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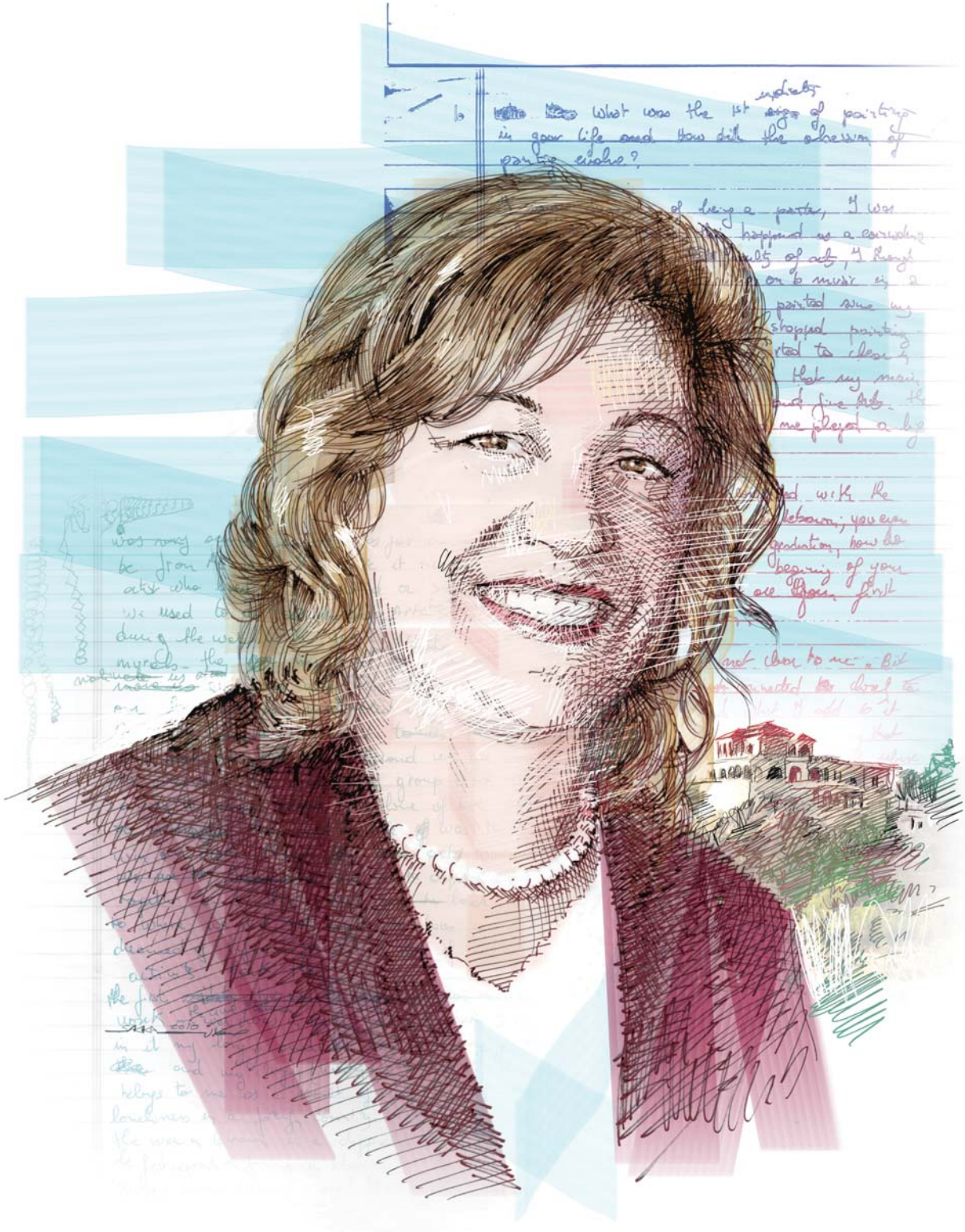
I Mourn
My Loving Wife, My Perfect Friend
Samira Chalala (1956-2010)

–Elie Chalala



Samira Chalala by Mamoun Sakkal

I Mourn My Wife and Friend, Samira Chalala

During the past 16 years of Al Jadid, I have not once allowed the personal to intrude upon the pages of this magazine. However, I am making an exception to remember and reflect on the loss of my wife, Samira Chalala, who was killed as she was crossing the street on her way home from work on February 24th, 2010.

The noted novelist Ghada Samman captured what Samira's death meant to me when she called it an "ember in the heart of Elie Chalala." Yes, her death has been a burning ember in my heart, my saddest moment. But I am not going to dwell on my own personal pain, as I am certain that most readers have had their own tragedies, and can attest to the unspeakable pain brought on by the tragic and sudden departure of a loved one. Instead, I would like to take a moment to reflect on the life that my wife and I shared and the inexplicable tragedy that snatched it away from us, in hopes of inspiring a greater appreciation for the fragility of the human experience.

I would never have been prepared to say goodbye to Samira, but the shock of her death caused additional intense pain and disbelief. My wife was killed as opposed to having died. I anticipate the question: what is the difference? Without being philosophical, I view death as a natural process due to illness or age for which one can prepare, at least to some extent. Killing is a thing of force, something brutal and unexpected that leaves the bereaved unprepared to cope. Without wearing my academic hat and playing the social scientist in the midst of personal tragedy, allow me to reflect on some of the pains I experienced and lessons I learned from the premature death of my wife. Maybe the words "lesson" and "pain" are still too academic, so let me qualify them by being personal and specific in terms of what I miss about my life with Samira.

We were friends for a few years prior to our eight-year marriage. We promised each other many things. Yet, Samira's death left many of these promises and plans unfulfilled, as we were deprived of an expected long life together. Both professionals, she a cytologist and I an academic, we were immersed in our daily jobs and put part of our lives on hold in naive belief that there was still time ahead. The 1998 Nissan pickup truck that struck Samira and killed her instantly crushed all of those plans and dreams.

One of our plans was to visit Lebanon, the country in which we were born and spent our formative years – a country that provided us with comfort when sharing memories of bygone years. The trip was scheduled for the summer of 2010. But we were unable to make the journey together. I did end up traveling to Lebanon – the first time in 38 years – just as planned. But I did so in order to attend a second memorial service for Samira in her hometown, Hammana. It was a visit not only marred by pain and loss, but it was also a journey into a past of tattered memories and places decayed by time, as well as a moment to reconnect with friends and relatives whose lives were transformed by age and war.

But far more than losing the chance to visit the place of our birth together, we were deprived of the beauty of going through life side by side. Deprived of the time to spiritually communicate, to say to each other what we had not, or could not. Deprived of the chance to simply know each other better; this was the most painful loss. I suppose I could invoke a popular rationalization here, one that would be understood by many professionals, and say that I failed to "balance work with private life." I am certainly not here to judge this rationale, being aware of what professionals go through on a daily basis. But I am here to share with you the pain of failing to establish that balance before Samira's death, the impossibility of doing so now, and to urge each of you to turn to the one you love and give that person the gift of your time above any and all other things. **AJ**

I want to thank the hundreds who sent their condolences via e-mails, mails, phone calls as well as those who attended my wife's memorial services, both in Los Angeles and Lebanon. Their kind words and sympathies have been a source of comfort at a very difficult time. I want to extend special thanks to two artists, Mamoun Sakkal and Doris Bittar, for their artwork of Samira, which appear on the first and second page of the magazine.

