours of duty on Facebook, Twitter, new and old media, or any medium open to their vanities. They lecture us on not forgetting the direction of the most important issue in the current conflicts, that is the Palestine question. The overshadowing of the Palestinian *nakba* with the ongoing *nakbas* of Syria and Iraq bears the fingerprints of *almumannah's* masters, Syrian and Iraqi dictators. And since they are good in raising their fingers, they should point them towards Damascus and Tehran. Author Hussam Itani offers a telling commentary that places Palestine's Nakba in a quantified context: "Those who died in Syria and Iraq during the past four years exceed the number of all the Palestinian people who died during the Catastrophe of 1948. The number of the Palestinians killed by Arab armies and militias is greater than the number killed by Israel."

In one of my many remembrances — one that stays with me and compels my recollection, I wrote about the "Generations of Catastrophes" on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Al Nakba. I noted then the many other catastrophes (cultural, economic, social) the Arab world suffered since the 1948 catastrophe or because of it. In that essay I covered what two prominent Syrian intellectuals — Sadallah Wannous and Adonis — said about what the Al Nakba meant to them.

#### Twisted Logic: The Younan Sisters and Julia Boutros Sing the Same Deceptive Tune

The conflicts in Syria and Iraq have led to various types of wars, including those of artistic and cultural characters. One could certainly classify the diatribes of Faya and Rihan Younan in their "peace message" video clip "*libiladi*" and the brief YouTube video by Lebanese singer Julia Boutros (in which she describes the Arab Spring as an "invented farce to deflect attention from the Palestine question") as forms of political expression. This is not to say that differences do not exist between the performers, with the Younan sisters being amateurs, while Boutros performs professionally, and has a long standing record of "pro-resistance" (Hezbollah) political

video clips. However, both videos attempt to deny obvious realities, and both reveal the rock bottom depths of political deceit to which Lebanese and Syrian discourses have descended. In the case of the two sisters and Julia Boutros, this political deception, or artistic



Faya and Rihan Younan

duplicity, if you prefer, entails a failure to credit the main villain in the Syrian conflict and his Iraqi counterparts, past and present.

As is to be expected, the artists accomplish their goals through different means: the Younan sisters surreptitiously hide their pro-Assad regime message behind generalities, while Julia Boutros's blunt words, delivered in an elitist and stern tone, preach to us that the "Arab Spring is a farce to shift Arab focus from the central cause and insist that the real Arab Spring is in Gaza" (the artist's own words as translated by her promotional video clip, Monitor Middle East). Ironically, the amateur couple score over the professional when it comes to religion. While the Younan sisters do not advertise their religion (for which I commend them), Boutros goes out of her way to identify herself as Christian singer (or at the very least allows her promoters to associate her with the Christian religion, not only in a brief statement in this video, but in some others as well). I note this assertion not because of any issue with Boutros' Christianity, but rather to contrast her actions with those of most other Lebanese and Syrian artists and people of letters, who have chosen to make a statement by not declaring their religious affiliations.

Back to the Younan sisters, I must admit to having harbored a feeling of ambivalence and a suspension of critical thought when I watched the video for the first time. Like many viewers, and some social and conventional media, I also felt taken in and charmed by the Fairuz music and the sisters' innocent appearances. This left me confused and took my focus away from the "lyrics." Like so many others, I was guilty of going with the music and not examining the subtext closely or paying attention to other important details. Fortunately, a critical review by Martina Sabra, translated from the German by Raed al-Bash, and published in Qantara magazine on November 3, 2014, has dispelled my confusion.

Although the Younan sisters' video has been labeled as anti-war production, the review questions that assumption, asking whether it isn't in fact a form of "pro-Assad regime propaganda?" According to Ms. Sabra's perceptive analysis, the interest in the video by both anti and pro-Syrian regime groups stems from the attention it has enjoyed in influential Western media outlets, such as Germany's Der Spiegel online and the BBC. Nor should the



viewer and the reader rule out the historical context. The Qantara article reminds us that while the blue-eyed, soft-spoken Younan sisters have charmed the media with their honeyed words of peace, sense of optimism (something that fascinates Westerners) and atypical appearances as unveiled Arab women, ISIS has beheaded hundreds and Assad barrel bombs have killed tens of thousands.

Leaving aside the harsh judgment Ms. Sabra passes on Faya Younan's performance of Fairuz's songs, I am concerned, as is the reviewer, with the lyrics delivered by Rihan Younan which explore war in the Middle East. These lyrics, delivered in a sermonic manner, examine the supposed causes of the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine. The method of her delivery, which appears alternately "festive," "accusatory," and "encouraging," features words that Ms. Sabra correctly characterizes as "devoid of meaning."

Rihan's diatribe about "illogical" war offers the reviewer an opportunity to ask whether a "logical" war can even exist? But Rihan's logic falters even further when she says "the war has broken into the doors secretly." This statement has apparently left the reviewer to satirically ponder: "Can war break in the door so easily?" And does Rihan think that Syrians would have welcomed war with a cup of Arabic coffee had it simply abandoned its clandestine approach to announce itself with a knock at the door?

The Younan sisters' careful removal of the person responsible for the violence from their lyrics belittles the viewer's intelligence, and elicits even more sarcasm from the reviewer. In her twisted logic, Rihan finds no one to be responsible, declares that the war "has no beginning," and assures viewers that it is "dreaming of an end." This evidently absolves the Assad regime, which gave orders to shoot at the peaceful protesters in the spring of 2011.

As if this is not enough, Rihan dons the hat of a political analyst, just like her ideological soul mate, Julia Boutros. She ambitiously offers her opinions on the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine, revealing either a woeful lack of experience, coupled with an impressive political naivety, or a willingness to parrot a pro-Syrian regime script. Like many media ideologues, she blames the "Other" as being the cause of regional conflicts, citing the "imperial powers in the 20th century, Britain, France, and the U.S." Nor does she forget to reference Palestine, which she considers the "compass" of all conflicts, while seemingly brushing aside the displacement of half of her country's population and the killing of close to a quarter of a million Syrians.

It would be a mistake to judge Julia Boutros or the Younan sisters on the merit of their analysis. Boutros's politics are known to many Lebanese and Syrians. If I were to place her within the Lebanese political spectrum, she would definitely reside in the *mumana* camp, i.e. the pro-Assad, Hezbollah, Iran alliance. In a recently publicized and emotional statement, Boutros characterizes the Arab Spring as a farce, and declares ISIS and Israel to be "different sides of the same coin," leaving one to ponder the possibility that she suffers some form of amnesia. Alternately, one has to wonder where this woman actually lives. She decries Arab silence concerning what has been happening in Gaza, but fails to acknowledge her own deadly silence, and that of her Lebanese and Syrian comrades, concerning the murder of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, and the displacement of millions more from their

homes. Apparently, they deserve their fates. After, all, Julia Boutros has already made up her mind, declaring to the cheering of her fans that these hapless victims must either be ISIS members or Zionists.

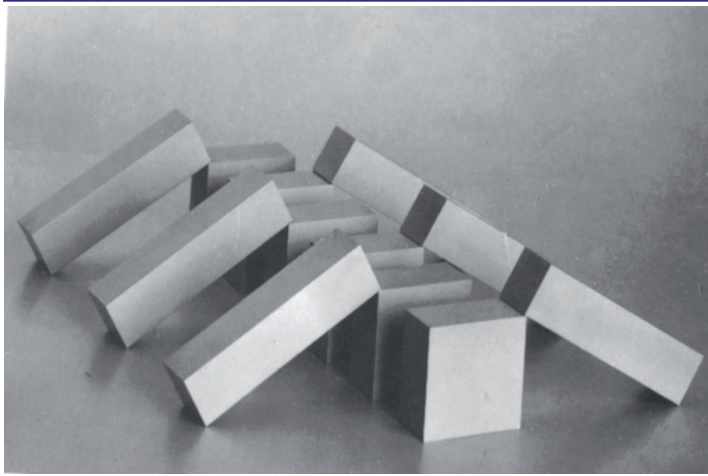
### **After Charlie Hebdo Attacks, Assad's Disinformation Machine in High Gear to Exploit a Terrorist Moment**

The latest *mumana* (anti-Western alliance of "leftist"-Baathist-Hezbollah supporters) media has been on a new mission: to redeem the bankrupt argument of its masters by exploiting a terrorist moment and sabotaging a counter argument to the rise of radical Islamists in Syria. This new "operation" does not challenge or poke holes in the pro-Syrian revolution argument. Rather, it inundates the media battlefield with a cacophony of feeble-minded voices explaining how the Charlie Hebdo attacks took place only for the purpose of muddling the field of criticisms of the French government. Since France also has its critics among the supporters of the Syrian revolution, Assad's disinformation machine mixed together facts and criticisms of and about France in order to confuse regional and world public opinion. This helps them to gain credibility and larger audiences, while distracting attention from sober analysis of the rise of extremists in Syria. There is a name for this in the literature of political propaganda: deceit and misinformation.

The nature of today's media enables the Assad's disinformation machines to deliberately sow uncertainty and confusion concerning the French policy in the Middle East. While this misinformation machine claims that France has supplied radical Islamists with arms and training, the non-Islamist Syrian opposition claims that France failed to deliver on its promises to militarily aid the anti-Assad forces (The French did, however, provide some humanitarian assistance and diplomatic assistance in support of the Syrian people). For most observers these are not two credible claims to be reconciled. The facts of the case are purely material: France did not supply military aid and training to any of the opposition groups, particularly the Islamists to return and bite the hand by which they were fed. The Syrian moderates — who have the facts on their side — would have welcomed military aid from France had it been provided, which it was not.

The pro-Assad apologists have flooded the media market with opinion-based analysis, as have the anti-Assad groups. The Assad disinformation machine, however, buries its head in the sand, refusing to face the fact that Assad's brutality, more than any ideology, has been the most effective recruiter for the Islamic state and other jihadist groups. Those who lost homes, parents, and children do not need a Wahhabi interpretation of Islam to join jihad.

Ironically, even when the rejectionists shed crocodile tears over the victims of Charlie Hebdo and create hypocritical shows of emotion, they simultaneously couple these displays with lectures aimed at the French through their lordly Lebanese disinformation



"Game Board" (1967), by Judy Chicago from the "Collection of Elyse and Stanley Grinstein," Los Angeles

machines. These lectures follow the familiar pattern of demonizing the victim, either stating "You brought it on yourself and thus deserve it," or smugly administering a "We told you so and you did not listen!" Since these "revolutionary" experts bear neither the hallmarks of professionalism nor a minimal level of human decency, they end up almost bordering on revenge with an adrenaline rush of getting even with a dying "colonial" power!

Unquestionably, the supporters of the Syrian revolution remain unhappy with France and other Western powers, with the intensity of this unhappiness varying from one group to the other. Their reservations about the French policy concern the belief that the terrorists would not have been able to reach Paris had France and the Western powers aided the revolution while moderate and secular forces dominated it. This view has gained the support and has been embraced by many observers, and if the world community does not act upon it, it is because the nature of world politics is largely dictated by interests rather than sound arguments.

In short, the discordant voices in Lebanese newspapers and on TV demonstrate the many contradictions inherent in this cynical campaign. Those who shed crocodile tears over the victims join those armed with vengeful attitudes toward the French, claiming they have reaped what they have sown. Regardless, the modus operandi of this misinformation machine is to do whatever it deems necessary to rehabilitate the Assad regime in the world's eyes. To this end, some of its top guns have already offered their "advice" to the French, urging them to work together with Assad to combat terrorism.

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## Adonis Sings the Same Old Tune, Again and Again!

Adonis is once again talking and singing the same, stale, old songs about 'changing society.' The latest refrain in this worn-out tune appeared in a 4500 word interview published in *As Safir* newspaper, which elicited sharp criticisms from multiple sources. Most publicized objections came from Walid Jumblatt, who described Adonis's ideas as "causing one to vomit disgust."

Earlier comments by Adonis have elicited sharp reactions, suggesting that the "poet" enjoys the spotlight. With considerable relish, he continues to rehash a Utopian notion that "revolution ought to start with the self, and changing society is a precondition to changing politics," a claim meant not to create meaningful debate, but rather to provoke his critics and satisfy his vanities. I say this because Adonis has been repeating this same thesis for more than half of a century.

My problem with this claim has both a theoretical and moral basis. Theoretically, I wonder how one of the Arab world's worst dictatorships could constitute the basis for a political movement supposedly designed to change society? Obviously, Adonis has been silent on the issue of these extreme methods of enforcing order and control and how they destroy lives and personal freedoms. Morally, how could Adonis allow himself to play such an "ideological game" with his critics when at least one-third of his people are displaced and a quarter of a million are already dead?

Consistent with my time-consuming habits on the subject, I collected and translated some critical responses to Adonis's positions during earlier debates. These include a response by Dr. Ahmad Beydoun, a distinguished Lebanese historian, whose input I appreciate and would like to share. (I took liberty in editorially translating his citations).

"What makes Adonis, a brilliant man, attract accusations of stupidity by suggesting that 'society' has managed its affairs with complete freedom and independence during half a century of Baathist rule, while the 'regime' has watched in admiration from afar?" writes Dr. Ahmad Beydoun in an old post.

He continued: "What makes Adonis ignore how, in the last three years, the regime and its powerful allies have faced the efforts of society attempting to bring about a change, and how the regime has fought this change by 'engineering' outcomes that suit its own desires which are so destructive that they have turned society upside down."

What makes Adonis promote a regime which controls education, media, culture, the totality of political life, professional organizations, and religious institutions, not to mention its domination of the private and public economic sectors of this 'society,' as well as controlling intelligence services which commit acts of horrific violence? Why would he believe that a regime accustomed to exercising all these levers of power would allow, let alone aid Syrian 'society,' which is so precious to his (Adonis's) heart, in changing itself, free of interference or harassment? Dr. Beydoun addresses this question, asking: "What is society, Adonis? Who changes what in it, and how?"





Artwork: Assia Djébar is Courtesy of BETTINA FLITNER WEBSITE

### Assia Djébar (1936-2015) Home in France; Heart in Algeria

Assia Djébar was at the center of controversy among Arab intellectuals both when she became an "Immortal," or life-long member of the prestigious French Academy, and when her name was frequently mentioned as a Nobel Prize contender. Her recent death on February 6 was no exception. As her body still lay in a Paris hospital, the same question arose: while her novels were translated into scores of other languages, why were they so rarely translated into Arabic? A valid question, since the French paper *Le Figaro* has suggested that the fact that Djébar did not write in her mother tongue was one of the reasons she was denied the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Yet more questions arose. Why did she choose to write in her former colonizer's language? This choice has led some even to question her intellectual integrity — why she would be chosen by an institution whose main purpose is "to protect and monitor the French language?" A prominent Syrian intellectual, Subhi Hadidi, comes unintentionally and indirectly to her defense: "The Academy has chosen a novelist whose works examine a central issue: "the sons and the daughters of the former colonies writing in French. Djébar uses the language of the colonizer to document its savagery and its bloody memories."

Born Fatma-Zohra Imalayene in 1936 to an Arab Algerian father and a Berber mother, she changed her name to Assia Djébar in 1957 after publishing her first novel, "The Thirst" at the age of 21. Djébar, who was a student of the renown French orientalist Louis Massignon, became a prominent poet, essayist, novelist and filmmaker whose works reflected consistent concern for individual human rights in Algeria, never abandoning her interest in Algerian and in Arab Maghreb causes, including the struggle for independence, culture, gender, and identity.

Was she a feminist? Some Arab critics seem actively to deny that Djébar was a feminist, as if "feminism" would stain her reputation. One critic wrote that "her literature did not have a feminist tendency to challenge a 'masculine' tendency or the 'literature of men,'" adding that Djébar's literature cannot be placed within the "gender" category, for her primary concern was women as human beings and as social victims of their *jalad* or executioners, which are man, the state, and society. Thus it appears to satisfy the critic that women are controlled by three institutions instead of one.

Djébar's body will be returned to Algeria and be buried in her hometown of Cherchell, according to her will.