–Elie Chalala

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ALJADID
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Samira Chalala

Samira Chalala was born in Tanios and Helene Ayoub's family in the village of Hammana in Mount Lebanon on January 31, 1956. She was the fourth child in a family of seven. She received her secondary education in Hammana and attended high school in Beirut, where she would complete her first year studying French literature at the Faculty of Pedagogy in Lebanese University, having been awarded a scholarship through competitive examination. With the civil war in 1976, she emigrated to Ohio, where she obtained a degree in cytology from the Cleveland Clinic. She later moved to Southern California, continuing her education and earning a Bachelor's degree from California State University, Dominguez Hills. She eventually joined Long Beach Memorial Hospital as a cytologist, where she held various technical and leadership positions. Samira contributed to and edited a number of publications. She also donated her time generously to Lebanese non-profit causes.

Cover Artist

"Farewell to Samira Chalala," the collage appearing on the cover, was created by Samira's friend Doris Bittar. Bittar is an award winning multi-disciplinary artist whose art is housed in public collections in the U.S. and abroad. Bittar has had several museum solo exhibits and participated in the Arab-American National Museum's inaugural show, the Sharjah Biennial, and the Alexandria Biennale. She teaches at California State University, San Marcos.

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Reclaiming Arab-American History: Remembering Michael Suleiman and Evelyn Shakir

BY LISA SUHAIR MAJAJ

Michael Suleiman and Evelyn Shakir, who passed away within weeks of each other last spring, left behind legacies of dedication and intellectual achievement that will be long remembered. As scholars and writers of distinction, each made a significant impact on the field of Arab-American studies. And each offered inspiring visions of what Arab America has offered and what it might become.

Evelyn Shakir and Michael Suleiman

Born in Tiberias, Palestine in 1934, Michael Suleiman came to the United States following the establishment of Israel. After earning his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Wisconsin he embarked on an academic path, establishing his career at Kansas State University, where he became University Distinguished Scholar and received the University's International Educator Award. Among the many other recognitions and honors he received during his lifetime were several National Endowment for the Humanities grants, a number of Fulbright-Hayes fellowships, a Smithsonian Institute Grant, a Ford Faculty Research Grant, and the positions of Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton and of Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

A consummate scholar of all things Arab-American, Suleiman is widely acknowledged as one of founding figures of the field of Arab-American studies. As part of his efforts he sought to build a community of scholars, and was known in particular for his mentorship of younger researchers in the field. Himself a meticulous scholar, Suleiman published over 70 journal articles and book chapters on Arab and Arab-American topics. In addition, he authored three books, including "The Arabs in the Mind of America" (1988), and edited four collections of essays, including the landmark volume "Arabs in America: Building a New Future" (1999). In 2004 he published the volume "Arab-Americans: An Annotated Bibliography," the culmination of 25 years of research – a "labor of love," as he termed it. This bibliography sought to cover all aspects of Arab-American life, and was intended to lay the groundwork for a comprehensive history of Arab America. It is a great loss that the manuscript in progress based on this research – "Arabs in the United States: a Social and Political History" – remained incomplete at his death.

Also still in progress at Suleiman's passing was an edited volume of essays (currently under review for posthumous publication) deriving from the conference on Arab-American Women that he organized at Kansas State University in March 2009. Like so many of his undertakings, this conference stood as a testament not only to Suleiman's intellectual commitment, professional achievement and inclusive vision, but also to the regard with which he was widely viewed. Speakers praised his intellectual generosity, his passion for mentorship, and his personal warmth. In a description both succinct and representative, Suad Joseph has likewise characterized Suleiman as "an intellectual of the highest rigor, a person of the highest integrity, and a friend of the highest honor."

Evelyn Shakir's life drew upon different, but equally significant, facets of Arab-American experience. The grandchild of immigrants from Lebanon, Shakir grew up in the Boston-area Arab-American community of West Roxbury, surrounded by immigrant community life. A literary scholar who received her Ph.D. from Boston University, she taught at various institutions, including Tufts and Northeastern, before making her professional home at Bentley University. As a Senior Fulbright Scholar, she also taught at the Universities of Damascus and of Bahrain, leaving a lasting impression at both institutions. Mary Tabakow comments that "Faculty and students at the University of Bahrain spoke of her [Shakir] with respect and affection; some Bahraini female students I met in 2006 told me, 'We believe in American

Studies because we are reading Professor Shakir's book.'"

Although her early work focused on the standard literary canon, Shakir made her most significant mark through publications in the fields of Arab-American literary criticism and Arab-American feminism, as well as through her own creative writing. In a series of historically significant and critically nuanced essays, she traced Arab-American literature from the earliest part of the twentieth century to the present, providing a critical lens through which to view this literature and helping to establish the foundation of an Arab-American literary criticism. Meanwhile, her gift for story-telling and her focus on Arab-American women's issues came together in the 1997 volume "Bint Arab," one of the first book-length explorations of Arab-American women's lives. Based on interviews and family stories as well as historical research, this book explored the conflicts and contradictions confronting Arab-American women. Shakir's portrayal of Arab-American women's negotiations – which she described as "hearts divided between two urges" – along with her ability to make the historical personal, struck a resonant chord with many readers. As Pauline Kaldas notes, "Shakir's ability to combine personal narrative, family history, cultural information and immigration history into one book had a tremendous influence on me as an Arab American and a writer. I saw myself and my own history in her work."

Shakir's 2007 volume of short fiction, "Remember Me to Lebanon: Stories of Lebanese Women in America," extended her focus on Arab-American women into the realm of fiction. The winner of the Arab-American National Book Award for adult fiction, and described by one reviewer as "a gem of a book," this collection both demonstrated and expanded the range of Shakir's literary abilities. The book provided space not only for the imaginative exploration of Arab-American women's lives, but also for the honing of a distinctive Arab-American literary voice one that portrayed Arab-American life with nuance and verve.

Michael Suleiman and Evelyn Shakir will be long and lovingly remembered for their professional achievements as well as their dedication to the betterment of Arab America. Each contributed significantly to the communities they researched and wrote about, not only through their scholarship and publications but also through the more intangible labor of community building. The spaces they leave behind will be hard to fill. But their legacies will continue to inform Arab-American culture and the field of Arab-American studies for years to come. ***AJ***

Untitled

BY MOAYYAD ALRAWI

I saw a man
Wandering in the abyss of the wilderness
Blocking the sun with both hands
Naked, waiting for the night
Holding his head high and
Pushing out a painful scream
In the face of the sky

I asked him what do you do
He said I am howling,
I am howling
All night
Perhaps a full moon would rise
And turn me back into a wolf
So that I would get along with people
Relate to what is inside them
So that we would go together
To where the smell of blood emanates

Translated from the Arabic by Basil Samara

"Untitled" is from Moayyad al-Rawi's: "*Mamalek*" (Kingdoms), Beirut 2010, Manshourat Al-Jamal.