We direct those interested in learning more about this remarkable person to a biographical essay by professor Lynne Rogers in *Al Jadid*, Vol. 11, no. 52 (Summer 2005) in wake of her election to the French Academy: "Assia Djébar Elected to French Academy: Immortal Sycophant or Courageous Humanist?" *Al Jadid* also published a review by Ms. Michelle Reale of Ms. Djébar's "So Vast the Prison" in *Al Jadid*, Vol. 7, No. 37 (Fall 2001).

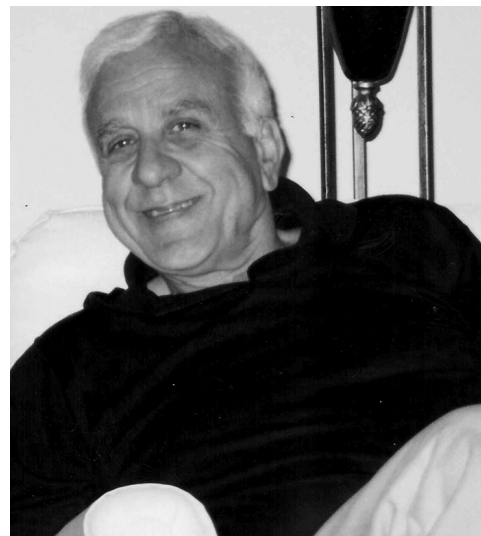
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# In Memoriam

Naseer Aruri (January 7, 1934-February 10, 2015)

## We mourn the loss of Palestinian-American Scholar Activist, Teacher, Husband, Father, Friend.



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### My Story with You is Different

BY RIMA ASSAF

Your fault is that you are dying in large numbers. Thus, you have ceased to be a rare scene. Your crime is that the photographs of your body parts no longer attract advertisers, and thus your death, pain, and displacement have ceased to attract TV viewers.



Rima Assaf

Your crime constitutes one of ordinariness. The news always reports the new, but the stories of the massacres committed against you, repeated daily for the last three years, have become ordinary events, and can no longer be considered new.

Your crime is that the photographs of your small bodies, torn by bullets and mortars, or crushed in the rubble, have lost the element of surprise at a time when the eye no longer lingers on such familiar, bloody scenes.

But as for me, no, I have not and never will become used to the idea that your murders and displacement stand as ordinary news items.

My relationship with you remains different; you have become part of my daily life, and I suppose that no one knows you in quite the same way; I constantly search for your images, for your news

and have memorized some of your names. You have become part of my life, my tears, my prayers, my pain and my failures, both in my profession and in my vocation of motherhood. I fear you are to be murdered twice, once at the hands of those who stole the life from your bodies and then again at the hands of those who neglected, concealed, or downplayed your pains, tears, and ravaged souls.

I wish I owned all TV stations, so I could expose the banality of this world, its malice and selfishness. If I did, I could keep your images alive and on everyone's television screens. No cause deserves the mobilization of resources more than yours. I do not know why the world deals so cruelly with you, the most tender and finest of all the creatures, cloaking you in brutal silence.

I wish I possessed the courage and freedom to say all that needs to be said about your murderers. As for you, little child, who finds yourself a refugee in one of Aarsal's camps, I wish I had never seen your mud-splattered image, had never posted it to Facebook, and thus had never read the offensive comment that followed, the one that demanded you "go back to your country for this is our country and homeland." No, this is not our homeland. I never knew it as such, nor did I know that there were people in my country with characters muddier than the mud that covers your clothes and shoes, oh the child of the camp. My country is not a place where people are stripped of their humanity, to become monsters in a forest. No, this is not my country and I do not want to belong to it. My country is a place where we are bound by shared human feelings even when we differ over everything else. In my country, all hatred bends down before the tears falling from your eyes. **AJ**

*This is an edited translation by E. Chalala of an article by Rima Assaf of LBC. Ms. Assaf has given Al Jadid the right to translate and publish the article.*

## CONTRIBUTORS

*Continued from page 5*

**Rula Jurdi** ("The Charisma of Words & Beauty: New Novel Explores the Interlocking Worlds of a Woman Poet from Qazvin and a Visionary Activist from Beirut," p. 28) is an Associate Professor of Islamic History at McGill University in Montreal. She has several publications on Islamic Shiite intellectual and sociopolitical history, including articles, encyclopedic entries and two books, one of which is co-authored with Malek Abisaab.

**Fawzi Karim** ("The Ordeal of a City," p. 33) born in Baghdad and lives in the UK is a leading Iraqi poet. Noted not only for his extensive poetic output but also for his works as a painter, critic, and journalist, Karim reveals an intense preoccupation with Iraq's tragic history both modern and ancient.

**Lisa Suhair Majaj** ("Gaza's Broken Blessing," p. 34) is the author of "Geographies of Light" (winner of the Del Sol Press Poetry Prize) and co-editor of "intersections: Gender, nation and Community in Arab Women's Novels," "Etel Adnan: Critical Essays on the Arab-American

*Continued on page 15*

### Sabah Zwein (1955-2014): An Innovative and Haunted Poet

BY MIKE D'ANDREA

Sabah Zwein, a prominent Lebanese poet, critic and translator, lost her battle with lung cancer last June, an illness known to few of her friends and acquaintances. This secrecy probably came as no surprise to many of her intimates, who, like her literary critics, recognized that the struggle with isolation, bitterness, and despair colored many of Zwein's poems.

Her profound loneliness manifested in her search for cultural identity and her battle to communicate through her poems. Zwein saw her cultural identity challenged when the Lebanese Civil War resulted in a brief self-imposed exile in Canada. She became an Arab poet in a Western land, writing in French. Abduh Wazen, *Al Hayat's* Cultural Pages Editor, notes that she returned to her native Lebanon determined to write in Arabic. Opinions differ on the reason for her change in tongue: some contend she felt limited by French, and others implicate her cultural identity crisis.

Wazen relates that the general limitations of language haunted Zwein. While she strayed from French because she felt constricted, the poet also struggled to communicate sufficiently in Arabic. She felt an urgent need to express herself, and languished over the difficulty of conveying her precise semantic experiences to others. As with her illness, Zwein shouldered this agony alone. In addition, the poet felt unappreciated professionally, a source of dissatisfaction and anxiety which, Wazen muses, accounted for the powerful, brooding character of her poems.

Zwein maintained a foot in many camps. She wrote literary and film criticism, worked as a journalist, published academic studies, and translated the works of many notable Arab writers and poets into French and Spanish, publishing them in several anthologies, including "Contemporary Lebanese Voices," Naim Kattan's "The Real and the Theatrical," as well as the poetry anthology, "Those are the Things on the Horizon" (2007). In 1997, Zwein also published a study on contemporary women's poetry in Lebanon. She worked for the leading Beirut newspaper, *An Nahar*, from 1986-2004, and wrote a weekly column in another paper, *Al Liwa*, in Beirut, from 2009 until her death. Best-known for her own poems, Zwein published more than 10 poetry collections in both French and Arabic over the course of three decades.

Mahmoud Shreih wrote in *Al Akhbar* newspaper, "Perhaps among the poets of her generation, she ranks first due to her strong yet transparent verse. She was a first-rate intellectual and a powerfully determined woman who brought about fundamental change in modern writing. And although she arrived in silence and left in silence, her poems, which span three decades, remain an authority for the trajectory of modern verse since the 1950s."

Zwein wrote her poetry in "half-sentence," or "semi-sentence" form, as seen in the titles of her poetry collections. She layered sentences in confusion, stuttering, and hesitations that defied linguistic rules and failed to offer complete, definitive meanings, creating sentences that served as linguistic canvasses, painted with the various

shades of sensitivity in tone. These fragmented sentences acted as windows into her fragmented experiences. Hussein Ben Hamza of *Al Akhbar* maintains Zwein "wrote in many languages — first in French, the language of the Catholic schools in which she studied, then in Spanish, her mother's native tongue, which she mastered."



Sabah Zwein

Joseph Aisawy, of *Al Akhbar*, echoes a similar observation, stating: "Zwein wrote books and titles that confounded the modern reader, that confounded us, as she broke down accepted poetic form while treating topics ranging from self-anxiety to the global devastation."

In fact, Zwein proved a prolific writer, whose publications include, among others, "Upon a Bare Sidewalk" (1983), "Passion or Paganism" (1985), "But" (1986), and "Starting From, Or Maybe" (1987). "Deciding to change her poetic tongue, she translated and compiled her previous works, and composed entirely in Arabic from then on," wrote Ben Hamza. Among her Arabic poetry publications are "In the Turmoil of the Place" (1988), "Our Time is Still Lost" (1992), "The Tilted House, Time, and the Walls" (1995), and "Because I, As if I, and I Am Not" (2002). She released her final volume in 2013, titled "When Memory or When the Threshold of the Sun" (2013).

Zwein "stood as a symbol of feminism at the very core of the movement, and was also a lover when she wrote, when she took her quill in her narrow fingers and produced her works.



## Essays & Features

She was quick, severe, and affectionate; determinedly sticking to her opinion with her stare,” said Shawqi Abi-Shaqra, one of Lebanon’s most distinguished poets, and an editor under whose wings Zwein worked while in An Nahar newspaper.

Critics describe Zwein’s poems as surreal. Some eulogists laud her for deconstructing poetic conventions, while others praise her for preserving them. On one hand, her free-verse poetry flouts tradition and may be described as a fusion of poetic language and prose. According to Ben Hamza, Zwein’s approach subverts the poetic conventions while, Abi-Shaqra, in contrast, remembers her as having “watched over the structure of the Arabic poem.”

Wazen makes similar observations about Zwein’s poetic school: “Sabah Zwein did not commit to one school or method in her verse, opting rather to write in free verse. She wrote short but poignant poems in an open style, stretching the language to its limit with her strange linguistic devices. Her career started as an adventure, and she continued this adventure her whole life, often times flirting with danger. She did not retreat however, taking care that her writing style did not sound like any but her own.”

Zwein represented, in some ways, a survival of a bygone culture, with an intense sense of privacy that may have been a pre-modern vestige. Aisawy suggests that Zwein felt reluctant to burden friends with news of her illness. Perhaps we shall never know if the poet’s reluctance derived from a desire for privacy, or functioned as a symptom of her chronic, profound loneliness.

Although such mysteries will continue to tantalize scholars, the poet left a legacy to be cherished and remembered. “Sabah has left us, it is only because her body has not risen to the heights of her thought, to her full maturity. This is the maturity she possessed from an early age and then planted in us; she gave us vision,” wrote Abi-Shaqra. “She has withdrawn since her body failed her and was overwhelmed by physical weakness. But she remains in what she created and composed, and that is a light in the darkness, a lamp by which we may walk. For we would not celebrate if her star disappeared or her beacon was extinguished in the midst of the darkness,” Abi-Shaqra said.

Zwein’s life has served as the subject of many eulogists, and some quite candid testimonials. Wazen offers some of his recollections: “Sabah was an anxious poet, and death is what worried her. Not death as an existential necessity or a metaphysical truth, but rather as an outward act and a bodily event. She unrelentingly defied outward death, rigorously guarding her health in the manner of the Buddhists and Sufis. She did not eat meat, drink, or smoke, reserving her voracity for her writing and translations. This wholesome lifestyle, however, did not abate her energy and passion, nor did it alleviate her never-ending tension or her fluctuating moods. She felt deep down that she had been wronged, that as a poet she had not received the critical acclaim, fame, and translation that she deserved.”

Abi-Shaqra, whom Sabah knew well, gave the following moving and touching farewell to a poet whom he appreciated and respected: “Zwein was an incredible woman, and the many pictures that capture her essence are unforgettable. She was a woman always present — you would run into her in any café, event, or house, and hear her laughter trickle out like a bubbling brook. You could find her awake in the early morning waiting to watch a bird grab a morsel to eat or carry a straw to take back to its nest.” **AJ**

I met [Sabah Zwein] at a poetry festival in Malmo, Sweden, where we both attended the same workshop. I remember her happy, flying as she danced at the festival’s farewell party.

Leaving is not, even in the case of the worst illness, merciful.

Would you have imagined I would eulogize you, whom I barely knew? We shared a few distant evenings of poetry, and one Eastern dance party.

*From Hala Muhammad’s Facebook; translated from the Arabic by Joseph Sills, who, along with Al Jadid editors, also contributed translations and research for this article.*

## CONTRIBUTORS

*Continued from page 13*

Writer and Artist,” and “Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers.”

Aisha K. Nasser (“Gender Relations in “Women’s Jail,” p. 30) holds a Ph.D in Middle East Studies from Exeter University, and has recently completed an MA in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies from Oregon State University. Her research interest focuses on Cultural Studies and women in the Middle East. She currently works as an Instructor, at Oregon State University.

Theri Alyce Pickens (“Arab American Transnational Literature: Conceptions of Citizenship and Homeland,” p.18) is an assistant professor of English at BATES College. Professor Pickens’ latest, “Narrating Arab and Black Identity in Contemporary United States” (Routledge, 2014).

Lynne Rogers (“Hassan Daoud’s ‘The Penguin’s Song’ Sees Abandoned Building as Metaphor for Lebanon,” p.17; “Slave to History: A Moor in the New World,” p. 26; “Round Rumps, Clapping Feet and Other Polite Profanities,” p. 27; “Trials of Innocence: Moroccan Child Brides and their Children,” p.29; “Middle Eastern Comedies as Social Critiques,” p. 32) is a professor and author whose articles have appeared in various publications.

Hanna Saadah (“Arabian Tales (Heard with Little Ears),” p. 36) is Emeritus Clinical Professor of Medicine, University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center. He is also the author of several novels and books of poetry.

Joseph Sills (“The Aftermath of War: Barakat Novel Focuses on Lost Humanity,” p.19) is a graduate of Davidson College, where he studied Arabic and Middle Eastern politics. He has traveled to several Middle Eastern countries, most notably Egypt and Syria in 2011, where he witnessed an early phase of the Arab Spring.

Alyssa Wood (“The Art and Culture of Yemini Silversmithing and Crafts,” p. 39) is a graphic artist and writer based in North Carolina. **AJ**

### *Radwa Ashour (1946-2014)*

# A literary, Cultural and Political Activist Icon, Echoing in Egypt's Valley

BY NADA RAMADAN ELNAHLA

*The valley was flooding with apparitions . . . Silence, followed by a crescendo. A sound that will echo in the valley years later. ("Apparitions")*

Radwa Ashour — novelist, educator, human rights activist, politically committed intellectual figure, and critic — opened her 1998 autobiographical novel "Apparitions" (or "Specters") with this powerful scene. Seventeen years later, on November 30, 2014, Ashour would join those apparitions, her gentle soul forever filling our valley with her inspiration, resistance and writings.

Born in Cairo in 1946 to a literary and scholarly family, her father Mustafa Ashour worked as a lawyer with strong interests in literature while her mother, Mai Azzam, worked as a poet and an artist. Ashour first studied English literature at Cairo University, receiving her MA in comparative literature in 1972 from the same university. Afterwards, she earned her Ph.D degree from the University of Massachusetts, writing her thesis on African-American literature, an experience she would later document in her 1983 "The Journey: Memoirs of an Egyptian Student in America."

During the 1960s, Ashour met the Palestinian Mouried Barghouti while both students at Cairo University. Their friendship soon transformed into a love story and marriage in 1970. Yet, for many years to come, their life together offered a constant series of hardships. In 1977, Egyptian authorities deported Barghouti, along with other Palestinians, on the eve of Anwar Sadat's controversial visit to Israel, and for 17 long years, with the exception of short, intermittent periods, Ashour parented their only child, a son named Tamim, alone.

Ashour's marriage to the Palestinian poet Mouried Barghouti, and her role as the mother of poet Tamim al-Barghouti, has no doubt influenced her involvement with the Palestinian cause. Signs of these affiliations appeared in her 1998 "Apparitions" (where the massacres in the Lebanese Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps are recounted) and in her 2010 "Al-Tantoureyia," a straight-forward work denouncing Israeli violence and the expulsion of the Palestinians from their own land. As an activist, Ashour opposed President Anwar Sadat's policy of normalizing relations with Israel, which led her to contribute to founding the National Committee against Zionism in Egyptian Universities. Under the regime of President Hosni Mubarak, Ashour also became an active member of the March 9 movement, which consisted of university professors calling for the independence of Egypt's universities. Though hospitalized during most of the events of Egypt's 2011 uprising, she recounted her



Radwa Ashour by Doris Bittar for Al Jadid

unforgettable experiences in Tahrir Square, along with personal struggles against cancer, and the ramifications of her illness, in her last and autobiographical "Heavier than Radwa" (in Arabic).

Ashour's journey to literary success was far from a smooth ride; it was paved with self-doubt, struggles, and suffering. In 1969, the young Ashour, with only one short story under her belt, attended a young writers' conference in Zagazig. Overwhelmed by the participation of so many accomplished writers, she so feared what she judged to be her lack of talent, that she abandoned the idea of writing. This question of whether or not she truly possessed talent haunted her until 1980, when she wrote "The Journey." Severe health problems that led to a serious operation finally triggered her literary awakening. From that day on, Ashour discovered that nothing teaches one to write better than writing itself. She followed her first published novel, "Warm Stone" (1983), with several other works, including: "Khadija and Sawsan" (1989), a two-part novel narrated respectively by a mother and daughter; the collection of short stories titled "I Saw the Date Palms" (1989); "Siraj" (1992), a novel set on an imaginary island off the coast of East Africa during the last decades of the 19th century; "A Part of Europe" (2003); and "Farak" (2008) with both novels concerning political detention. She also wrote, "Blue Lorries" (2014) with Barbara Romaine and "Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide, 1873-1999" (2008), co-edited with Ferial Ghazoul and Hasna Reda-Mekdashy.

Ashour's most famous work, "The Granada Trilogy" (1994-95) — triggered by the aftermath of the Gulf War and voted one



of the top 100 literary works by the Arab Writers Union — won First Prize at the first Arab Women’s Book Fair in 1995, and was translated into different languages, including English and Spanish. The three-part novel chronicles the rise and fall of Arab civilization in Spain and recounts the history of three generations of a Spanish Arab family, covering the period from 1491 to 1609. Ashour was honoured with a number of literary prizes, chief among them the 2007 Constantine Cavafy Prize for Literature and the 2011 Al Owais Award. Believing messages of pessimism to be immoral, Ashour used her novels to resist and deal with defeat. Her husband mourned her on Twitter, saying: “42 years in the company of Radwa Ashour. Yes. Life can be that generous.”

Perhaps, her own words best express her political views: “I am an Arab woman and a citizen of the Third World,” she declared, in an essay for the anthology “The View from Within” (edited by Ferial Ghazoul and Barbra Harlow, 1994). The Guardian cited her as adding, “My heritage in both cases is stifled ... I write in self-defence and in defence of countless others with whom I identify or who are like me.” **AJ**

## Hassan Daoud’s ‘The Penguin’s Song’ Sees Abandoned Building as Metaphor for Lebanon

### The Penguin’s Song

By Hassan Daoud

Translated by Marilyn Booth.

City Light Books, 2014.

### BY LYNNE ROGERS

Readers who like to keep an organized library may want to order two copies of Hassan Daoud’s novel, “Penguin’s Song.” The first copy can go next to the other Lebanese war novels which display the vibrant cultural production of contemporary Lebanon, while the second copy can occupy a place next to Knut Hamsun’s “Mysteries,” and Melville’s “Bartleby the Scribner,” two narratives that also creatively employ abnormalities to reflect on the distortions of “normality.”

Admirers of Daoud will recognize his motif of the elderly male awaiting death, isolated despite the proximity of family members, as well as the writer’s use of a disintegrating apartment building as a metaphor for Lebanon. While unmistakably Beirut, Daoud’s city, with its balcony life, curved streets, repetitive shops and civilian displacement, features a narrative that transcends physical boundaries and identities to become a universal metaphor for modernity. In “Penguin’s Song,” set in the urban outskirts, the characters must walk along a sandy road to enter a building “rising on the knoll like a short, fat tower.” Once there, they discover that the back of the edifice faces even more sand that drops off into a void.

Daoud’s startling coming-of-age protagonist, the reader eventually will discover, is shaped like a penguin. The young man



“Glass Kiss” by Eleni Mylonas, from “Journey Through Ellis Island” (1984)

lives with his parents and reminisces about sitting in his father’s shop reading while the agile man attends to both his son and his customers. But this shop and paternal vitality belong to the past. Now, as the father’s eyesight continues to deteriorate, he irritates his son and wife by repeatedly asking if they can see his old store from the balcony. As they look away or mock him, the man insists “that [they] are actually seeing his shop, even...as far away as this, he can let himself believe that someone else sees the same image.” While the father gazes into the ever growing distance of his memories, the mother concentrates on her tiny stitches of embroidery. Yet time will not stop; the father’s box of cash grows smaller until the young man announces that he will drop out of school, although he still plans to continue a strict self-imposed reading regime. In contrast to the father’s oblivion and slow decay, the mother and son grow acutely aware of the woman and her daughter who live downstairs. In one of the novel’s many strikingly visual scenes, the young narrator hangs upside down from his window ledge, hoping for a view of the young girl downstairs. As the blood rushes to his head, he fantasizes about being the one “who will bring something unchildlike from her body, a body that returns sweaty and exhausted from school. [He wants] her to be ignorant of her body, unaware of its forces.” Gradually, with a cruel indifference, the narrator’s mother detaches from her failing husband, and aligns herself with the woman downstairs. In an image reminiscent of French impressionism meets post-colonial poverty and futility, the two women picnic in the sand under a huge umbrella “looking for something that [is] increasingly unlikely to happen.”

Yet, quietly and insidiously, something does happen. The young man ventures out on his hopping penguin feet to find meaningless employment comparing two identical texts. His debased economic and professional stature ridicules urban pretensions to civilization.

Simultaneously, his conniving mother arranges for her penguin son to sleep with the woman downstairs. In a lonely, uncomfortable and laborious sexual encounter, the young penguin, never forgetting the maternal “spying eye,” ultimately mounts the white slack corpulence of his mother’s friend.

Once this physical and moral threshold has been crossed, the two women begin to travel to the new city at night, and as the young girl also looks towards the city, her face grows “sly and expectant,” its “tiny hairs over the lip giving that toughness an even stranger glint.” With the father’s death, the young man manages to sell the apartment’s furniture, as well as his many books. Freed from the clutter of the past, he resolutely claims, “This is my home: I will not simply live here: I will live off this house. I will eat from it.”

Nevertheless, the son repeats his father’s behavior, continually revisiting the past and his self-delusion of “taking action” through routine. Daoud’s stark and original narrative charts a domestic dance of solitary desolation, punctuated by the haunting refrains of empty space. The novel will lead the reader into a moment of awed silence, a reminder that value lies not just in times of action, but also in life’s brief pauses. **AJ**

## Arab American Transnational Literature: Conceptions of Citizenship and Homeland

### Contemporary Arab American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging

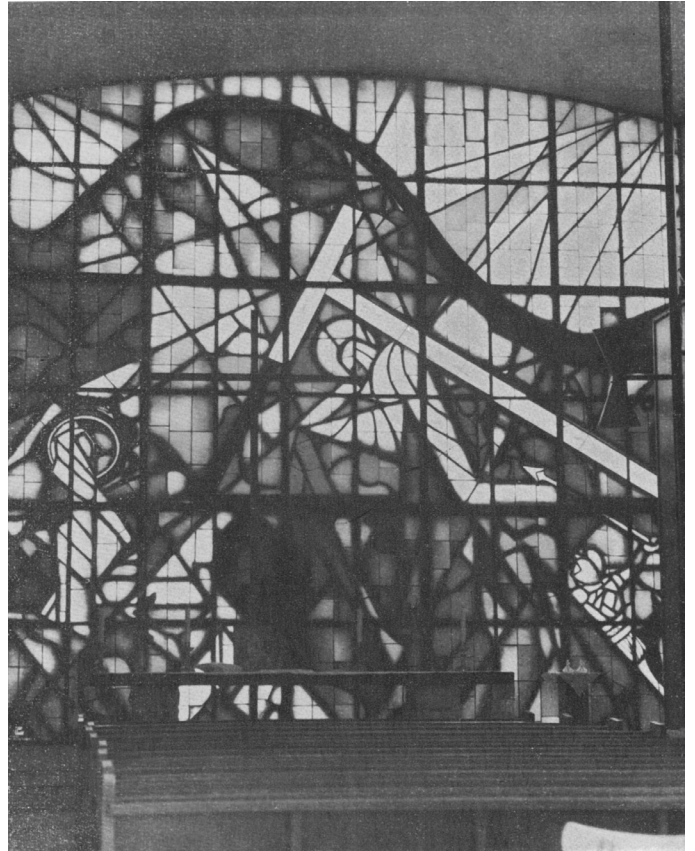
By Carol Fadda-Conrey

New York: NYU Press, 2014.

#### BY THERI PICKENS

Scholars familiar with Arab-American studies — literature in particular — waited anxiously for a critical text that promised to “conceive homes and homelands as constantly changing and evolving entities that are configured and redrawn based on individual and communal positionalities and outlooks.” Within Arab-American letters, notions of national belonging and citizenship defy “the hegemonic classification of minority bodies in the U.S. according to restrictive trajectories of national, ethnic, and racial inclusions and exclusions.” For this reason, Carol Fadda-Conrey’s “Contemporary Arab American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging,” is a long awaited treasure. This text amplifies and expands the scholarship regarding Arab-American notions of citizenship. In so doing, the author provides a much-needed compendium to existing scholarship and already lively conversation.

Rather than proceed in strict chronological order, this book provides a constellation of readings that reimagine the nature of transnational relationships. The introduction covers well-worn ground in defining the limited term “Arab-American” as well as a brief history of Arab-American literary production in the United States. For those well-versed in Arab-American studies, this material may appear redundant but it is integral to Fadda-Conrey’s ensuing discussion (and will be useful for readers for whom this is the first critical look at Arab-American literature). The first chapter, “Reimagining the Ancestral Arab Homeland,” challenges the conception of Arab homelands as fixed in the minds of second and third generation of Arab Americans. Fadda-Conrey



“Vitrail de George Cyr” from *Vitraux Modernes*, Musée Nicolas Sursock Beyrouth, Islamiques.

argues that these authors destabilize the nostalgia mediated by older generations. She continues this discussion in the second chapter by focusing on the shifting, gendered, geo-political aspects of transnational movements. She argues that female protagonists revise the conception of Arab American identity itself. Their notions of home are neither as stereotypical nor as stable as one might claim or seek to believe. In the third chapter “The Translocal Connections between the US and the Arab World,” Fadda-Conrey develops the idea of the translocal, which she understands as useful for theorizing about the specificity of place and space when thinking through transnational connections. The local remains constitutive of the global, in other words. The final chapter examines literature about 9/11, Arabs, and Muslims, positing that various authors clarify the necessity of transnational notions of citizenship in order to understand Arab-American critiques of the US body politic.

At a theoretical level, “Contemporary Arab American Literature,” evinces sophistication in thinking about the role of transnational affiliation. Thus far, scholarship has devoted itself to pointing out the places where transnational identities exist and investigating the various strategies deployed to negotiate the hyphen between Arab and American. In Fadda-Conrey’s analysis, authors and artists do not merely move back and forth, but also transform spaces and ideology. For instance, the author’s reading Annemarie Jacir’s “Salt of this Sea” (2008) places a particular emphasis on the protagonist’s demands for recognition. Fadda-Conrey leaves room for the ambiguity that a discrepancy between



“exiled Palestinian returnees and those who remained behind after 1948 and 1967” creates while pointing out the privilege that inheres in such an exchange. Here, the author theorizes about how settler colonialism forecloses multiple possibilities regarding the right of return (i.e., through arrest) and proffers unexpected avenues (i.e., the protagonist’s use of her U.S. citizenship to get into Jerusalem). In her development of the translocal, Fadda-Conrey’s discussion of Rabih Alameddine’s “I, the Divine” gestures toward the protagonist’s ambivalence as an indication that characters are not caught between two poles, but rather centering two specific geo-political spaces that are “local” to them.

Most novel, Fadda-Conrey’s book offers a widened definition of literature, which includes film and art in its deliberations. Some critics might complain that this mixture leaves little room for the consideration of genre and collapses significant differences between conversations in poetry, fiction, drama, film, and fine arts. However, I would reframe that objection to emphasize the author’s implicit argument that all of these works speak to the issue of transnational negotiation. This represents the hallmark of interdisciplinary study: binding together the conversations about literature, film, history, and fine arts. In fact, Fadda-Conrey’s analysis of fine arts and film by Arab-American artists uniquely repositions this art from the margin to the center of a conversation. This alone makes the book worth studying. Moreover, Fadda-Conrey anticipates the arguments of those inclined to read these artists and authors simplistically. Her acknowledgments and rebuttals of those interpretations buttress the idea that each genre of art participates in a larger conversation.

“Contemporary Arab American Literature’s” chapters include multiple objects of inquiry. Each chapter offers no less than three works of literature and at least two other media under discussion. I can understand why one may consider this a misstep in an otherwise sophisticated and complex discussion. It leaves little room for depth in the way of close analysis on the various texts. Nonetheless, the varied material provides a starting point for discussing other aspects of those texts. To be clear, Fadda-Conrey’s book intends to theorize, not necessarily provide a comprehensive reading of the texts in question. More to the point, having a plethora of texts under discussion functions as approbation of her point: that Arab-American literature (broadly defined) questions the easiness with which people define Arab home and American homeland.

Fadda-Conrey’s critical text fits easily into the recent upsurge of critical texts on Arab-American life. “Contemporary Arab American Literature” is in direct conversation with Syrine Hout’s “Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction” (Edinburgh 2012). Readers interested in thinking through the exigencies of gender, belonging, and representation would want to read Nadine Naber’s “Arab America” (NYU Press 2012), and Evelyn Alsultany’s “Arabs and Muslims in the Media” (NYU Press 2012). Those who wish to pick up the threads of race and citizenship should examine Sarah M.A. Gualtieri’s “Between Arab and White” (University of California Press 2009) and Wail Hassan’s “Immigrant Narratives” (Oxford 2014). It is a rich and exciting moment in critical discussion about Arab-American life, indeed. **AJ**



Victim Rose (2011) by Dia Al-Azzawi

## The Aftermath of War: Barakat Novel Focuses on Lost Humanity

### Oh, Salaam!

By Najwa Barakat

Translated by Luke Leafgren

Interlink Books, 2015,

### BY JOSEPH SILLS

In “Oh, Salaam!” Najwa Barakat tells a haunting story of post-war life in an unnamed Arab country — unmistakably similar to Lebanon — through the lens of two survivors, Luqman and Salaam. Both feel helplessly stuck in a monotonous existence that does not compare with the thrills of war. For Luqman, once a prosperous sniper who craves the fear and respect, as well as the wealth, he once enjoyed, life in his country has diminished to the act of seeking pleasure from the Russian prostitute Marina. Long since unemployed, he relies on the coffers of the lonely spinster Salaam, whose lover, the Albino, before meeting his demise, prospered alongside Luqman, as a warlord and torturer during the war. Meanwhile, Salaam, while attempting to entice Luqman into marriage, finds herself relegated to caring for the Albino’s mother, Lurice.

Luqman breaks their oppressive routine when he runs into his old friend, Najeeb, who, in addition to being an explosives expert, also served as the third former partner in the Albino’s profiteering crime ring. Najeeb convinces Luqman and Salaam to embark on a business together based on his idea, and soon Salaam and Najeeb begin a torrid affair, while Luqman seduces their first client, a French archaeologist named Shireen. Thus,



before the winds change and their ambitions unravel, each appears to have fulfilled their desires in this war-ravaged city and nation.

Through graphic and vivid scenes of sadism and violence, Barakat evokes painful images of characters twisted in the wake of war. Natural acts and emotions, from suckling an infant at its mother's breast to feelings of sexual arousal, take unnatural forms that reveal the psychological burdens each individual carries, an isolating force that warps their intentions, good and bad alike, leading to an inevitable downward spiral of self-destruction.