When A Flower Dies

Dedicated to Samira Chalala

BY HANNA SAADAH

When a flower dies and Spring with one flower less
Bears a bald spot on her sunny dress
Summer wonders why with gapping eyes?
When a harvest dies
And Summer birds, still hungry, fly away
With open beaks, nor dance nor sing nor play
Fall sheds its yellow tears and sighs?
When the final wink of snow melts down
Revealing underneath the winter's brown
Sun-hungry seeds awaken from their sorrow
To sprout the smiles that color Spring's tomorrow.
When Spring returns to color earth and bless
And it no longer has one flower less
Nor bears a bald spot on her sunny dress
It shows how life each Spring can conquer death.
Whosoever returns to mother earth
Comes back a smiling flower at rebirth.

_____

Hanna Saadah is Emeritus Clinical Professor of Medicine, 2003, Department of Medicine, University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center

The New Christian Question

BY MICHAEL TEAGUE

The December 2009 issue of Qantara, the Paris-based *Institut du Monde Arabe*'s magazine of Arab culture, is devoted almost exclusively to a reassessment of the current predicament of Christians in the Arab world. Whereas in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Christians found themselves at the forefront of the Arab nationalist movement and were instrumental in helping significant portions of the Arab world to appropriate and benefit from modern political, cultural and artistic developments, today the case could not be more different. As Francois Zabbal, the magazine's editor, points out in his introductory article, any interest shown by the media (and here one would assume the author is referring to the media in France, since in the United States the issue is, predictably, non-existent) in the plight of these unfortunate Christians—the Copts of Egypt or the Assyrians of Iraq for example, always appears in the context of their "decline" and victimization at the hands of Islamist groups. As such, this can be largely understood as yet another symptom of the corrosive effect that "Global War on Terror" language has had on our ability to insightfully analyze the circumstances of those living in the Middle East. Zabbal's point is that greater effort is necessary if one is truly concerned with understanding the complex and precarious reality of today's Christian Arabs.

Cover of a special Qantara issue about Middle Eastern Christians

"Christians of the Arab World: New Questions" does not provide a comprehensive list of each and every Christian community in the Middle-East, nor does it seek to pronounce any sort of final word on the subject. Rather, the aim is to construct a framework in which to discuss the situation in a more realistic manner- a framework that takes into account pertinent facts, whether they be of the historical or the on-the-ground variety. In this manner, Zabbal asks why and how it came to be that the Christians, who once played a leading role in the Arab renaissance (*Al Nahda*), and who were among the most vocal and idealistic proponents of Arab nationalism, now find themselves falling back on the confessionalism they once emphatically rejected. The answers to these difficult questions are not totally obvious, but are perhaps to be found in two articles, one by Bernard Heyberger and the other by Georgine Ayoub, that deal respectively with the Christian relationship with the West and the role that Christians played in the modernization of the Arabic language.

Heyberger's article is an excellent attempt to grapple with the many paradoxes of Oriental-Occidental Christian relations. He makes the observation that Arab Christians contributed greatly to the commercial success of Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ," a film considered almost unanimously by Western Christian standards as anti-Semitic. This is to underline the fact that these Christians share many traits with their Muslim compatriots, such as antipathy towards the state of Israel, but also a more ardent form of religious observance, and often the same sort of distrust of Western rhetoric about democracy and tolerance. For all the similarities, however, it cannot be ignored that the development of Christian communities in the Middle-East throughout the last few centuries can be traced back to the West. Indeed, Arab Christians formed their identity in part around religious practices originating in Europe (the Vatican especially), as well as around the writings of European orientalists.

More importantly, it was this relationship that helped bring about the secularization and modernization of Arabic, and this is the gist of Ayoub's contribution. She outlines the principal factors that transformed the language from a purely religious tongue into a social and cultural one. This development took place in two different locations during the *Nahda*-- in Egypt, with Muslim reformers in Cairo, and in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially Beirut, where Christian intellectuals such as Butrus al-Bustani, and Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq set about to make their own reforms. Essentially this was an effort to introduce the process of modernity into Arab society, to "vulgarize" knowledge, as it were, to make of language a social institution. Al-Buastani and Shidyaq published dictionaries and encyclopedias that took into account the development of the language over centuries, not just its original Quranic usage. A press was created, and journals and newspapers sought to provide a space in which public opinion could develop, and this example was followed throughout the major capitals of the Ottoman Empire. New words were created to describe new realities. Shidyaq's "*Al-Saq 'ala l-Saq*," published in Paris in 1855, is not only the prototype of the Arabic novel, but also marks the introduction of the personal pronoun "I" into common usage. But as much as Ayoub outlines these momentous changes, she is equally aware of their inevitable limitations. The Christian intellectuals who made the leap of faith in the name of reform were able to do so because of their otherness. Those mentioned above and the ones who were to

follow, Amin Maalouf is but one example, were able to accomplish their feats partly because of their familiarity with Western languages that had already become compatible with modernity. Thus, the very condition that allowed them to change the Arabic language in such a drastic fashion was also the basis of their difference in a predominantly Islamic society, regardless of how sincerely they embraced Arab nationalism. They would ultimately have to rely upon the like-mindedness of Muslim reformers to re-evaluate the Islamic foundations of the language, a like-mindedness that has become over the years increasingly less forthcoming.

With this historical primer in mind, "Christians of the Arab World" delves into three specific Christian communities of the Middle-East: the Copts of Egypt, the Christians of Iraq, and the Christians of the Syrian village of Maaloula. In the case of Egypt and Iraq, the picture is rather bleak. Alain Roussillon highlights the unenviable plight of the Copts, who have become marginalized since the 1950s. Previously as staunchly supportive of Arab nationalism as their Levantine counterparts, the Copts became a prime target for Islamic extremists starting in the 1970s. Today the attacks continue, though less frequently, but the situation is compounded by internal divisions within the community. The Coptic pope Chenouda III has, since the (nominal) establishment of multi-party elections in 2005, been a vocal supporter of the Mubarak regime. This has angered many of his constituents, who feel as though this stance reinforces sectarianism and leaves the community susceptible once again to become targeted as sympathizers of a brutally authoritarian regime. These dissenting voices seem to be vindicated by the Christmas massacre of 2009, proof that the Copts have received little in the way of protection or political representation in return for their support of the government.

Sebastian de Courtois writes of the perhaps even more desperate situation of the Assyro-Chaldean and Syriac Christians of Iraq who, since the U.S. invasion of 2003 have been especially vulnerable. What can only be called ethnic cleansing has forced these peoples into the Kurdish north of the country, where they are working to establish an autonomous region within an autonomous region. In order to do this, however, the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council has been forced to make compromises with a Kurdish political system that is not only notorious for its corruption and nepotism, but that represents a culture that has historically been in many ways just as hostile to the Christians of the region. Many have opted instead to become refugees in Turkey and elsewhere.

The Christians of Maaloula in Syria, one of the few remaining places where the Aramaic language is widely spoken, are the subject of Frederic Pichon's contribution. These Christians and their ancient culture are protected and preserved by the Assad regime, and the situation is in some ways a very inspiring example of the successful cohabitation between Christianity and Islam-- indeed many Muslims go to Maaloula to pray before the Christian religious monuments there. The regime encourages and helps to support these Christians, though, naturally, this fact is often exploited for propagandistic purposes. At the same time, the people of Maaloula live mainly off of tourism; Christians from every imaginable place on earth come to visit, and this leaves many of the younger generation with no choice but to head for Damascus in search of better economic opportunities.