Disturbed by the brutal treatments the characters receive, and, in due measure, dole out, the reader feels captivated by revelations of humanity and vulnerability, while at the same time, feeling suffocated with the inexorable and accelerating pace of events. Given a front row seat to each character's thoughts and intentions through revealing internal monologues, we wonder how differently we would act in similar circumstances.

Ms. Barakat has woven together a narrative, at once complex and straightforward, in which the grotesque becomes commonplace and shocking events cease to jolt us. Luqman and Salaam, have, as Luqman claims, "won the war against peace" as they fall into depravity, and we, the readers, become complicit in their war. "Oh, Salaam!" convicts us of our voyeurism while implicating us in the horrors of war with an unabashedly candid view of the lives it affects and corrupts. Barakat accomplishes all of this while avoiding the heavy-handed and didactic constructs that so easily diminish the impact of similar stories. **AJ**

## Confronting the Past: The Lebanese War, Diaspora, and Redemption

### Other Lives

By Iman Humaydan

Translated by Michelle Hartman

Interlink Publishing Group, Incorporated, 2014.

### BY D.W. AOSSEY

Those who lived through war, directly or indirectly, as well as those interested in the human psyche and how it is fractured by such upheavals, will appreciate the novel "Other Lives," by Iman Humaydan. The story follows the life of a young Lebanese woman, Myriam, as she struggles to survive and find a sense of belonging during and after the Lebanese civil war. Displaced from her rural village in the Shouf Mountains, she travels to Beirut then to places unimaginably distant — Australia, Kenya, South Africa — searching for a new livelihood and identity. Finally, driven by a sense of personal obligation and a longing for friends and family, Myriam returns to Lebanon — only to find that the people and the country she left behind have changed profoundly.

The faces and expressions of those she once knew seem vaguely familiar, though somehow different, leaving her to



By Youssef Abdelke

ponder the process of reconciliation. Yet, while her struggle to reconnect looms large, another of life's ironies unexpectedly rears its head: the haunting inability to rid one's self of her past.

A scene in which Myriam sells the family home to settle her inheritance — an inheritance made possible only by the death of her brother — reveals the depth of such a dilemma. She remembers how her brother was killed in a rocket explosion outside their home during the war, and how the smell of his burning corpse remained in the house for a long time afterward. "Sometimes I feel as though this smell is still close to me, that since this incident my senses can no longer perceive any other smell."

Myriam proves a complicated character, somewhat brooding and self-absorbed as she stresses over relationships with men in particular. Eventually, though, she accepts her fate as a loner traveling life's side roads. Yet, "Other Lives" also operates on another level, painting a familiar picture. For those who, in one way or another, might have been affected by the Lebanese Civil War, redemption and personal empowerment can be found in confronting one's past, however tragic and distant that past may be. **AJ**

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# Countering the Paradigm of Arab Othering Through Art

### **Contemporary Arab Photography, Video and Mixed Media Art: View From Inside**

By Karin Adrian von Roques, Samer Mohdad, Claude W. Sui, & Wendy Watriss

Schilt Publishing, Amsterdam, NL, 2014.



From "View From Inside"

### **BY REBECCA JOUBIN**

The beautiful and visually powerful book "Contemporary Arab Photography, Video and Mixed Media Art: View From Inside" features a selection of photography, video, and mixed-media art created by 49 Arab artists from 13 different countries. These include Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. The heightened interest shown by the Western world for the art of the Arab and Islamic worlds, as well as the rise of galleries catering to this interest, inspired the production of this book. Its publication coincided with an exhibition of the artwork featured within its pages.

Offering several introductory articles as well as a multitude of colorful photographs showcasing the diverse talents of leading artists from around the Arab world, this colorful book gives voices to individuals who would otherwise remain unheard. Not only does the artwork depict the powerful connections between these artists, who continue to work and live in the Middle East, but it also speaks to individual experiences, thereby challenging dominant paradigms of dismissing diversity through othering the Arab culture into one homogenous whole. This book gives voice to a generation of artists who came of age during the expansion of satellite television, digital technology, and the Internet in the Arab world, and we see the multitude of ways that technology has influenced art.

We also see their multifaceted responses to the reality of globalism as well as current uprisings against dictatorship. Syrian artist Tammam Azzam's piece, entitled "Goya's The Third of May 1808," interweaves a photograph of current destruction with an image from Goya's painting as a way to symbolize how Syrian culture and art is in the process of destruction while the art and culture of the West lives on. "Refugee," his image of a fly in a yellow

sky above tents, proves remarkably potent. Egyptian artist Hazem Taha Hussein's series "Facebook-Napeolon@2011" and "Mask of Revolution" (2012-2013), bring the Egyptian uprising alive. These images and others serve to remind us that this art book forms part of a historical archive of how artists have addressed current tragedies and imparted their own perspectives and humanistic messages. **AJ**

## **Diaspo / Renga: The Poetics of Ordinary People**

### **Diaspo / Renga**

By Marilyn Hacker and Deema Shehabi  
Holland Park Press, 2014.

### **BY MILED FAIZA**

In 2006, award-winning Jewish-American poet Marilyn Hacker began an email correspondence with Palestinian-American poet Deema Shehabi consisting of a renga, a traditional form of Japanese collaborative poetry in which two poets alternate stanzas of specific lengths. Shehabi responded in kind, beginning a series of long-distance poetic volleys, a finely-woven blend of the political and personal which spans time and continents, now collected as "Diaspo/Renga."

Marilyn Hacker's first poem in the book introduces a wounded Gazan child, surrounded by the wreckage of a home destroyed in the aftermath of the Israeli invasion of Gaza. The girl has lost her father, but has survived to tell the story of her tragedy:



## Books

Five, six – and righteous,  
the child in green in Gaza  
stands in her wrecked home,

grubby, indignant. Her hands  
point; she explains what was done,

bombed, burned. It all smells  
like gas! We had to throw our clothes  
away! The earrings my

father gave me... no martyr,  
resistant. The burnt candle...

Deema Shehabi's answering volley invokes the Native American Trail of Tears, continuing the legacy of Mahmoud Darwish and many other poets who recognized the resemblance between the tragedies of these two peoples. She uses the Trail of Tears as a metaphor to describe the scale of pain and destruction that her people are going through:

This is the new Trail of Tears.  
Calls out, Oh outspread Indian nation  
Let's braid our hair  
with the pulverized  
gravel of Palestine.

From the first few pages, themes such as exile, nostalgia, loss and displacement play central roles. We meet different characters from Beirut to Paris, and Palestine to the San Francisco Bay Area, sharing the same concerns and dreams of liberty and emancipation. The poets capture the poetic moments of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria with a refreshing authenticity: the daily routine of an 80-year-old woman going to Tahrir Square, a phone call between a Syrian mother and son who use the weather as a code for the revolution. In Tunisia, the sentence "My body is my mine and it's nobody's honor," which detained feminist Amina Sboui wrote on her naked chest, becomes a beautiful poem denouncing the hijacking of the revolution by Islamists.

In this book, both poets transform the current political events in the Arab world into poems filled with life, questions and memories of childhood and intimate places. Paris, where Hacker lives, provides a vivid background to some of the poems: "[I] walk away up the / rue de la Roquette humming / "Guantanamera." / on the place Voltaire, a white / lady can enjoy the joke." Deema brings back memories of her childhood in Kuwait by echoing al-Sayyab "How does one say farewell / to Iraq, Iraq, Nothing But Iraq?/ She grabs a fistful of ground," and by inviting Um Kalthum's voice singing "What I saw before my eyes saw / you was a wasted life." Prosaic events, both political and personal, become poetic in the focus on very small details like "the hum of cicadas outside / the midnight window, the muffled sound / of the Bart train speeding by."

The book represents not only a dialogue between the two poets, but also between the present and the past. In fusing verses from al-Mutanabbi such as "The horse and the night

/ and the wide desert know me..." as well as from Abu al'Atahia, al-Sayaab, Darwish, Jamil Bouthaina, Rumi and Kafafi, the poets deal with these difficult human issues by tapping the wisdom of classical and modern masters, their poetry a collective eternal text written by all poets everywhere.

"Diaspo / Renga" celebrates untold human stories of people whose low voices and shy eyes usually go unnoticed. It deals with the daily struggle for love, happiness, freedom and dignity. It speaks to the need to save our memories from fading while trying to survive in the midst of revolutions, wars and displacement. It focuses on saving the soul that is crushed by exile and diaspora. **AJ**



"Ici On Noie Les Algeriens" (Here We Drown Algerians) by Jean-Michel Mension. Courtesy Getty Images.

## Revisionist Tome Examines French Colonial Failure

**From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945-1962'**

By Hannah Feldman

Duke University Press Books, 2014.

### BY D.W. AOSSEY

At first, the premise of Hannah Feldman's book, "From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945-1962," seems legitimate. It does appear that the attitudes defining French art and culture post-WWII were not so much "post-war" as representative of the conflicts surrounding a violent decolonization process which dogged France well into the 1950's and '60's.

Integrating the necessary historical revisions fell, as it sometimes does, to artists, thinkers and journalists, together with the usual politicians and pundits. Yet, as the subtitle proclaims, in all of the posturing and analysis about "art and representation," an obvious omission gnaws at the reader — where's the art? Even a little would be fine. Surely the French know all about it. France birthed the most influential movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, for god's sake. So why does "From a Nation Torn," feel more like an



empty search for French art after WWII, rather than an analysis of it?

As for the “representation” part of the scenario, there may be something to discuss. How can a nation so thoroughly devastated during WWII attempt to justify, much less sustain, a colonial (or post-colonial, if you prefer) presence in Southeast Asia and Africa? Apparently the term “representation” would be the right one when examining the facade of French intellectualism towards a kinder, gentler occupation. Here, the discussion focuses upon the Algerian War of Independence as part of the French left’s “reinvention of itself.” The challenge of journalistic integrity versus the capitalist-owned media also rates a mention, though it barely touches upon coming to terms (or perhaps coming to grips) with the messes in Indochina.

The densely written, highly academic “From a Nation Torn,” has the look and feel of revisionism; dissecting the minutia of faux-art and the glorification of obscure intellectuals as a cover for bourgeois elitism and the emptiness of colonial failure. **AJ**

## The Faces of War-Torn Afghanistan

Afghanistan –A Distant War  
By Robert Nickelsberg  
Prestel, USA, 2013.

**BY REBECCA JOUBIN**

“Afghanistan – A Distant War,” by photo-journalist Robert Nickelsberg, offers a colorful, yet grim collection of photographs portraying a country ravaged by war, poverty, and tyranny. The volume commences with a forward by Jon Lee Anderson, which recounts the 1979 Soviet invasion and the effects of the Cold War on U.S. policy in Afghanistan. Oblivious to the fact that the Afghan puppet regime only toppled after the fall of the Soviet Union, Anderson depicts methods of combating Soviet domination and the growth of Communism, such as the United States financing of the mujahedeen resistance army. The forward provides the historical context for the rise of extremism in the Taliban, which emerged in response to the vacuum created by the immense chaos of that period. Despite the dangers, Nickelsberg continued to spend time in Afghanistan, using his camera to record the unfolding tragedy. Anderson documents how September 11, 2001 once again elevated Afghanistan’s importance to the United States. He then delineates the U.S. invasion that removed the Taliban from power and the state of war that consumed the country as Americans hunted al-Qaeda and engaged the Taliban in battle.

In his forward, Anderson cites with conviction the irony of the United States preparing its departure at a point when American intervention had strengthened the Taliban. With bleak cynicism, he concludes his forward recounting how the vicious cycle of war continued in Afghanistan as American soldiers departed.

Following this bleak forward, 100 large colored photographs taken by Nickelsberg over a lengthy span of time, highlight his



From “Afghanistan-A Distant War”

sensitivity to the ravaged country. The astounding images feature an Afghan mujahedeen carrying a U.S. – made Stinger missile; a young boy with a burnt face at Kabul’s Jamhuriat Hospital; an impoverished Afghan family fleeing their home to escape the intense violence ravaging their country, and photographs taken in 1990 of young Afghani boys, sadness carved into their young faces, as they sit meekly outside a refugee camp. All these images show the tragedy of Afghanistan, which has been aggravated due to outside geopolitical interests. The last section, encompassing the time between 2001-2013, depicts America’s war in Afghanistan, and how 10 years later Washington stood posed for an exit, no matter how brutal the cost. In this section, Nickelsberg’s



From “Afghanistan-A Distant War”

camera focuses on images of disparate American soldiers, Afghan National Police forces, and saddened Afghan farmers.

Despite the strongly developed historical perspective and critique of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, the U.S. perspective appears to dominate the narrative that emerges from this volume. As I read the interspersed articles or examined the photographs, I did not believe that Nickelsberg adequately covered the chaos unleashed by U.S. Cold War politics. While he definitely touched upon it, I think he could have gone much further. Nevertheless, Nickelsberg did attempt to give war-torn Afghan society a face, something that is very much appreciated. **AJ**

# Victoria College: A Witness to the Rise and Fall of a Cosmopolitan Alexandria

**Victoria College: The Making of Royalty and Celebrities**

By Dalia Assem  
Jadawel, 2014.

**BY NADA RAMADAN ELNAHLA**

Journalist Dalia Assem's book, "Victoria College: The Making of Royalty and Celebrities" (in Arabic), constitutes more of an attempt to compile the stories behind the 110-year old college and its students than a detailed historical documentation. Even though many of the college's graduates have gone on to change the course of history in the area, Victoria College cannot be reduced to a simple sum of its students, who have hailed from nearly 55 nationalities. The college itself boasts a rich history, interwoven with that of Alexandria, Egypt, and has stood as a witness to a thriving — and later declining — cosmopolitan city, acted as a centre of British Intelligence in the Middle East and North Africa, and has moulded many unique personalities (which ultimately led to the brain-washing accusations). In 12 chapters, Assem narrates the stories behind the college's construction, its lively academic life, the turbulent political history it witnessed, and its old Victorian graduates, as well as the college's current standing in the world.

In 1901, as part of Britain's new imperialist ideology, the English community in Alexandria started building a new college in remembrance of the then recently deceased iconic Queen Victoria, with the intention of enticing the scions of families engrossed in the politics of Egypt, the Arab world and the North African countries. After the college officially opened in 1906, its most important legacy became evident: it offered a liberal education to the sons of the aristocratic families residing in Alexandria, preparing them to become future leaders in their countries, regardless of their religious, ethnic, or national affiliations. The college's Latin motto, "Una Sumus Cuncti Gens" (meaning "Together We Are One"), still reverberates across the years. Nicknamed the "Eton of the East," it became renowned in Alexandria for its Speech, Sports, and Music Days, as well as for a scout group and an annual exhibition for cultural, artistic and scientific activities. The college housed a theater hall, an office for a published seasonal magazine, and a distinguished library whose beech racks have cradled thousands of books going back 100 years into the past alongside taxidermied animals.

Assem then recounts how Victoria College, despite its brief transformation to a strategic base and a military hospital for the British army, succeeded in surviving two world wars, including the Italian-German air raids on Alexandria. The college, moreover, stood as witness to the 1948 Palestine war and the 1956 Tripartite Aggression against Egypt. By 1956, factors such as the rise of new competing schools in Alexandria, the rampant rumours that Victoria College constituted a stronghold of spies, and its nationalization, compounded by the turbulent political situation in Egypt and



"Still Life with Bible," 1885. Van Gogh's Van Goghs by Richard Kendall, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1998.

the rise of national and religious sentiments, led to the gradual demise of the college's pre-eminence. Although not a product of Victoria College, Assem's practice of interviewing old and new Victorians provides her with the required familiarity, knowledge and background. Assem, therefore, dedicates the second half of the book to the biographies of and/or interviews with some of the prominent Old Victorians, notably: Edward Said, Sadiq al-Mahdi, King Hussein of Jordan, artist Mahmoud Said, directors Youssef Chahine and Shady Abdel Salam, actor Omar Sharif, and others. The book closes with black and white photos of various documents, Old Victorians, and different school events.

***In 1901, as part of Britain's new imperialist ideology, the English community in Alexandria started building a new college with the intention of enticing the scions of families engrossed in the politics of Egypt, the Arab world and the North African countries.***

In answer to my query why she chose to write about Victoria College even though she does not number among its graduates, Assem said, "Through my work as a journalist, I have always endeavoured to highlight what makes Alexandria a special place. After a feature I wrote about Victoria College and how it reflected the cosmopolitan life in the city was published in the London-based Asharq al-Awsat newspaper, I was approached by a publishing house. In this book, I have tried to highlight man's relationship with the place and how students coming from different cultural backgrounds were able to interact with the college." For the reader, this book infuses pleasure with sadness, however, it still offers an engaging look at a rich part of Alexandrian history. **AJ**



# Medieval Mediterranean History: Putting Religion in its Place

## Infidel Kings and Unholy Warriors

By Brian A Catlos

Farra Staruss and Giroux, New York, 2014.

### BY BOBBY GULSHAN

Reconstructions of the Middle Ages usually invoke romantic images of brave knights, scheming kings, zealous holy warriors and legendary locales of antique glory. Unsurprisingly, for medieval scholars, the period proves a time of nuance and complexity — as would any historical period examined with similar scrutiny. However, more often than not the popular imagination — particularly in the West — leads to an emotionally potent oversimplification and mythical reduction of the medieval period. Brian Catlos' "Infidel Kings and Unholy Warriors," deftly manages to compose a narrative that explores the period's often dizzying historical, political and cultural complexities while simultaneously infusing the text with moments of entertaining, accessible prose.

The central thesis of the work asserts that, upon closer examination, historical evidence reveals that religion and religious identity often play a secondary role in defining conflict in the Medieval Mediterranean world. Instead, as with most periods of human history, the motivations of power and sustained dominance — whether for glory or treasure, or both — tend to be the primary drivers of medieval conflict. Here, religious identity and piety provide useful cover or can be used to manipulate and navigate complex political and cultural waters.

To this end, Catlos chronicles the careers of certain historical figures, some more famous than others. The cases of Yusuf Ibn Naghrillah, El Cid, the Norman conquerors of Sicily, and the early Crusaders elucidate the shifting identities and allegiances favored by influential figures of the period. Naghrillah, for example, deeply immersed himself in the dominant Arab culture of Granada, despite his Jewish ancestry. Rather than a matter of simple expediency to his position as vizier to the Sultan, his hybrid identity reflected the cosmopolitanism of Granada during his time. Similarly, the great Spanish hero El Cid, although a Christian, sometimes fought for, as well as against, Muslim kings in Andalusia, depending on which way his military and political fortunes turned.

One might be quick to accuse the writer of harboring a cryp-topolitical agenda, disguising this vision of religion and history during the age of the Crusades and Medieval Jihad as an attempt to universalize certain tendencies that will subsequently point to our contemporary world. However, only the shallowest of readings supports such a suspicion. The notion that those in power often instrumentalize religion in order to sway populations in their favor is hardly controversial. In fact, it practically constitutes a truism to anyone with an even cursory understanding of human history. But when one moves beyond this common critical sense to read and examine the actual scholarship, it further validates the writer's thesis.



"Untitled," 1976. Rukhin, Prime Time Investments, 1989.

While the writer takes occasional license, rendering historical scenes for which no records exist, he can be afforded some leeway. He clearly identifies each instance, explaining his desire to pepper the narrative with a little imaginative color in the endnotes. This results in a text that moves between moments of accessible, almost cinematic levity, and moments of dense and complex historical narrative. Again, this results in a fair tradeoff, as the writer certainly faced the challenge of making intelligible the complex web of associations — familial, regional, and cultural — that defined the Mediterranean of this period. For example, the inclusion of family tree diagrams clearly benefits attentive readers who might find themselves asking which Baldwin was which. **AJ**

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### Slave to History: A Moor in the New World

**The Moor's Account**  
By Laila Lalami  
Pantheon Books, 2014.

**BY LYNNE ROGERS**

In her new novel, Moroccan-American writer, Laila Lalami turns to the 1500's Spanish conquest of the New World for "The Moor's Account." Filling an empty space in the historical narratives of Spanish imperialism, Lalami recounts the story of Mustafa's arduous journey of survival from Morocco to Spain, and ultimately, to America's frontiers. Born into a respectable Moroccan family, Mustafa first rebels when he refuses to follow his father's footsteps and become a notary. Instead, the flash and the excitement of the marketplace draws the young and successful Mustafa into the world of deals that even includes a slave trade which he later comes not only to regret, but to also understand. When his father dies, drought and Portuguese taxes reduce the family to poverty, and Mustafa, in a noble gesture designed to save his family, sells himself to the Christians despite his younger brother's tearful protests. In one Faustian instant, Mustafa cements the hardships of international politics and economical flux as he states that his signature has delivered him "into the unknown and erased [his] father's name. I could not know that this was the first of many erasures." Christened Estebanico and armed only with his facility for languages, he becomes part of the expedition to the New World, a victim to the caprices of those who control his fate.

Once the Narvaez expedition arrives in Florida, Lalami further widens her narrative scope as she explores the diverse receptions afforded the conquistadors by the various tribes, as well as the multitude of variables that influence those receptions. In addition to the colonist/indigenous dichotomy, Lalami's historical account also works as a complex microcosm of the Spanish conquistadors as their political, economic and religious fraternity disintegrates and reorganizes under the threats of disease, starvation and hostile hosts. Tormented by the thought of dying unknown in a foreign land, Mustafa becomes a different type of notary, and discovers not only his own will to survive, but the beauty of his new environment and its people. Deservedly, he assuages his longing for home with his new family, a new profession, and the knowledge that "a good story can heal." For her fans, Lalami delivers more than a "good story" as she shines her lively and maturing prose on one rediscovered sliver of the multifaceted history of the United States. **AJ**



Two moorish women playing chess to lute music. From a chess book in the Great Library in El Escorial, written in 1283.

### 'Sherazade': Seeking an Arab Identity in 20th Century Paris

**Sherazade**  
By Leila Sebbar  
Interlink Publishing Group, 2014.

**BY D.W. AOSSEY**

In the spirit of assessing the insidious reach of 21st century Post-colonialism (as opposed to, say, watching it shrink and disappear in the rear view mirror of history), the novel, "Sherazade," offers a timeless reminder of what once was, and what might always be. Sherazade is a young Algerian runaway living with a group of wayward youths of various stripes and nationalities in an abandoned tenement building in late 20th century Paris. Torn between old world expectations and the promise of a new social and economic order, Sherazade searches desperately for an identity as an Arab, an Algerian, an African and a woman — only to discover colonialism to be a brutally possessive master that never lets go.

Told through a collection of vignettes, the story unveils Sherazade's relationships with a cast of kindred characters. Julian, the sympathetic son of French-Algerians, functions as the catalyst in the story. He befriends Sherazade as she struggles to understand herself and her surroundings, only to disappoint the young woman in the end, revealing the true face of an elitist, misogynistic class system.

The beauty of the story lies in the author's use of metaphor to represent a broader world view. The dystopia of endless struggle in which Sherazade and her fellow teen squatters live provides a wrenching symbol of French post-colonialism, one that has left its inhabitants dispossessed and impoverished amongst so much natural wealth and human potential. Sherazade's struggle for personal/spiritual redemption throughout the story might also be interpreted as a search for an Arab identity under the oppressive regimes of European colonialism and post-colonialism. Other books have traveled down this path recently, using old-world social mores, outmoded cultural expectations and identity conflict as symbols of impotence and failure. The recent novel "ATTA," by Jarett Kobek, comes to mind. **AJ**

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### Round Rumps, Clapping Feet and Other Polite Profanities

**Leg Over Leg, Volume One & Volume Two**

By Ahmad Faris Al-Shidyaq

Edited and translated by Humphrey Davies

New York University Press, 2013.

**BY LYNNE ROGERS**

If you happen to have an Arab literary scholar, a linguist or an Arab comedian on your gift list this year, I suggest Humphrey Davies' bilingual translation of "Leg Over Leg or Turtle in the Tree: concerning the Fariyaq, What manner of Creature might he be," otherwise entitled "Days, Months, and Years spent in Critical Imagination of The Arabs and Their Non-Arab Peers," by "The Humble Dependent on His Lord the Provider Faris ibn Yusuf al-Shidyaq," Volume One and Two. The title alone sets the tone for the potential reader. In her introduction, Rebecca Johnson points out that al-Shidyaq, as "a pioneer of modern Arabic literature, a reviver of classical forms, the father of Arabic journalism," remains a literary figure familiar to Arabic Scholars, while Davies' edition represents the first English translation since the original appeared in Arabic in 1855. With ribald humor, intense linguistic twists and turns, as well as a diversity of genres including "Proems," Volume One begins with a 20 page list of various descriptions of male and female anatomy (some even surprised this seasoned reader). Teachers of the Arabic language may even want to keep a hidden copy of this extensive list as a secret weapon to illustrate the dexterity and vibrancy of the Arabic language. The plot frame follows the travels of the young man Fariyaq who, like al-Shidyaq, chooses a career of writing even though "since the day that God created the pen, the profession has never been enough to support those who practice it, especially in countries where the appearance of a piaster is cause for great rejoicing and the sight of a dinar is greeted with plaudits of 'God is Great.'" In Fariyaq's escape from one repetitive, humorous misfortune to another, and in his efforts "to weave our story in a way acceptable to every reader," the author shines his satire on women with ample rumps, priests with big noses, any religious denominations, market-men and bag-men.

Volume Two opens with a dazzling chapter, "Rolling a Boulder," which lists man's many uses for stones ranging from religious icons, and hearth stones to weapons. This chapter alone makes the text an ideal lesson for the advanced Arabic class and al-Shidyaq's irreverent skepticism immediately dismantles any notion of Arab rigidity. The narrator ostensibly resumes his narrative of Fariyaq's journey to Egypt only to be sidetracked once again by lustful ruminations in "A Throne to Gain Which Man Must Make Moan." Later, Fariyaq's temporary illness in Egypt provides the narrator with a chance to satirize the medical profession before ultimately leaving our young hero to pick up his tambourine. Humphrey Davies' intricate parallel translation stands fortuitously as a genial introduction of Faris al-



Ahmad Faris Shidyaq (1804–1887)

Shidyaq to students of literature and a generous gift for scholars and comedians who relish a good roll about with words. **AJ**

### A Desert Companion

**A Sleepless Eye: Aphorisms from the Sahara**

By Ibrahim al-Koni

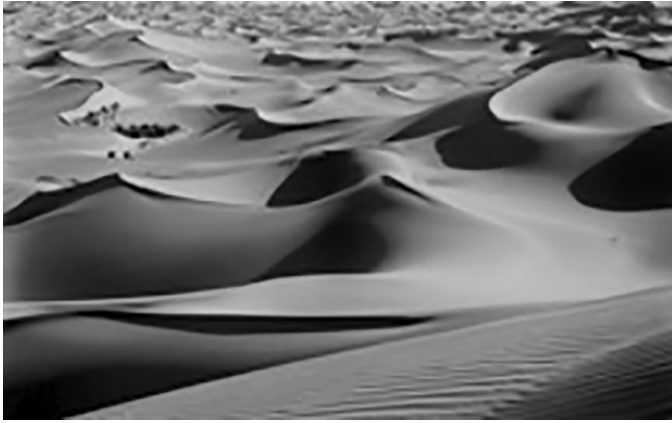
Selected by Hartmut Fähndrich and Translated by Roger Allen

Syracuse University Press, 2014.

**BY ANGELE ELLIS**

Proverbs and aphorisms — whether pithy and earthy, or mystical and deep — have played a significant role in Arabic culture and literature. A contemporary scholar, Riad Azziz Kassib, has compared the aphorisms (*hikam*, or wisdom in Arabic) of the 11th century Ethiopian sage Luqman to the Solomonic aphorisms of the Hebrew Scriptures. In the early 19th century, the Swiss scholar J.L. Burckhardt, building on the work of Sharaf ad-din ibn Asad, introduced a collection of Arabic proverbs to the West.

"A Sleepless Eye" is a beautiful addition to and elaboration on this tradition. Composing in Arabic, Ibrahim al-Koni, a prolific Tuareg writer from Libya, uses this form in his series of poetic meditations on the Sahara. Al-Koni divides his book into sections (such as "Nature," "Seasons," "Desert," "Water," and "Sea"), enhancing them with color photographs by Alain and Berny Sèbe. Hartmut Fähndrich, who worked closely with the author to select



The Algerian Sahara photographed by Alain Sèbe, whose images illustrate "Sleepless Eye" by Ibrahim al-Koni. Courtesy Alain Sebe / Syracuse University Press.

the images and aphorisms, which Roger Allen then translated into English.

The effect of reading this book feels like engaging in a form of prayer. A photo of intensely cracked Algerian earth from which grass stubbornly rises juxtaposes with the aphorism, "Nature, a cat that eats its own children to protect them from the world." A lovely shot of Umm el-Ma' Lake in Libya precedes "Water, a saint who dies in order to give life," while a photo of a trickling chebka in Algeria follows it. A shot of a Libyan *wadi* (valley) that resembles a gateway to heaven creates a beautiful pairing with "Rock can pride itself on belonging to the kingdom of eternity." The impact of the work only becomes deeper on rereading. "A Sleepless Eye" offers both revelation and companionship. **AJ**

## The Charisma of Words & Beauty: New Novel Explores the Interlocking Worlds of a Woman Poet from Qazvin and a Visionary Activist from Beirut

### Charisma

By Hala Kawtharani

Dar Al Saqi

### BY RULA JURDI

"Charisma," Hala Kawtharani's latest novel explores the relationship between beauty, words, power and revolutionary change in an original manner that ties together seemingly unrelated events and characters. The term "charisma" does not merely refer to a leadership style or personal magnetism, but to the inexplicable power, which visionaries working through mediums of poetry, music and art, have over those around them at a particular moment in time. The novel carries the reader

through the lives of three women and two men inhabiting two temporalities, namely, the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, as well as several cities: Beirut, Qazvin, Shiraz, Tehran and Karbala. Europe also acts as a background influence, whether through the actions of its travelers to the Middle East, its modernist notions of progress, or through the fashions adopted by upper class Muslim women in the "honey-colored city" of Qazvin.

Hala Kawtharani, a Lebanese novelist who lives in Beirut, works as the chief editor of *Laha*, a magazine tied to the Beirut newspaper *Al Hayat*. Every week since 2000, Kawtharani has published a short story in *Laha*. In addition to "Charisma" (2014), she has written three novels, namely, "Al-Usbu` al-Akhir" (The Last Week, 2006), "Studio Beirut" (2008), and "Ali al-Amrikani" (The American Ali, 2012), which received the Award for Best Arabic Book (2012) in the area of fiction at Sharjah's International Book Exhibit.

In "Charisma," Rasha, the narrator, moves between various times and spaces, transformed by the act of narration, the narration of the dreams of charismatic persons, like Taj the feminist poet, and Hadi the political activist. Rasha is transformed by dreams, which die, and dreams, which live on. After breaking up with Ayman, a self-seeking entrepreneur, Rasha meets `Azza, a school teacher in her 80's, who is filled with loneliness, and memories of a great love and a lost son. In `Azza's house, the two women start their interlaced journeys into the past. These journeys unfold as Rasha reads piecemeal the book of Taj, found in `Azza's library. She narrates Taj's life story and aspirations. Kawtharani writes, "Can reading be so exhausting? She [Rasha] will stay to read to her [Azza] more. But what could be the reason for all her fatigue? Only now does Rasha start to fear the curse, which words carry. Despite her tiredness she cannot stop reading. She brings the book of Taj closer to her eyes then puts it back on her thighs, and reads without stopping. She is enchanted by words as they pull her mercilessly. She in turn surrenders to them completely."