Christian Poche, an ethnomusicologist, writes the final article in the series, about the peculiar tradition of the eulogist in the Christian churches of the east. The evolution of the art of the eulogist has a trajectory that is similar in many aspects to that of the Christian communities as a whole. Over the centuries, eulogists have had to adapt their art, secularizing it in a sense in order to accommodate the ethnic influences by which they have been surrounded. For example, songs traditionally sung in Greek or Syriac had to be translated into Arabic with great care in order to preserve the original character of the music. Influences from outside the region have also left a footprint, like protestant pastors who subjugated the form to western musical notation. Like the Christians themselves, this art has managed to survive either in spite of or because of its dexterity vis-à-vis a variety of external pressures.

During much of the 19th and early 20th centuries, eastern Christians were willing to submit their identity to the needs of the greater Arab nation. Today, with the dream of Arab nationalism having long outlived its immanence, the energy of their sacrifices and achievements are being artificially relegated to a distant past. But this recent effort by Qantara magazine to properly contextualize the current circumstances is no mere funeral oration and should under no circumstances be mistaken for one. The continuing exodus of Christians from the Middle East is not simply some melancholic historical inevitability to which the people of the region are or should somehow be resigned— its implications are in fact potentially quite dangerous, and this is true not just for Christians but for Arabs in general. The Middle East may not be able to sustain the amputation of one of its most integral and dynamic components.**AJ**

The False Widow…

BY GHADA SAMMAN

The gentle French woman
Wrote on my identification papers: Widow!
And patted my shoulder in commiseration.
I did not tell her that I'm not really a widow
For you are still alive with me at home and on the street and everywhere…
But no one has seen you or heard you but me…
It seems that I alone, have become able to relate to your current life..
Is that what death is? Your death…
Or is that what pride is…My obduracy?

Translated from Arabic by Rewa Zeinati

From Ghada Samman, "Al Qalb al-Ari...A'shiqa" (The Naked Heart...Lover), Beirut: Ghadda Samman Publications, 2009

Clearing a Path for Mainstream Arab-American Literature

BY ANDREA SHALAL-ESA

Arab-American literature was already growing by leaps and bounds in the late 1990s, but the Sept. 11, 2001, hijacking attacks fueled an upsurge of interest in all things Arab and Muslim, and helped broaden the mainstream appeal of poetry and prose by American authors of Arab descent. More Arab-American writers are getting published, and their work is finding its way into more anthologies of women's writing and other postcolonial collections, albeit slowly. Challenges remain, to be sure, but we are watching a vibrant new genre of Arab-American literature emerge after a century of struggle for recognition.

Much of the post-9/11 attention sought out non-fiction works about the Middle East, Islam and the situation of women in the region, with little regard for works of fiction – a trend also seen in other areas of the publishing world. Michael Norris of Simba Information analyzed Bowker's Books in Print database and showed a marked increase in the publication of books about the Middle East and the Arab world beginning in 2003 and 2004. This slight delay reflects the lag time in publishing and interest further bolstered by the Iraq war – although he says the higher numbers have already leveled off. His data shows a steady increase in the number of fiction and non-fiction books published about the Middle East, from 793 in 1997 to a peak of 1,304 in 2004. In 2006, the number had dropped back to 1,076.

The sad truth is that even now the centuries-old tradition of Arab letters and philosophy remains largely outside U.S. consciousness. When these works are available in English translation, Arab literary and religious classics are often grouped with Third World literature, emergent literature and post-colonial literature, something scholar Fedwa Malti-Douglas describes as a "grave injustice" given their rich history. (One of the only Arab writers with a strong publishing record in the United States is the late Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz, but his works became readily available only after he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988, the first and only Arab to achieve that honor.)

"Untitled" by Youssef Abdelki

Contemporary Arab-American writers trace their literary heritage to a group of poets active in the 1920s. The group, known as Al-Mahjar or "the immigrant poets," included writers from Lebanon and Syria such as Gibran Kahlil Gibran, Ameen Rihani and Mikhail Naimy. Together, these writers sparked an interest in immigrant writing among the mainstream American audience, as writer and critic Elmaz Abinader demonstrated. Rihani, whose works include "The Book of Khalid" (1911) and "A Chant of Mystics and Other Poems" (1921), is often described as the "father of Arab American literature." One of his most notable accomplishments was to introduce free verse to the traditional Arab poetic canon around 1905.

Gibran not only held a prominent role among the early Arab-American writers but also kept company with U.S. literary figures such as the poet Robinson Jeffers and playwright Eugene O'Neill. His opus, "The Prophet" (1923) has been translated into more than 40 languages and for many years, it was the best-selling book in the United States after the Bible; today there are some eight million copies in print. Despite his immense popularity, the first serious anthology of American poetry to include Gibran's work was "Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry," published by Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa in 1988.

From the late 1940s through the early 1980s, writers seldom self-identified as Arab American, although strong independent poets and writers such as Samuel Hazo, D.H. Melhem, and Etel Adnan established their reputations in this time period.

Abinader, an award-winning writer herself, says these writers "distinguished themselves initially as writers independent of ethnic categorization (and) later donned the cloak of the Arab-American identity." She describes them as a bridge between the two generations, as well as between Arab-American writing and the American literary canon. For instance Melhem, a noted scholar and author of the first comprehensive study of

Gwendolyn Brooks, helped mainstream Arab-American literature by organizing the first Arab-American poetry reading at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in 1984 (Abinader). Adnan created her own publishing company, The Post-Apollo Press, which has helped ensure publication and distribution of many works by Arab-American writers. She also served for years as president of the Radius of Arab American Writers, Inc. [RAWI], a writers' group founded in the early 1990s.

Poets Naomi Shihab Nye, Lawrence Joseph, David Williams and others made their marks in the 1980s and 1990s, with younger poets following their footsteps, including Suheir Hammad, Nathalie Handal and Hayan Charara, to name just a few. Diana Abu-Jaber published her first novel, "Arabian Jazz," in 1993, a book widely described as the first mainstream Arab-American novel. Mona Simpson is another Arab-American writer who has published several novels, but she does not strongly identify as Arab American and the subject is not central to her work.

Several important anthologies and periodicals have helped generate interest in Arab-American literature over the past decade, including "Grape Leaves" and "Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings By Arab-Amerian and Arab-Canadian Feminists," by Joanna Kadi in 1994. "Post Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing"(1999) showcased recognized writers and introduced newer writers, including Hammad, Hayan Charara and Mohja Kahf to a broader audience. Handal won great acclaim for compiling the poetry of Arab women writers, including quite a few Arab Americans, in her book, "The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology" (2001), which was published by Interlink Publishing and has sold more than 10,000 copies, a phenomenal achievement for a book of poetry in the difficult U.S. market.

Another important collection, "Dinarzad's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction," followed in 2004, edited by Khaled Mattawa and co-editor Pauline Kaldas. This year, Charara came out with a new anthology, "Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Poetry," which includes more poets who cover more new ground with their themes and topics.

Clearly, the early years of the 21st century have seen a spate of new works of Arab-American fiction and poetry, autobiographical memoirs, anthologies and a growing body of literary criticism. However, several factors, including consolidation of the publishing industry and the attendant focus on profitability, anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism, and the increasing conglomeratizing of bookstores, have continued to limit the number and range of works that are being published. Despite promising inroads, Arab-American literature is still far from integrated into the mainstream of U.S. cultural criticism. Charara concludes that most of the poets included in his anthology remain mostly unknown "not only to the larger public, but even to 'experts' in the field of contemporary American poetics and to other poets."