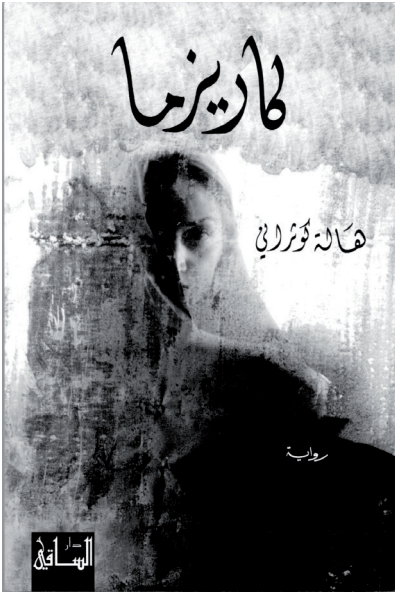
The Internet and YouTube allow Rasha and `Azza to connect with Taj even when they hear her poems recited in Persian, a language they do not understand. They have become deeply connected to Taj through the Arabic book and able to understand her message, which challenged patriarchal norms, gendered inequality, and religious prohibitions.

When Taj decides to lift the symbolic veil, beautiful words come out, the words that "carry curses" just like charisma. But when Taj lifts the physical veil that covers her face in public, she breaks custom and violence ensues. Her prophecy and freedom are denied. Taj is cast out, marked for death. Through the act of narration, Rasha gives life back to Taj who was born 195 years earlier, and "who looks like her [Rasha], a woman struggling to be free from inherited duties fixed firmly to her, stitched to her limbs, which she has to carry whichever direction she moves, and everywhere she goes."

Rasha's act of narration empowers her, yet, unlike the proverbial Shahrazade, narrating the lives of visionaries makes her life dwarf in comparison. Narrating the taboo also inflicts Rasha with pain. Life is incapable of imitating art or the captivating poetry of Taj, which Rasha tries to revive through narration.

Rasha becomes the meeting place of charisma, the connection between the spiritual sovereignty of Taj (Crown) and the illuminating vision of Hadi (Guide). Rasha had fallen in love with





Book Cover of "Charisma" (In Arabic)

Hadi, a gifted man who had "rediscovered music," which took him away from a career as a "military correspondent," and placed him on the path of radical political change. If Taj stood for the queen or the leader who urges us to take new spiritual journeys, then Hadi was the guide who encourages us to follow our dreams. Both of them faced a tragic end because their societies did not embrace their visions and ended

up punishing them for violating social and political norms.

Toward the end of the novel, Rasha becomes more than a medium for these past and present voices of Taj and Hadi. She is transformed by the violent end of beautiful bodies and magical speech, articulated by Taj and Hadi, respectively. Kawtharani takes us through images of the current uprisings in the Arab world, constantly reminding us of the present time. She interweaves the ambiance of a desolate Beirut with Rasha's expectations and premonitions. Rasha "has to bear the betrayal of the spring," and the betrayal of love by those who do not allow themselves to be touched by beauty, or to accept the advent of the spring.

Rasha moves closer to Taj not only through narration, but also through Hadi, and her admiration and desire for him, and through their lovemaking. Hadi decides to stay in Beirut to fight for his ideals joining a secretive organization of disillusioned activists who lost faith in earlier forms of struggle. Rasha describes her uncertainty about Hadi's feelings toward her, "She assumes that a person like him would not reciprocate her feelings if he was in love with someone else, or trying to hide another affair. Yet, he appeared preoccupied with another matter, as if those moments they shared together, which she is fond of, were not enough for him. She touches his neck, presses on it with her fingers. He kisses her hungrily. A sweet time passed after which she feels that life could be truly generous with her."

"Charisma," is the inarticulate condition, and the invisible thread that ties the spaces and characters of Kawtharani's novel. We also come to hear the feminist voice of Forough Farrokhzad an iconoclast whose poetry was banned for more than a decade in Iran after the revolution. The novel recasts gendered and political conflicts through poignant metaphors that oscillate between the apparent and hidden meanings of unveiling, aesthetics and revolution. But "spring" is nowhere to be seen. The novel leaves us with the expectation that we must create a new world, a new language. It leaves us to ask how can the past be visited without being repeated? How can we avoid "decorating it with the crowns of nostalgia?" **AJ**

## Trials of Innocence: Moroccan Child Brides and their children

**Bastards: Outcast in Morocco**

Icarus Films, 83 minutes, 2014.

By Deborah Perkin



**BY LYNNE ROGERS**

In an effort to protect women and children, Moroccan courts outlawed child marriage in 2004. However, this new family code left younger women who had already taken part in a traditional wedding or relationship without legal papers, vulnerable to the whims of their children's fathers. In the documentary "Bastards: Outcast in Morocco," Deborah Perkin follows the efforts of one young woman, Rabha, who, despite being married at the time of conception, must now fight to have her eight year old daughter officially recognized as legitimate in order to avoid the serious social stigma of illegitimacy. Over and over, other women who have also given birth to "illegitimate" children, and their tireless social workers, ask the men "Are you not ashamed?"

*This film unveils the ethical issue that tradition fails to safeguard the innocent*

Married at 14 to her mother's mute and abusive nephew, Rabha leaves her husband after two years, and returns to her village pregnant. Fortunately, she still has her wedding pictures, even though her daughter has never seen her father. The Women's Solidarity Foundation helps Rabha with her legal pilgrimage through two trials reaffirming both the effectiveness of grass roots organization and the protective intentions of the Moroccan judicial system. The film, like Rabha, travels from city to village revealing the cultural overlap and social complications. Perkin's camera allows the participants to speak for themselves as these honorable women seek justice for children whose fathers hide behind their verbal negations. In contrast to Rabha's teary tale of rape, her mute husband's stoic denial of sexual intercourse, related through his father, cannot fail to shock the audience. "Bastards: Outcast in Morocco," ends with one personal triumph, and illuminates the larger contemporary ethical issues that occur when tradition fails to safeguard the innocent. **AJ**

### Gender Relations in ‘Women’s Jail’

#### Women’s Jail

Story by Fatheya El-Assal

Written by Mariam Naoum

Directed by Kamala Abu-Zekry

Produced by Al Adl Group Multimedia. 2014.

#### BY AISHA K. NASSER

The fasting month of Ramadan is a time for celebration in the Muslim World. During the ninth month of the lunar calendar, Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset every day. Family gatherings in the evenings are marked with prayers, celebration, food, and television shows. Each year, networks produce a great number of television musalsalat (soap operas) especially for airing during the month of Ramadan, which represents the peak of soap opera production in the Arab world. This commercialization of Ramadan by state television, which also promotes piety, perplexes Walter Armbrust, who writes extensively on Egyptian culture. With the arrival of Ramadan, Muslims impatiently anticipate the debut of new television soap operas. Last year, “Women’s Jail,” loosely based on playwright and screen-writer Fatheya El-Aassal’s original play by the same name, became one of the more popular productions. For its exploration of intersecting oppressive structures in Egypt, the series won a human rights award.



From “Women’s Jail”

Screen-writer Mariam Naoum expanded the scope of el-Assal’s original story by creating bittersweet moments, diversified personalities, added events, and convoluted relationships. Set in a well-known women’s jail in al-Qanatir al-Khayriyya, a suburb of the Egyptian Capital, Cairo, the series traces a number of incarcerated women convicted of various crimes: robbery, sex work, murder, and drug dealing, among others. Two of the three main protagonists, Ghalia (Nelly Karim) and Rida (Ruby), have been convicted of murder, while the third, Dalal (Dora) has been found guilty of being a sex worker. All these characters develop throughout the series, with Dalal providing the best example. A shy girl of modest background, who supports her single mother and two sisters, she steps gradually into the underworld of sex work, and ends up in jail on a fallacious charge. This causes her mother to shun her, and leads Dalal to become a full-fledged sex worker, then a madam. Finally, she comes to run a regional sex worker’s ring.



From “Women’s Jail”

Naoum portrays these three central figures sympathetically, and demonstrates how the complex socio-economic situations that have convoluted their fates represent a microcosm of the national issues that led to the January 25, 2011 revolution in Egypt. She presents a variety of realistic, complex characters that evade the clichéd dichotomy of villain/rascal so common in many jail stories. Instead, she explores and illustrates the myriad relationships among women; e.g. motherly love, friendship, jealousy, competition, etc. She also explores the intricate relationships between men and women and how abuse can become the dominant factor, as in the case of Ghalia, whose husband framed her for a crime he committed.

In addition, Naoum reveals emotional instability through the development of the characters, such as the temporary insanity that causes Rida to murder the daughter of her employer. The screen writer also introduces a minor character played by Hayat, a woman who must cope with pressing circumstances beyond her control, especially contaminated vegetables and fruit, and rampant sexual harassment, which also renders her children potential targets. Hayat, who most likely also suffers from severe depression, eventually kills her family to escape similar circumstances to those that later causes Egyptians to revolt.

The diversity of these characters, and how they deal with their circumstances, makes this series quick paced compared to other soap operas presented during Ramadan. The actresses, especially the three main protagonists (Nelly Karim, Ruby, and Dora), give excellent performances and prove themselves assets vital to the work’s success. Director Kamla Abu-Zekry has saved the series from a potentially depressing atmosphere of divisive and oppressive relationships by interjecting scenes that display rare moments of joy in the prison. For example, inmates sometimes sing and dance all-night to entertain themselves, and hold special celebrations to mark the release of one of their prison mates. The act by the cheerful Zinat, (played by Nesreen Amin), a sex worker who now serves as the prison’s hairdresser, also alleviates the subdued conditions of the prison.

In its annual contest, National Center for Human Rights (NCHR) gives a tribute to “works that deal with Human Rights issues.” Last year’s awards ceremony, held on 29th September (2014) in the Opera House, Cairo, gave its second prize to ‘Women’s Jail.’ **AJ**

# ‘The Jewish Quarter’: Ramadan Drama Revisits 40’s Egyptian-Jewish Relations

BY ELIE CHALALA

“The Jewish Quarter” has sent some unsettling messages about the “Ramadan series” (or soaps), prompting commentaries in the Arab press and beyond, and finally meriting a feature article in the New York Times. This 30 episode serial, which runs through the month of Ramadan in Egypt, offers a viewpoint unlike that featured in any other serial before or after the Arab Spring. Its importance stems from its unprecedented and sympathetic treatment of Egypt’s Jews, highlighting their “fierce anti-Zionism” to Egyptian audiences. Mohamed el-Adl, director of the series and nephew to its writer, Mahdat el-Adl, describes the serial as dealing “honestly with history.” Of course, there are those who agree and disagree with this assessment.

Set in 1948 Egypt, the “Jewish Quarter” provides audiences with glimpses of a very different country from today’s Egypt, which has a much smaller Jewish community than the one that existed before the establishment of the state of Israel. The serial’s positive depiction of Jews can disorient modern Egyptian audiences, who have been socialized by overwhelmingly anti-Semitic themes for the past six decades, themes that continue to arise in “reruns” on Arab TVs. “A Knight Without a Horse” (2002), based on the notorious anti-Semitic fraud “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” as described in the New York Times, represents an example of this negative socialization.

Conspiracy theories of the Arab Spring thrived on anti-Semitic diatribes, which alleged that the Jews, Israel, and Zionists stood behind all the violence in the Arab world. Whether focusing on the Islamic State, Jabhat Al Nusra or some other Jihadist organization, pan-Arab nationalist and anti-Western rejectionist sentiments hold them to be the creations of Israel, designed to divide and weaken the Arab nation. The same applies to scores of assassinations and suicide bombings all attributed to Israel and the U.S. Regardless of the military coup that overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood regime two years ago, Egyptian history and attitudes at this time appear livelier than before, — which explains why “The Jewish Quarter” broke away from the old, monotonous anti-Semitic opinions of politics and arts.

Critics approach the issue from different angles: anti-Abdel Fattah el-Sissi Islamists feel the series has not told the Muslim Brotherhood organization’s history in the best light, while some leftists feel it has tainted their history by highlighting the role of Egyptian-Jewish comradeship from the bygone days of the 1940s. Other complaints fall somewhere in between.

As expected, some criticisms cast the series in “frankly anti-Semitic terms, for making the Jews look better than the Egyptians,” a characterization the New York Times based upon one viewer’s post on the Facebook page of the filmmakers.



Another lamentable criticism identifies the serial’s limitations in the scene where a Muslim military officer considers marrying a Jew. The objections go even further, linking the serial to some sort of tacit alliance between al-Sissi and Israel. And as if the program could not be condemned enough, Al Jazeera stepped in to support the Muslim Brotherhood claim that some link exists between the series and Israeli “closeness” to al-Sissi.

Inadvertently, the Israeli Embassy in Cairo lent support to the Islamists by commending early episodes, writing on an embassy-run Facebook page that, for the first time, “it [the serial] shows Jews in their real human state, as human beings before anything else, and we bless this,” a position they retracted later, according to press reports. Director el-Adl expressed confusion over the official Israeli praise, adding “The series does not support the Israelis. It is against them...Israel is the first enemy of Egypt.” Echoing the same sentiment — though phrased differently — lead actress Menna Shalabi described herself as having begged the “Egyptian media not to confuse Israel with Jews, or Zionism with Judaism.”

Leftists, on the other hand, take offense to the serial’s labeling of their communist Jewish comrades as “secret Zionists,” a false and political smear circulated by their Arab nationalist and Islamic rivals. Rivals of Palestinian and Lebanese-Syrian communists used this same distortion in the past. Ms. Haroun, the daughter of a leading Egyptian leftist of his day, complained on Facebook that the series suggested that Jewish communists had “played on the minds of people in order to turn them towards Zionism.” Concerning the merit of such allegations, Professor Joel Beinin, a historian at Stanford who has written about Egyptian Jews of the period, described the series as “more consistent with the facts than almost anything else that has appeared in Egyptian mass media in recent decades.” “Most Egyptian Jews of the 1940s identified themselves as Egyptians and not as Zionists...When the Arab nationalism of the 1950s made it untenable for Egyptians to maintain identities as both Arabs and Jews, very few migrated to Israel,” added Professor Beinin.

Other criticisms of the series center on its silence over the military’s treatment of Egyptian Jewry under President Gamal Abdel Nasser, a subject which, according to the New York Times, the series “omitted completely.” Similarly, it maintains a silence on the nationalists’ role in “persecuting and ultimately pushing out many of Cairo’s Jews.” This apparently insinuates that the series made special attempts to ensure the comfort of the military and pro-al-

*Continued on page 32*



## Middle Eastern Comedies as Social Critiques

### Humor in Middle Eastern Cinema

By Gayatri Devi and Najat Rahman

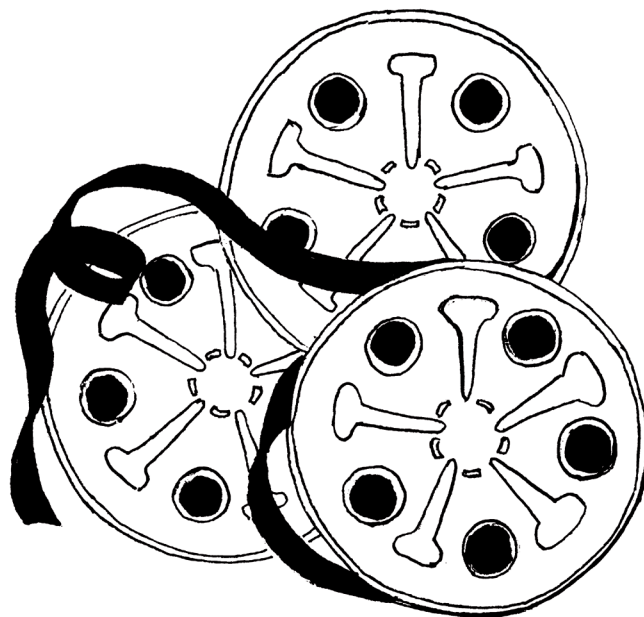
Wayne State University Press, 2014.

#### BY LYNNE ROGERS

Editors Gayatri Devi and Najat Rahman have collected nine scholarly essays that examine the spaces for change created through comedy and the camera in “Humor in Middle Eastern Cinema.” The contributors, all academics, confront today’s socio-political issues in their interrogations of humor, a cultural dimension unfortunately often overlooked by critics. Devi and Najat’s introduction gives the reader a quick overview of region’s geopolitics, followed by a more thorough introduction to “the modalities of humor.” The first essay, by editor Rahman, uses Ranciere’s paradigm of “political subjectivation” to look at three contemporary Palestinian films made under Israeli Occupation. The laughter provoked by these popular works reaffirms Palestinian identity while providing a release to the constant assault of Occupation, as well as an “alternative vision.” In his essay “Strategies of Subversion in Ben Ali’s ‘Tunisia,’ Allegory and Satire in Moncef Dhoub’s ‘The TV is Coming,’” Robert Lang discusses the film’s exploration of “how national-cultural history is written and about how Tunisia is confronting certain political, economic and cultural challenges in the global era” in its “unambiguous” indictment of the Ben Ali regime.