Such continuing obstacles have spurred increasing numbers of Arab Americans to create their own venues to present works of literary and cultural production, a trend that one expects to continue to strengthen in coming years. RAWI, has been a key driver in this movement, as have its individual members. The organization has grown immensely since its inception and now includes over 100 Arab-American writers and maintains a website that features member profiles and original writing. In 2000, writers D.H. Melhem and Leila Diab compiled an anthology of the work of RAWI members, and the group has begun hosting annual literary conferences to further promote Arab-American literary production.

"...several factors, including consolidation of the publishing industry and the attendant focus on profitability... have continued to limit the number and range of works that are being published."

Playwright Kathryn Haddad founded the award-winning journal Mizna: Prose, Poetry and Art Exploring Arab America, in 1999, facilitating publication of the work of hundreds of Arab-American writers and visual artists whose work might not otherwise have seen the light of day. This journal, Al Jadid, founded by Elie Chalala 14 years ago, has also played a critical role in showcasing the work of Arab-American writers and critics. New York recently had its fifth annual Arab-American Comedy Festival, drawing a record 1,700 attendees. Handal is helping to found a group based in Britain that plans to stage and highlight Palestinian theater, and Kahf is working on an anthology of Muslim-American literature.

Together, these individuals and organizations have contributed mightily to the emergence of a rich and growing body of Arab-American literature, making it more accessible to scholars and students in disciplines such as English, comparative literature, American studies and women's studies, as well as the general public. In addition, their efforts have created a national community of Arab-American writers, many of whom previously felt isolated within their own regional communities. This emerging community has helped fuel more collaborative projects and remains a key driver behind events that showcase and encourage Arab-American literary production.

Several years ago, the late scholar Edward Said said the Arab-American community was as in a "gestating stage," and that there wasn't quite enough of a tradition of Arab-American literature yet. At that point, he said, the "Arab American simply plays a very tiny, marginal, unimportant role." The ensuing years have provided some glimmers of hope, and a new age may be dawning. The period of gestation is over, and the community has in fact given birth to a strong, healthy and growing body of Arab-American literature. Challenges still abound, but the number of venues for publication and distribution is expanding, and a few pioneers are clearing the path for increased access even to big, mainstream New York-based publishers. **AJ**

The Veiling of the City

BY MOHAMMAD ALI AL-ATASSI

Many visitors to Damascus today are amazed to see how the practice of veiling has become so widespread, especially when compared to twenty or thirty years ago. It is as if the veil has imprinted the Syrian capital with its image. This is the case in the city's streets and markets, its restaurants and parks, its schools and universities, its public offices and private companies, not to mention the homes that confine women within their walls in the name of the veil.

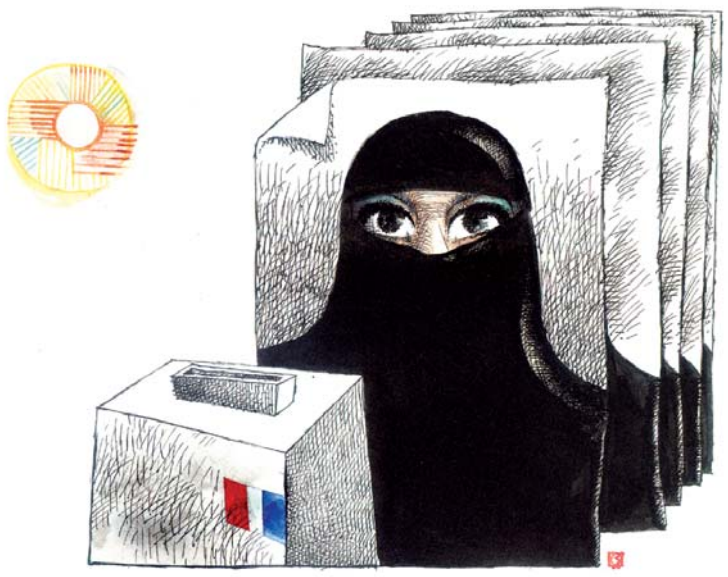
Indeed, a good many educated and enlightened thinkers in Damascus point to the renewed prevalence of veiling in order to illustrate both their powerlessness and the intensity of the conservative Islamic movement that their city is witnessing.

This article aims to bring to light some forgotten pages in the history of unveiling in Damascus and in the liberation movement of Damascene women. By elucidating some of the intellectual, social, and political factors that contributed to the movement toward unveiling in the first half of the twentieth century, the author hopes to explain some of the conditions that led to the reversal of this pattern from the 1970s onward.

While the forgotten pages in the history of unveiling discussed here are particular to the city of Damascus, they can just as easily be taken from the history books of any number of Eastern cities such as Beirut, Jerusalem, Baghdad, or Cairo.

It has become standard practice to date the launching of the movement in favor of Arab women's unveiling and education to the publication of Qasim Amin's book, "The Liberation of Women," published in Cairo in 1899, and followed a year later by his book, "The New Woman." Nonetheless, the true movement to unveil Arab women had to await the 1919 revolution and the famous women's demonstration, led by Huda Shaarawi, to welcome back the exiled nationalist leader, Saad Zaghloul. There, Shaarawi and several other women demonstrators publicly removed their veils in the middle of the square. Zaghloul himself, upon his arrival, removed the veils from the faces of some of those who were there welcoming him.

In her book, "Veiling and Unveiling," Natheera Zein al-Din quotes the literary writer, May Zeyadeh, who remarked of this incident in the Egyptian newspaper, "Al Ahram": "Is there a more significant factor affecting women's unveiling than the actions of the leader [Zaghloul] upon his appearance at the women's congregation waiting there to welcome him? Indeed, his hand was faster than his mouth in expressing his wish, when, laughing, he reached over and removed the veil from the face of the woman demonstrator who was standing closest to him. His action was received with applause and ululations. The women there followed suit and took off their veils, signaling in that day, the liberation of women."



"Untitled" by Youssef Abdelki

By custom, religion, and practice, at that time, veiling was understood to mean the total covering of the woman's body, including her face. Today, this form of covering is called "*niqaab*." The call for unveiling by such as Qasim Amin and Huda Shaarawi at first only referred to removing the veil from women's faces and allowing them to leave their homes. Nonetheless, their efforts contributed to relaxing the rigid, orthodox view of the veil, and removed social and religious taboos with regard to unveiling. Their actions also exposed the lack of validity in the excuses and religious sayings that were used to perpetuate the practice of veiling up till then. Those actions also paved the way toward the eventual removal of the veil completely from women's heads. While this latter development took several years to occur, it was nonetheless a

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natural outcome of the path that had been opened up by Qasim Amin.

Egypt, at the time, was at the forefront [of Arab countries] in the movement toward women's liberation. Egyptian women made the transition from words to deeds. In an article published in 1928 in "Hillal" magazine, Sheikh Ali Abd al-Razzaq remarked: "I consider Egypt to have made the transition, with God's blessing, from the conceptual considerations of veiling to the actual implementation of unveiling. Among Egyptians, except for retrogrades, you can no longer find those who question whether unveiling is permissible by religion or not, or whether it is one of the necessities of modern life or not. Rather, even those who are still old-fashioned and veiled believe that unveiling is in accord with religion, reason, and necessity, something that cannot be avoided in a modern city." Abd al-Razzaq adds, "Our brethren in Syria seem to have a different history to veiling and unveiling than in Egypt. For they seem not to have yet gone beyond the conceptual stage that was begun by the late Qasim Amin twenty years ago. Nonetheless, they seem to walk beside us along this new path, the way of actual, total unveiling."

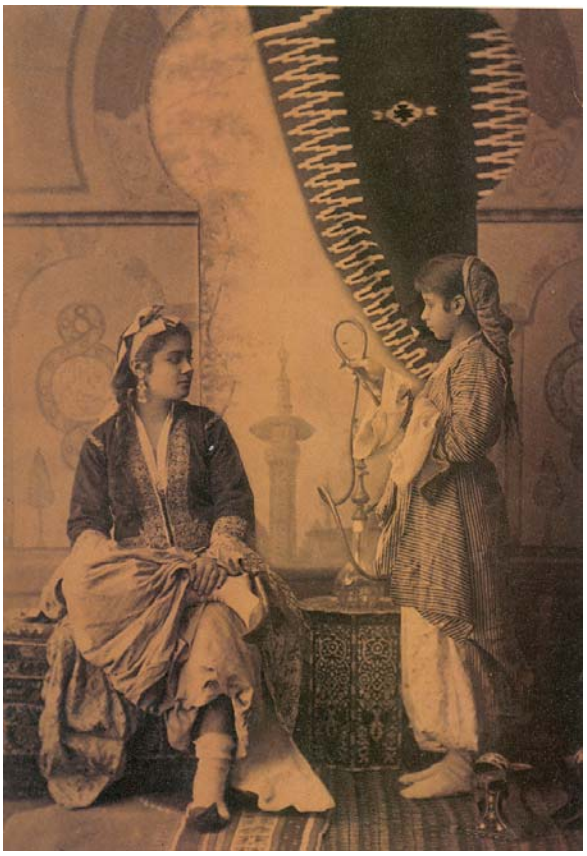
Veiling in Damascus

In Damascus, it appears that there were only a handful of scattered writings toward the end of the nineteenth century in favor of women's unveiling. These were penned by such writers as Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq and Zeinab Fawaz al-Amiliya. In fact, no complete work along the lines written by Qasim Amin appeared in Syria until the publication of a book by Nazira Zain al-Din [published ca. 1928].

In Damascus, the catalyst that encouraged women to lift the veil from their faces in public for the first time was a national event that was equal in significance to the return of the exiled Egyptian nationalist leader Saad Zaghloul. This event, however, was of a different type from the one that occurred in Egypt. It took place when the American ambassador Charles Crane visited Syria in April 1922. Crane was sympathetic to the Syrian demands for independence from France and he was a supporter of the Syrian nationalist leader, Abd al-Rahman Shahbandar. Shahbandar was known for his calls for the liberation and education of women. He, along with other nationalist leaders, was arrested for participating in public demonstrations welcoming Crane and calling for Syrian independence. These arrests led to more demonstrations among the general public. For the first time in the history of the city, women began participating in public demonstrations, and some even took off their veils.

In his book, "Syria and the French Mandate," the historian Philip Khoury writes: "On April 11th, organizers added a new approach to their demonstrations, positioning forty women at the head of their long march, among them the wife of Shahbandar as well as other wives of imprisoned nationalists."

Upper class women such as the wife of Shahbandar, Sara al-Mouayed al-Azem, and other wives of nationalist leaders were in the forefront of those who took off their veils in public. However, the matter was much more difficult for less privileged Damascene women. In fact, prevailing custom put pressure on Muslim women to remain fully veiled in public up until the 1920s. For some girls, leaving the home to go to the marketplace was an act that put their lives in danger.

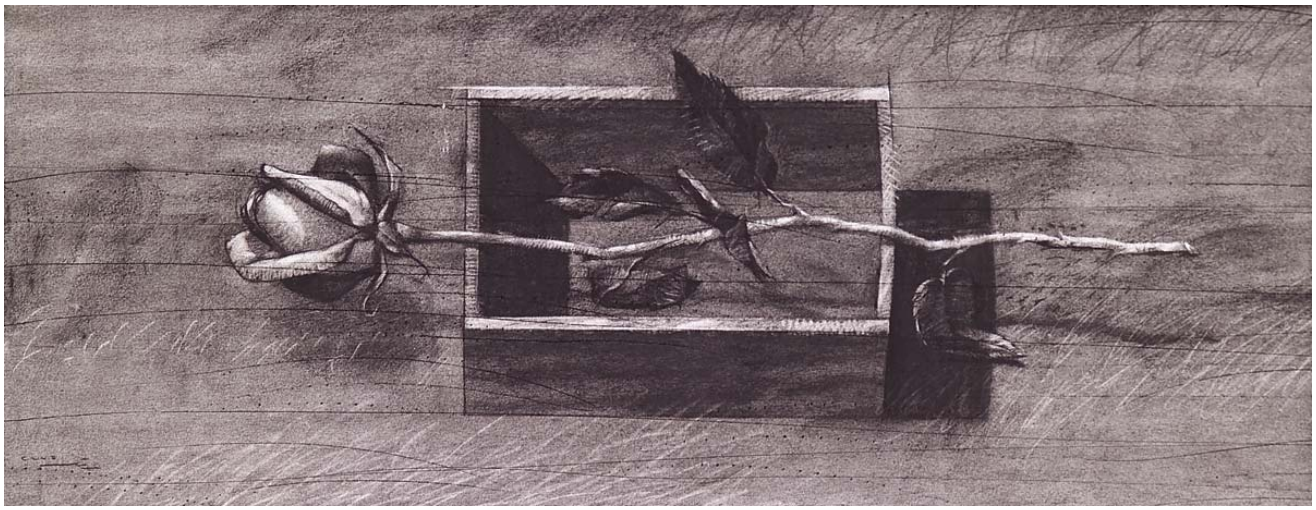


"A domestic/servant offering a narghileh" by Jean-Baptiste Charlier, ca 1867 from"Des Photographes a Damas 1840-1918" by Badr El-Hage, Marval 2000.

In 1927, a group of Damascene women, foremost among them the feminist pioneer Thuraya al-Hafiz, organized a demonstration at Marja Square, during which they lifted the veils from their faces. The matter of veiling was not so easily settled however. As Nazira Zain al-Din points out in the preface to her book on women's rights and unveiling, the reason why she felt compelled to write in the first place was the unrelenting pressures that were placed on Damascene women to stay veiled. She notes: "I began to study the position of Eastern women as soon as I began to understand the meaning of justice, liberty, free-will, self-reliance, and the insufficiency, even inadmissibility, of tradition in God's religion. I found much that was strange and saddening to me. I held back a great deal, but the events in Damascus last month, when Muslim women's freedom was suppressed and they were forbidden from leaving their homes to enjoy the air and light, drove me to take up the pen to express an abbreviated version of the pain I feel."

Up until the end of Ottoman rule in the early decades of the twentieth century, veiling in Damascus had remained a social

practice that required not only the complete covering of a Muslim woman's face, but also of her full body. This practice also entailed sequestering women in the home, forbidding them from obtaining an education, and arranging for them to marry at an early age. In his book, "The Damascene Woman," Abd al-Aziz al-Hithma describes the situation of women at the time. "When women went out of doors, they would wrap themselves in a white veil that reached to their feet and would cover their faces in colorful scarves that prevented others from seeing anything behind them. Enveloped in modesty and respectability, no one dared approach them, even if they were related to them, because for men to talk to women in the marketplace was deemed shameful."