The collection includes one essay on Iranian television and two on Iranian films. Cyrus Ali Zagar views the thunderous resonance with Iranian viewers of the popular television series of Mehran Modiri and his “creation of spaces that explore identity as geographical allegories.” Somy Kim’s “Comedic Mediations, War and Genre in The Outcasts” delineates the film’s contrast between the “thug life and a pious existence.” Released in 2007 and directed by former Hezbollah General Dehnamaki, this film follows three marginalized young men as they make their way to the 1980’s conflict with Iraq and are transformed into either martyrs or respected war veterans. Kim addresses the criticism of the film by contextualizing the comedy within the Iranian melodramatic martyr narrative, and concludes that “the comedy and its attendant social critique are what appealed to an Iranian audience struggling to accept the strictures of an increasingly restrictive government.” In “Humor and the Cinematic Sublime in Kiarostami’s ‘The Wind Will Carry Us,’” Editor Devi holds the Iranian filmmaker up to the challenges of Longinus and Kant, arguing “that the sublime poses one of the most effective humorous challenges to reality’ status quo.” Her treatment of Kiarostami’s work stands as a tribute to the artistry of his films, while her essay exemplifies how the canons of literary theory can be used to deepen our appreciation of contemporary culture. Elise Burton illustrates the use of ethnic humor in Israeli cinema to dismantle “Ashkenazi cultural dominance” and promote cultural equality through laughter.

The collection would not be complete without an essay on the beloved Egyptian filmmaker Youssef Chahine, and Rahman’s



essay examines three of Chahine’s films. She maps where the humor meets history, with the harsh urban environment of Cairo in the films providing not only social critique but also inspiring triumphant joy and empathy. Perin Gurel’s essay “traces the development of America and Americans as instruments of comedy in Turkish film from the 1970’s...” and the cultural ambiguities of Hollywood’s influence on Turkish cinema.

In one of the strongest and most controversial essays, “Laughter Across Borders, the Case of the Bollywood Film, Tere Bin Laden,” Mara Matta demonstrates how the comedy of “Tere Bin Laden” reveals the post 9/11 Islamophobic collapse of the “Middle East,” to now include Pakistan. Banned in Pakistan, the film’s carnival spirit crosses geopolitical boundaries, parodying ISIS as well as the global war on terror. Film students will benefit from the academic rigor and thoroughness of these informed essays. Film buffs will enjoy the validation of comedy as a vital social critique and the exposure to films which might have escaped their notice before reading “Humor in Middle Eastern Cinema.” **AJ**

### ‘The Jewish Quarter’

*Continued from page 31*

Sissi groups concerning their war against the Muslim Brotherhood.

In the end, I wonder who wants to black out this shining page of Egyptian history during the interwar period, an era adequately covered in many history books? Supportive reviews of “The Jewish Quarter” praise the series “for celebrating the more pluralistic ethos that prevailed under the British-backed monarchy, seeing the Egyptian Jews” as “personifications of a more liberal culture destroyed by Nasser’s 1952 coup.” Would any reasonable reviewer contest this assessment of that period? **AJ**

# Images for Syria’s ‘Democratic’ Proxy War

**Democratic Desert: The War in Syria**

By Robert King

Schilt Publishing, 2014.

**BY D.W. AOSSEY**

“We know what we are fighting against,” (the rebel commander) spoke softly. “But we don’t know exactly who we are fighting for.”

This quote from Robert King’s “Democratic Desert: The War in Syria,” may be as good as any when framing the ongoing catastrophe there. And yet, it doesn’t ring entirely true. It could make sense — but does it? Perhaps that’s the point; that the surreal images in this vulgar and disturbing photo album don’t make any sense. Madness does not come with a logical explanation, and no rationale exists for what’s going on in Syria. Like the title suggests, it’s all just a lie.

*Madness does not come with a logical explanation, and no rationale exists for what’s going on in Syria.*

The images in “Democratic Desert” comprise a rare collection of faces, corpses, injuries and destruction. They speak to the mind in a way that words never could, covering the flashpoints of the conflict from April to November of 2012; capturing the vertigo and despair, the frustration and darkness that has descended upon the people of Syria. And if their sacrifice has something to do with ‘Democracy’,

(i.e. Come to Democracy or Democracy will come to you . . .), one only need consider that Russia, the sole military obstacle to American hegemony in Europe and the Middle East, still maintains a naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus.

In other words, we’ve seen this bad movie before — in Korea and Vietnam; in Nicaragua and the Congo and Afghanistan and Iraq. The plot for this particular proxy war has been reworked, slightly. The characters have been dressed in different costumes. But the song remains the same: the natives have grown restless; freedom, democracy and corporate profits are under threat. This time, it’s the pickup truck-Jihadi’s from parts unknown, or maybe it’s some nasty-out-of-favor dictator. It doesn’t really matter, for as “Democratic Desert” shows, the images of proxy war are always the same. Charred, half-collapsed dwellings where ordinary people once lived; children laying on concrete floors, their heads wrapped in bloody rags; dead bodies littering city streets; doctors performing surgery by flashlight.

So, should we just cast them off as casualties of war? After all, we know the culprits— not by the propaganda we’re fed in the mass media and not even from eyewitness accounts of those like the rebel commander who couldn’t be sure whose side he was on, but by the nature of the game. As the title suggests, Democracy has come to Syria. And, thanks to Robert King, we know what it looks like. **AJ**



From “Democratic Desert: The War in Syria”

## The Ordeal of a City

**BY FAWZI KARIM**

Ah for the deluge of that era!  
How often it has ravaged the city  
How often will the city be ravaged  
with the passage of time  
by volcanoes, wars, mass graves?  
Yet, the city rises again,  
in every era  
resurrected by its name  
emerging from the annals of the immortals.

How often will the city shed its skin  
for the sake of another?  
How many more times will it rise again?  
exhausted,  
in deference to its name?  
How often will a sad, self-pitying tune  
drown out the city’s breaths  
wishing to resist its immortal name  
to resign to a genuine death  
in order to rest and let others rest?

—Translated by Salih J. Altoma

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# Turn of the Century British Orientalist Literature as a Tool of Colonialism

**Reading Arabia: British Orientalism in the Age of Mass Publication 1880 – 1930**

By Andrew C. Long  
Syracuse University Press, 2014.

**BY D.W. AOSSEY**

The Hollywood epic, “Lawrence of Arabia,” immortalized the familiar story of T.E. Lawrence. But few know that proponents of the Orientalist ideologies which dominated British politics and culture in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries carefully crafted the tale. Along with other notable author/adventurers of the time, T. E. Lawrence delivered a combination of propaganda and entertainment for the political (mis)information of the British people; stories that helped shape and promote British policy and influence in the Arab World. In a new book, “Reading Arabia: British Orientalism in the Age of Mass Publication 1880 – 1930,” Andrew C. Long reviews the work of some of these men and the way in which they portrayed Arabs and the Arab/ Islamic World to mainstream British society during this period.

Orientalism as an ideology, constitutes an Euro-centric belief that Western culture represents enlightenment and civilization, whereas the cultures and traditions of the Arab, Ottoman and Eastern worlds represent various measures of barbarism.

The differences and distinctions between Christianity and Islam also engender a good versus evil debate. Long does an excellent job of introducing Orientalist voices of the time, including soldier/ explorer, Richard Burton; poet and writer, Charles Doughty; Scottish adventurer and politician, Robert Cunningham Graham; Marmaduke Pickthall, a Muslim convert who translated the Quran into English; and T. E. Lawrence. These men based much of their work on embellishments and fantasies depicting the Arab world in exotic ways, while promoting British influence and colonialism in the region. Often the depictions represent forms of self promotion, intended to enhance the images of the authors, and further promote their own brands as explorers, soldiers, politicians and travel writers. The author also devotes a chapter to the popular late 19<sup>th</sup> century literature of the British Campaign in the Sudan; a colonial war often depicted as a cricket match of a conflict, avenging the defeat of General Charles Gordon at the hands of the nationalist Mahdi Army.

Long writes the book in a scholarly manner, but redeems it with a depth of insight and information on these fascinating personalities at a very important time in Middle Eastern history. Certainly, most will find “Reading Arabia” worth a look. **AJ**



“Omnibus” Lawrence and Arabia. 1986 BBC 90 minute documentary biography of T. E. Lawrence.

## Gaza’s Broken Blessing

**BY LISA SUHAIR MAJAJ**

The day the bombs paused long enough for fishermen to set to sea, casting their nets over blockaded waves so overfished they expected little return (they had

to try: their children, dazed from the long weeks of war, were hungry) the sky above shone brilliant, blue as the sea from whose salty horizon they were barred,

bright as the flowing galaxies beyond where daystars burn. Boats clustered together; men spoke quietly. Suddenly the calm

exploded: a torrent of shimmering scales bursting in blessing, tumult of joy, fish flinging themselves from salty depths

to waiting boats, bodies twisting through air in a bright ballet, a fountain of dancers in furious celebration, starbursts, silver notes

shimmering like rain. Later, when the laden boats returned to shore, the bombs had not yet begun again to fall. Children gathered, stroking the gentled bodies

of creatures who flung themselves to death so they could eat. And we, far off, watching from blue expanses of safety as bombs rain down

on fragile humans (salt on our lips, roughness of death splintering our human faith) feel our hearts erupting with Gaza’s broken blessing.



### Orientalism's Children: "Voices from the Threshold"

#### Talking Through the Door: An Anthology of Contemporary Middle Eastern American Writing

Edited by Susan Atefat-Peckham

With a Foreword by Lisa Suhair Majaj

Syracuse University Press, 2014.

#### BY ANGELE ELLIS

It has been nearly 11 years since an automobile accident cut Susan Atefat-Peckham's work and life short while she pursued a Fulbright Scholarship in Jordan. Now, Atefat-Peckham's anthology of Middle Eastern American writing takes its rightful place among others, including Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa's "Grape Leaves," Joanna (now Joe) Kadi's "Food for Our Grandmothers," Munir Akash and Khaled Mattawa's "Post Gibran," and Hayan Charara's "Inclined to Speak."

As an Iranian-American poet, memoirist, and scholar, Atefat-Peckham broadens the scope of contemporary Middle Eastern American literature, finding both engaging similarities and subtle differences between the work of Arab-American writers and her own, as well as those of fellow Iranian-American writers Nahid Rachlin and Roger Sedarat (and of the Iraqi-Syrian Jewish American writer Jack Marshall). The title of her anthology, taken from a poem by Rumi, links this expanded consciousness to the rich (and border-crossing) literary traditions of the past: "We talked through the door. I claimed / a great love and that I had given up / what the world gives to be in that love."

Love, complicated love — for self, family, heritage, homeland, the new land — resides at the heart of selections from 16 writers chosen by Atefat-Peckham for this anthology. Many of them, as Lisa Suhair Majaj points out in her sensitive and illuminating foreword, have since become well-known beyond the niche of ethnicity (including Elmaz Abinader, Diana Abu-Jaber, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Khaled Mattawa). Like its authors, this anthology visits a wide variety of places, times, and perspectives, including the Lebanon of World War I, pre-revolutionary Iran, Ibn Hazm's 10<sup>th</sup> century Cordoba, and Ohio — again and again — in the transformative decades after World War II.

Because of Atefat-Peckham's gift for choosing deeply personal work, however, the reader is with the narrators of these poems, stories, and pieces of creative nonfiction — sometimes painfully — throughout their trials and revelations. (Other writers represented in this collection are the late Joseph Awad and D.H. Melhem, Barbara Bedway, Joseph Geha, Samuel Hazo, Joe Kadi, Pauline Kaldas, and Eugene P. Nassar.)

Atefat-Peckham, who began work on this anthology in the late 1990's and pursued it through the shattering events of 9/11 and beyond, wrestled with the issue of naming and identities. She strove for empathy, connection, and bridge-building even though, as she writes in her introduction to this anthology: "We



"Candlestick," from Islamic Art, The Nasli M. Heeramaneck Collection, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

live in times of crisis and change. We struggle for a foothold in a country that is at once repulsed and intrigued by the many voices of its immigrants. And we struggle for a place in time that calls for the opening of many doors to intelligent discussion." As this struggle to move beyond the thresholds, to open the doors, continues today, Atefat-Peckham's work renews its power — what Lisa Suhair Majaj calls its "sustenance." **AJ**

### Joseph And The Amazing Proto-Technicolor Dreamcoat

#### The Story of Joseph: A Fourteenth Century Turkish Morality Play

By Sheyyad Hamza

Translated by Bill Hickman

Syracuse University Press, 2014.

#### BY ANGELE ELLIS

Once upon a time, in 14<sup>th</sup> century Anatolia, a gifted storyteller — part preacher, part minstrel — wove together the texts of the Peoples of the Book with traditional folktales to create a thrilling narrative and Islamic morality tale. In Hickman's skillful translation from Old Turkish — complete with weighted pauses, dazzling digressions, and fantastic events — the reader can almost hear the gasps of Hamza's spellbound audience.

The bones of the story, as known even today, remain intact. His father's favorite, Joseph, the beautiful, virtuous young hero with the fabulous coat, finds himself betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery, only to rise, through God-inspired divination of dreams, to power in Egypt. Eventually, Joseph reunites with and forgives

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# Arabian Tales (Heard With Little Ears)

BY HANNA SAADAH

Children love stories and ask, with innocent curiosity, questions, which adults can seldom answer. As a schoolboy, my mind teemed with beehives of questions, which when asked, earned me risible rebuke. At that time, during the early 1950s, teachers and parents were far more authoritative and a lot less tolerant.

“Stop asking senseless questions,” snapped my aunt.

“I have no time for silliness,” sighed my mother. “Ask me something intelligent, instead, something that I can answer.”

“Stick to your textbooks,” admonished my teachers, “and stop flapping all over the classroom with your absent mind.”

My Arabian Tales transpired before 1954, before I turned eight, and before I knew to feel intimidated by adult company. During those childhood years, my father worked in Saudi Arabia and came home once a year, loaded with Bedouin stories and anecdotes, which I sat and listened to with fascination. During that juvenile period of my life, I perceived the adults who audienced my father as merely big people, who laughed loud, smoked cigarettes, sat too long after meals sipping coffee, and entertained themselves with conversations instead of toys.

Of all the conversations I sat through as a little boy, my father’s were the most gripping because he was a gifted storyteller. He could turn a simple incident into an anecdote, a fool’s remark into a profound message, a chance encounter into a propitious omen, and an unpleasant event into a divine intervention, sent to avert a lurking evil. He embellished, I am certain, as all story tellers do, for the object of telling stories is to entertain rather than to render the absolute truth. As Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) said, “We must embellish the truth to make it believable.”

At that nascent time of my life, I half understood most of what he said and left the other half to wander, unresolved, within my elephant memory. With uninhibited curiosity, in spite of ridicule and rebuke, I continued, unabated, to ask and to interrupt those half-understood adult conversations. Something about half understanding what adults were saying challenged me. I filed those blurred, un-understood halves into the recesses of my mind, leaving them there until that time when, as an adult, I would be able to decipher their arcane remains. And it is from that latent, childhood memory of mine that now, 62 years later, I have re-composed those tales.

When he related the story of one Arabian poet who, sitting upon his horse, told a veiled lady (with only eyes showing) as she passed him on her camel – with the light of your eyes I shall light my cigarette – all the adults in the room cooed with enchantment. I, on the other hand, could not understand how come the story ended without an end... Unable to control my curiosity, I asked with a bleating voice, “So? Did he really light his cigarette from her eyes?” Instead of an answer, a hum of polite laughter fluttered about the room, which further teased my mind and left unappeased my primal inquisitiveness. Of that long,



“Women Loading Hay” by Bachar Al Issa

involved story about the Arabian poet – may the reader forgive me – I have only retained that one line and forgotten all the rest.