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Women at that time were completely denied the right to education and forbidden from leaving the home alone. Religious men, who controlled the educational system until late in the nineteenth century, taught boys only. Their curriculum consisted of a series of "booklets" that taught the Arabic language and the fundamentals of religion. Up until the beginning of the twentieth century, there was only one high school for boys of elite families in Damascus. Its language of instruction was Turkish and it prepared boys to pursue higher education in Istanbul.

Upon the end of Ottoman rule, however, a series of fast-paced changes overtook the country. Those occurred at the political, economic, and social levels. The ideas of the Arab Renaissance and calls for educational reforms spread among the educated classes through important reformists such as Sheikh Taher al-Jazzairi, Sheikh Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi, and Muhammad Kurd Ali. The changes proposed by these thinkers paved the way toward more modern political, social, and cultural practices in the new neighborhoods of the city. These changes also led to a decrease in the influence of conservative religious figures on social conduct. Little by little, it became possible for girls to be free of veiling and to enter schools and universities, and so to assume their place in the public sphere.

The Unveiling of the City

The issue of women's liberation became one of the principal points of social controversy during this new phase of social openness, becoming one of the main topics of public debate in newspaper articles. This debate was accompanied by noticeable changes in the position and role that women came to occupy in the public sphere.

The practices of unveiling, mixing of the genders, and the imitation of European lifestyles were at first limited to the privileged classes of Damascene [Muslim] society (in particular the family clans of al-Azem and al-Abid) and a few Christian women. This phenomenon, however, soon began to spread among large segments of the educated and the professionals of the middle class. While this new lifestyle was no longer limited to a particular class, its adoption was still somewhat circumscribed, remaining most prevalent among the young girls and students in the newer neighborhoods and a few upper class women. An article titled "The Syrian Girl Today," published in the newspaper "Al-Sabah" on January 22, 1934, clearly describes the changes taking place: "The new spirit of modernism has arisen in the Syrian capital to such a point that you can walk in the streets of Damascus and witness many young women wearing Western clothes in bright colors, eschewing their old clothes, and walking on the street with male friends. This is something that was simply unheard of before our time."

As this new lifestyle began to spread to wider segments of society, it met resistance and even violent rejection by religious authorities and notable personalities in certain populist areas such as Hay al-Meydan. In his book, "Syria and the French Mandate," the historian Philip Khoury points out that the religious organizations that were formed in the period between the two world wars made it a point to urge the general public to focus on two controversial matters: women's place in society and the educational curriculum. As Khoury also points out, this time period was witnessing great changes in lifestyles and social

conduct. Greater opportunities for travel between the Middle East and Europe as well as the gradual spread of modern, secular education during the mandate period provided new opportunities for women from the upper and upper-middle classes. Women began to adopt new forms of dress and came to hold new aspirations that distinguished them not only from women among the general masses but also from their mothers and grandmothers. According to Khoury, the changes that were occurring in the period between the two world wars helped women to venture into the public sphere more than before. The wives and daughters of nationalists, in particular, took on more active roles in the political arena, participating in demonstrations and working with charity organizations. Little by little, these greater levels of participation pushed the question of women's rights to the surface.

"A woman smoking the narghileh" by Jean-Baptiste Charlier, ca 1867 from "Des Photographes a Damas 1840-1918" by Badr El-Hage, Marval 2000.

Syria's former prime minister, Khaled al-Azem (1903-1965), remarks in his memoirs on the changes that occurred in women's clothing in Damascus during the twentieth century. He says: "The main difference between the past and today is to be seen in women's dress. Women, the poor things, had to wrap themselves in a full-length black veil that completely hid the form of their bodies. Their faces were so covered that they could barely see the light. I am inclined to erect a statue to that Arab Muslim woman who could walk in the street and see her way through that type of veil." Al-Azem, who received the highest proportion of votes in the parliamentary elections that occurred during the democratic phase [of Syrian history], describes the progress that women had made in their manner of dress. He situates this change in the context of historical progress and the change in the social status of women, regardless of where they lived, whether in the newer or the more traditional neighborhoods of the city. He notes: "Even though women in the city's old sectors continue to wear traditional clothing, the social status of residents in the newer sections have changed. There, the full wrap was first exchanged for a shorter one that barely reached the knees and exposed arms and hands. The face veil became thinner and thinner until it became so transparent that it only covered some blemishes, thereby enhancing the beauty of the face rather than concealing it. Women took an even braver step when they exchanged the wrap with a thin head covering, the "yashmak," and wore regular clothes covered by a coat. In the end, modern women eschewed all signs of outdoor dress that would distinguish them from non-Muslims."

Inevitably, the fast-paced changes in women's dress were met, from time to time, with resistance and public demonstrations by religious organizations that viewed them as signs of the undermining and decline of traditional Muslim customs in society. As Philip Khoury points out, in May 1942, religious organizations led demonstrations "denouncing women who would venture unveiled to public spaces, take walks while hanging on to their husbands' arms, or go to the movie theaters. They demanded that the government dedicate special tramway cars during rush hour in order to segregate the sexes and that it close down all taverns and nightclubs located near religious or cultural centers. They also demanded that a new morality police division be created with the express purpose of eradicating vice." As Khoury also notes, however, the government of Husni al-Barazi, along with a few other religious authorities, paid no heed to these demonstrations. Furthermore, Khoury points out that students from "Tahjir" school, who were active politically in the city, took a position that strongly opposed such demands, ultimately leading to the failure of the [conservative] movement.

In May 1944, major clashes took place between conservative religious groups and prominent figures such as the prime minister Saad-allah al-Jabiri in the nationalist movement. The clashes came in the wake of an incident that came to be known as the "Drop of Milk" ("niqtat al-haleeb"), the name of a women's charity organization that was headed by the wife of the minister of education, Nusooh al-Bukhari, and that included a number of wives of prominent nationalist politicians. The Drop of Milk organization had planned a charity dance event. What upset the religious conservatives was the news that Muslim women would be attending this event unveiled. Consequently, they organized angry protests and set upon certain cinemas, forcing women to leave the theaters. Four people were killed in the ensuing violence that erupted in Hay al-Meydan.

It is important to note that in Arab countries at the beginning of the twentieth century, intellectual debates regarding women's dress separated the question of veiling from religion. Unveiling was not accompanied by a repudiation of Islamic principles. On the contrary, changes in women's dress

were taking place at the hands of Muslim women who were proud of their identity as open-minded Muslim believers. The question of the veil was regarded among the educated classes as an issue that was tied to individual freedom and women's personal choice as well as with progress. It was seen as having no relationship at all to religious commands and obligations.

Muhammad Kurd Ali, one of the leaders of the "Arab Awakening" movement, commented in his memoirs, published in 1951: "We are wary of resorting to force in doing away with the veil lest we create an opportunity that the conservatives can exploit. As far as I see, the practice of veiling is weakening of itself. Its use is limited in the countryside, and it is being used less and less with each year in the city. Many female students now leave the house unveiled and do not wish to return to veiling after finally being rid of such a practice. They are even encouraging their mothers and families to follow their example and bare their faces."