When my father told the story about the first King of Arabia, the room choked on golden silence, unblinking eyes gaped, cigarettes grew long with un-tapped ashes, and a cloud of wonder hovered like a halo in midair.

“When, after the great war, King Saud was invited by the young Queen Elizabeth to a royal banquet at Buckingham Palace, the world watched with keen interest,” began my father. “The table, set with strict royal etiquette, glimmered like the Milky Way on a dark desert night. Seats were arranged according to rank and the King presided at one head of that very long table opposite the Queen, who presided at the other head. The Bedouin King, who had been specifically coached in the formalities of royal manners for that special occasion, comported himself with aristocratic grace, initiating each course with slow, small, calculated bites, gaining the admiration of all the blond, powdered faces scrutinizing him. When, at last, the food was cleared and the grapes brought in, little golden bowls filled with cool water were placed before the King, the Queen, and the rest of the invitees, for the purpose of dipping the grapes before mouthing them. The King, desert-born-and-reared with little water to spare and, through some faux pas, un-coached in the nuances of this particular use, perceived the glittering bowl of cool, clear, water as God-sent manna. While the rest of the table, including the Queen, eyed the King, awaiting his first move, he nonchalantly lifted the golden bowl to his lips and with sibilant mirth, emptied its lucent contents into his desert mouth.

“The table froze. The invitees struggled to recompose their awkward faces. The King licked his lips with succulent insouciance. The Queen, with a pallid smile and a feigned cough, quickly held everyone’s attention. Then, with musical grace and regal dignity, she lifted her bowl to her still smiling lips and slowly savored its calm, cool, contents.

“Seconds thudded like drums, eyes vacillated in their sockets, and all breathing ceased. The Queen gently laid her emptied bowl down and with a tacit tilt of her crowned head, ushered the invitees,



who, in unison, lifted up their bowls and drank them to the lees.”

Hearing that story, the listeners burst the room with loud, exclamatory acclaims followed by flaps of laughter, as if a flock of birds had been abruptly startled into flight. Then, after the roars had died and the silence of astonishment supervened, the group, with amused eyes, beckoned my father for one, final, summary remark. Seizing that moment’s lull, I inquired, “Do golden bowls make water taste better?” Murmuring smiles lit the smoke-filled room but neither comment nor explanation was offered to fill in my gaps.

It would take yet another time and place for the apricot incident to be related. My father went back to his hospital in Jeddah, gone for yet another year. When he returned the next fall, I was as eager to spend as much time listening to his stories as were so many of his friends. Being a year older made me feel more confident and also more inquisitive. Again, it happened after lunch, during one, long, coffee-sipping, cigarette-smoking October afternoon.

Dropped by the school bus at the head of our dead-end street, I walked home and rang the doorbell. The living room was foggy with cigarette-smoking adults listening attentively to my father discourse on the upcoming elections, for he was both surgeon and politician. He saddled me onto his knee, and went on with his exposition, of which I understood nothing.

Then the doorbell rang again, and entered in a tall man from Akkar – a fertile mountain region famed for its fruits – bearing a gift of dried apricots.

“Mr. Bitar,” called my father, standing up and giving the man a huge hug. Then, turning to the guests, he added, “This nice man sent me a case of fresh apricots all the way to Jeddah. His son, who works at our hospital, brought it with him in mid August.”

After the customary handshakes, which dominoed around the room, and after the man was seated, handed a demitasse of Arabic coffee, and offered a cigarette from the cigarette tray, my father saddled me back onto his knee and began his apricot story with this prologue.

“I love Bedouins,” he began, “and I love their Saharan wisdom. For millennia they have survived the Arabian Desert and have thrived in spite of intolerable conditions, vast emptiness, and scarce water, spawning a magnificent language with inimitable literature, a formidable religion, and a vast empire. Of all the Sahara’s nomadic tribes, many of whose members I’ve come to know as patients, not one has accepted the government’s invitation to urbanization. They prefer the stark, serenity of the desert to the boisterous, obtrusiveness of the city. From them, among other things, I have learned endurance, cheerfulness, insouciance, contentment, fidelity, patience, simplicity, and joie de vivre.

“One day, in the heat of August, I came to lunch after a long, operating schedule. As I sat down, my nurse came in to tell me that a Sheikh Hussein from an inland tribe had travelled several days on camel back to see me. I asked her to usher him in and invited him to share lunch with me, which he refused by placing his hand upon his chest and uttering a ‘shukran’. Sitting across the table, he told me of his medical problems and I agreed to examine him after lunch.

“After the food was removed, the cook, with a sly smile on his face, came in with a bowl of cold, perspiring apricots, which he placed before me. ‘Mr. Bitar brought them with him from Lebanon last night,’ he announced, relishing my surprised face. Sheikh Hussein



*“Untitled” by Hussein Almohasen from “The Season of the Return,” 2004*

studied the fruits with delectable curiosity. To a Bedouin, the cold, succulent, red-and-yellow cheeks of those plump, Lebanese apricots must have flaunted a tantalizing spectacle because he couldn’t stop eyeing them. Even in the plush souks of Jeddah, apricots were a rarity because they travel poorly and have a short shelf life.

“Noting his insatiable curiosity, I said, ‘Please. Try some.’

“‘What are they?’ he asked with a parched throat.

“‘They come from Lebanon. They arrived last night,’ I answered, and then pushed the bowl toward him.

“He hesitated then reached with two, long, sand-blown fingers, picked one, and very cautiously, put it in his mouth.

“‘There’s a seed inside,’ I cautioned, as he began to chew.

“A smile rose into his eyes as he spit the seed into his hand, reached for another, and another, and another, consuming the fruits with dizzy enchantment. A thrill shivered through my bones as I watched his mouth, savoring one apricot after another with sumptuous reflection. And when he stopped, it was not because of satiety, but rather because of propriety, for he had eaten about two dozens by then.

“All this time, I said nothing, but watched with a welcoming smile the son of the desert compose himself, put the apricot seeds into his pocket, wipe his bearded mouth with his sun-parched palm, take in a deep sigh, and then verbalize with Koranic solemnity his culinary epiphany.

“‘Doctor,’ he said, pointing at the apricots with his long, trembling, index finger. ‘They say that the bath is heaven upon earth. May Allah be praised. I think that I’ve just had my first bath.’”

Stories told of yesteryears  
Come to us through little ears  
Hold us captive in their spheres;  
When the years will disappear  
Only stories keep them near  
For our little ears to hear. **AJ**



### Sabah: Lebanese Singer Icon

*Continued from page 40*

Abaza. Along the way, she had two children. Her son, Sabah Najib Shammās, works as a medical doctor in the U.S., while daughter Hwaida Anwar Mansi acted in films prior to moving to the U.S. Sabah obtained American citizenship through them and, in addition to her Lebanese passport, received passports from Egypt and Jordan, with the latter serving as an expression of the high regard in which the former Jordanian King held her.

Sabah's designer outfits, hairstyles, and numerous plastic surgeries became her trademarks as she aged. Even late in her life, her priority went to her appearance over her health, and she declared that she loved life, humor, and going out to meet people. Her persistent glamour appealed to some people, but attracted the mockery of comedians, such as famous impersonator Bassem Feghali (no relation) who made a career of it. Despite her apparently shallow personality, Sabah commanded respect with her genuine kindness, honesty, and generosity. Stories about how she was always broke served as fodder for gossip columnists. When she was often asked to describe how her close circle of friends and relatives took financial advantage of her, she preferred to talk about the generosity of those who helped her, including the family that gave her permanent residence in their Beirut hotel, where she eventually died.

Even in death, she still commanded the spotlights with a glamorous style. Frequent rumors of her premature demise amused her and she was quoted to say that she kept people busy even in death. She then asked that people dance and sing at her actual funeral, which they did. Videos of her casket being bounced to the rhythms of her songs went viral. A Lebanese army marching band played her tunes at her burial in Bdadoun. Numerous interviews and biographies document the diva's legacy, including a 2011 30-episode television drama titled *Shahroura*, starring Lebanese singer Carole Samaha.

Sabah died within a year of the death of her frequent duet singer, Wadi al-Safi. Their illnesses at older ages brought attention to the absence of a medical insurance system for artists in Lebanon and the Arab world. Even the great ones had to rely on their families or the charity of donors, and occasionally, heads of other states, to support themselves or pay medical costs. At Sabah's and al-Safi's funerals, many politicians promised to work to fix this problem. Art critics spoke of the end of the golden era of Arab arts.

Although her personality, appearance, and spontaneous comments received a great deal of attention and coverage, her artistic legacy proved more important than many critics gave her credit for. An incredibly talented and capable singer, Sabah excelled in various styles, but was exceptional in the mawwal genre, vocal improvisation in the context of folk songs and zajal poems, as well as mijana and ataba, popularized in Lebanese musicals of the Rahbani Brothers. She characteristically polished off long phrases in one breath, to the awe and praise of her audiences. Her greatest contribution to Lebanon, however, constituted the global appeal that resulted from her transporting Lebanese arts and folk traditions around the world. When Sabah became a star in Egyptian movies, the leading movie industry in the Arab world, she single handedly familiarized Egyptians with the Lebanese

dialect, and through it, the Lebanese culture, paving the path for numerous artists after her to reach beyond their small nation. **AJ**

### Joseph And The Amazing Proto-Technicolor Dreamcoat

*Continued from page 35*

his family, eventually dies and then undergoes a sacred burial. But Hamza's interpretation of this Hebrew prophet adds a distinctly Muslim flavor, with morals waiting at turning points of the text.

Hamza's tale begins with an invocation to the Prophet, Muhammad — Hope of sinners — and to the imams. At one point, Muhammad appears to all Muslim sinners in Hell, wiping the mark of that dark place from their foreheads, and leading them into Paradise. Zeliha (who replaces the wife of Potiphar in this version) repents of her sins and smashes her idols — with the implied identities of Christian saints. After her husband's death, Zeliha finds herself restored to youth and beauty, marries Joseph, and bears him many sons. At the story's end, Moses removes Joseph's coffin from the River Nile and buries it (an ending that is similar to one Talmudic version of Joseph's life).

Hickman includes with his translation an introduction, afterword, and synopsis—but as Hickman says, this ancient story can be enjoyed on its own, as it was when Hamza told and retold it. **AJ**

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# The Art and Culture of Yemeni Silversmithing and Crafts

## Silver Treasures from the Land of Sheba: Regional Yemeni Jewelry

By Marjorie Ransom

The American University in Cairo Press, 2014.

### BY ALYSSA WOOD

With more than 300 color plates, this lavishly illustrated tome offers a wonderful introduction to Yemeni crafts, touching on embroidery as well as the silversmithing referred to in the title. Marjorie Ransom includes stunning examples (all expertly shot by Robert K. Liu) of a variety of hairpieces, headdresses, necklaces (lazem), earrings, bracelets, belts, swords (jambiya), anklets, and amulets. Luckily for readers, she proves an enthusiastic guide with a very readable and engaging style.

This, Ransom's first book, grew out of her lectures and her captions from the exhibition, "Silver Speaks: Traditional Jewelry of the Middle East," which she organized with Ellen Benson of D.C.'s Bead Museum. That exhibit featured her collection of nearly 2,000 pieces of Middle Eastern jewelry. She began collecting silver jewelry from local crafts people in 1966 and 1975, during the time she and her husband, David, worked as American State Department employees posted to Yemen. When she realized how rapidly the pieces had begun disappearing as Yemeni women sold their silver jewelry in a quest for the more popular gold, she began to document this collection. More recently, she returned to Yemen to painstakingly interview people in order to document the techniques, provenance, and cultural context of the pieces in her collection.

"Silver Treasures" provides an overview of the traditional silversmithing of the varying regions of Yemen and their Bedouin populations (since most owners of the silver jewelry were Bedouin) with a focus on the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Where possible, she places the pieces within a specific cultural context, detailing how and under what circumstances the jewelry would be worn. Notably, in her section on Hadramaut, where women excelled in the production of loop-in-loop silver chain, she lists each item that a bride in the Sayyun region would wear for her wedding and its significance. She continues, discussing the importance of dance in the weddings and the regional preference for musical anklets and belts.

One might wish for the inclusion of first-person narratives or excerpts of her interviews, perhaps even as an appendix, given the considerable time and effort dedicated to obtaining those interviews. Hearing craftsmen and owners discuss the jewelry and its significance in their own words would add depth and richness to the text, particularly for anthropologists. In her conclusion, Ransom mentions that she plans to write a book detailing precisely the processes involved in Middle Eastern silversmithing and the people who craft it. Hopefully, this will include first person accounts. Nonetheless, it will constitute a valuable contribution to the study of Yemeni crafts. **AJ**



From "Silver Treasures from the Land of Sheba: Regional Yemeni Jewelry"



From "Silver Treasures from the Land of Sheba: Regional Yemeni Jewelry"



From "Silver Treasures from the Land of Sheba: Regional Yemeni Jewelry"

**Al Jadid Turns 20 in 2015**  
A Review & Record of Arab Culture and Arts



### Sabah: The Curtain Descends Upon a Great Lebanese Singer & Cultural Icon

BY SAMI ASMAR

Lebanese singer and actress, Sabah, died last November at 87 year of age. She was known by many different names, her birth name Jeanette Feghali, her stage name Sabah (as well as the diminutive variation Sabbuha), her common nickname Shahroura, meaning songbird, and Ustoura, meaning legend. Regardless of what her fans called her, they knew that her popular song titled “I love Life” captured her true essence.

Born in 1927 in the Christian Lebanese mountain village of Bdadoun, just outside the capital, Sabah would become one of the most prominent Arab stars in modern history. Her incredible signing talent, especially in the so-called mountain folk style, was discovered at a young age and she released her first song at age 13. With beauty and pleasant personality to go with the voice, this winning formula caught the eye of producer Asia Dagher, who encouraged Sabah’s family to bring her to Cairo for a three-film contract. Her family agreed and the young woman never looked back.

Sabah would go on to make nearly 90 films over seven decades. From the very first film, she took her character’s name, Sabah, as a permanent stage name, a popular choice with her fans. Later, inspired by her famous folk poet uncle, Asaad Feghali, who published under the pen name Shahrour al-Wadi, or songbird of the valley, Sabah adopted her nickname, Shahroura. Having written the zajal poetry which his niece sang as a child, Asaad had exercised a significant influence on Sabah.

The best leading men of the time wanted to work with her, and renowned composers offered to write her songs. The list

of her producers and co-stars constitutes a who’s who in the history of Arab cinema, while the list of composers proves more diverse than that of Um Kulthum’s or Fairuz’s. In Egypt, Sabah collaborated with the legendary composer Riyad al-Sunbati (her first voice coach who reportedly honed her lusty voice but failed to remove the mountain flare), as well as the famed Zakariyya Ahmad, Muhammad al-Qasabgi, Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, Baligh Hamdi, and Farid al-Atrash. In Lebanon, she worked with Filimon Wehbe, Walid Ghilmieh, Zaki Nasif, the Rahbani Brothers and Elias Rahbani. She co-starred in Rahbani musicals with Wadi al-Safi, Nasri Shamseddine, and Fairuz. This diversity proved a key to her artistic success, as she willingly explored different genres, which kept her style fresh for audiences, leading to the release of 50 albums and a reported 3000 songs.

Sabah broke many records and became the first Arab star to

perform at various elite venues and opera houses in Paris, London, New York, and Sydney. When she died, leading American and European news agencies carried special reports on her. In addition to breaking records, Sabah broke many taboos. She spoke uninhibitedly on numerous talk shows about raising children, her sex life, marriages, and betrayal by husbands, as well as her failures in some of those areas. She also admirably stood out for never bad-mouthing fellow artists in the press, and

staying above religious differences and political intrigues.

Sabah loved the spotlight and proved a prolific worker, despite, or possibly because, of surviving many adversities, which starting at a young age with the murder of her mother for alleged infidelity at the hands of her older brother. She also apparently loved to get married, holding a record of nine husbands from different backgrounds, including politicians and her co-stars, such as the famous heart throb, actor Rushdi



Sabah by Zareh for Al Jadid

*Continued on page 38*