It is thus impossible to look at the phenomenon of women's unveiling in Damascus as something separate from the intellectual, political, and social atmosphere that was current at the time. This was an environment that was essentially concerned with freedom. It is true that the 1940s and 1950s were afflicted by a series of military coups and the temporary suspension of political freedom. Nonetheless, there were no attempts to infringe upon the social framework, to choke social freedoms, or to take hold of civil institutions. The efforts to modernize and the understanding of modernity were concomitant to a social dynamic that championed development, openness, and hope in the future.

Druze woman from the outskirts of Damascus and Damascene woman by Pascal Sebah 1873 from"Des Photographes a Damas 1840-1918" by Badr El-Hage, Marval 2000.

The Backlash

Damascus was a city that took the Arab nationalist cause to its ultimate conclusion. Its populace, both men and women, took to the streets in 1958, calling for unification with Gamal Abd al-Nasser's Egypt. Yet this same city witnessed its nationalist dreams dissipate in the wake of the military coups that were linked to Arab nationalism. Damascus soon saw its political and cultural diversity dissolve into the confines of single party rule. It witnessed its burgeoning social openness close off in response to the failed efforts at modernization. While the city had been in the process of lifting the veil from itself, it returned to shrouding itself in a political veil, abandoning the movement toward intellectual awakening. In the process, Damascus transformed itself from a city full of promise to a small town untouched by progress.

In trying to account for this reversal, some blame the resounding Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel along with the failure of the state's modernizing agenda. Others point to Islamic revivalism and the Iranian Revolution. Yet others fault the oil boom and Wahhabist thinking.

In truth, I do not know the reason, but it seems that nothing explains how broken and humiliated the city had become with regard to the question of veiling as much as the tragic events that took place on its streets in 1981. At that time, Rifaat al-Assad [head of special forces, *Saraya al-Difaa*, or "Defense Companies"] had decided, without prior warning, to send certain undercover women in the company of the armed members of *Saraya al-Difaa* to the streets of Damascus in order to force all women, regardless of their age, to publicly remove their veils, imposing a ban on veiling in the streets.

This order was rescinded on the following day by authorities representing the Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, restricting the ban on veiling to students within the confines of their schools. Later, this ban too was lifted at the beginning of Bashar al-Assad's rule [in 2001].

Nonetheless, the momentous events of 1981 removed the question of veiling entirely from the realm of personal freedom and placed it squarely into the realm of politics and political identity.

The state's authority was strengthened in the aftermath of its devastating clashes with the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s. The price of armed confrontation with militant Islam was the dismantling of civic freedom. At the same time, some religious teachers whose families were descendants of Sufis … were allowed to become active in Damascus, to expand their circle of followers, and to form associations and institutes. These religious figures advocated a particular understanding of Islam,

which outwardly appeared far removed from politics but which was nonetheless extremist and regressive in its social and cultural outlook.

In Damascus today there are thousands of mosques that are overseen by the office of the mufti (*dar al-ifta'*), and there are numerous schools for memorizing the Quran. Moreover, there are about fifty thousand university students in Damascus. Of those, about nine thousand attend a sharia college.

The Syrian government has chosen to look the other way with regard to these religious institutes, neither banning nor recognizing them. With time, these institutes have developed into colleges, and those colleges into universities that grant degrees, even doctorates. This is all happening at a time when the government still refuses to grant permission not only for the formation of political organizations but also for any intellectual or cultural activities that do not fall under its direct supervision.

In addition to the flourishing of religious schools, the city of Damascus has also witnessed the phenomenal rise of "al-Qubaysiat," an old, women-only Sufi order that was founded by the Damascene lady, Munira al-Qubaysi. This movement originally spread among the more socially and economically privileged classes. Initially, it undertook to mold the character of urban women and to encourage them to wear the veil. Religious instruction was provided in the homes, and, on occasion, the lessons were accompanied by celebrations of religious occasions. Ibrahim Hamidi, a reporter to the Damascus newspaper, "Al-Hayat," estimates that this movement has a following of about seventy-five thousand girls. He also estimates that about forty religious schools revolve around the teachings of Sheikha Munira al-Qubaysi. These schools offer the official curriculum of Syrian schools in addition to providing religious instruction. ("Al-Hayat" 5-3-2006).

What is shocking about all this is that the religious figures today have surpassed their predecessors in their conservatism and closed-mindedness, succeeding in areas where their forefathers had failed in the 1920s and 1930s. This is especially true with regard to their opposition to women's unveiling, education, and freedom to leave their homes. Religious figures today not only receive protection and financing from the state in their efforts to spread their conservative views (as is their right), but they also incite the government to strike with an iron fist anyone who dares open a window to let intellectual enlightenment shine upon Damascus.

Suffice it to say that a century after the publication of Qasim Amin's book, "The Liberation of Women," in Cairo, two figures who are ever present on the airwaves of Radio Damascus and on Syrian television, Sheikh Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Bouti and Sheikh Muhammad Ratib al-Nabulsi, still declare fatwas declaring that the most becoming, prudent and safe way for Muslim women to conduct themselves is to hide their faces and remain veiled. This is all taking place at the same time as the incarceration of the opposition leader [and democracy advocate], Dr. Fida al-Hourani, who remains unveiled but jailed in the women's prison in Douma.

The reason why Dr. al-Hourani was put in prison is simple and can be found in the fatwas of both Sheikh al-Bouti and Sheikh al-Nabulsi. With regard to democracy, al-Bouty says: "If you mean by democracy that there should be consultation between those in authority and members of the general population, then this is a principal aspect of state government in Islam. However, if you mean that the people should rule themselves, then this is contrary to the rule of Islam, because the ruler in Islamic Sharia is God." Al-Bouti, on the other hand, voices his opinion in a frank but harsh simplicity, "Democracy is foreign to Islam." **AJ**

Syria: Open Sesame?

BY MICHAEL TEAGUE

A spate of recent articles in *The New York Times* popularized the notion that Syria is "opening up" and that an effort is being made to somehow "liberalize" society. Considering the long and brutal track record of the Assad regimes, especially the Machiavellian tactics to which both father and son have resorted in order to retain power, there is ample reason to question the sincerity of such reports. It behooves us to take a closer look at the premises of these articles, and ask whether they offer solid evidence that this new "opening up" is genuine, and to what extent, if at all, it is taking place.

Kareem Fahim wrote recently about how the Syrian regime, while still offering support to Islamist groups in Lebanon and Palestine, is no longer being so tolerant of its domestic Islamic groups. Fahim notes that past tolerance on the part of the government for the Islamists finds its reasoning in the 1982 Hama bloodbath. Winning that battle came at a high price, and the government was not eager for any repeats, and so, in the aftermath, Islamists were allowed a certain amount of leeway. The fact of the matter is that the regime's hypocrisy is embedded in this particular version of the narrative: Hafez al-Assad was publicizing the threat to his "secular" regime while simultaneously allowing fundamentalist elements to enjoy a certain measure of freedom in society. A 2008 car bomb in Damascus that killed 17 people, as well as other security incidents that have been blamed on Islamists (though the culprits have yet to be identified), is one of the purported reasons for this most recent reversal. Intellectuals and academics are now even being encouraged to publicly speak out against the Islamists. However, all this fanfare about the renewed commitment to secularism is more likely a cosmetic attempt to make some overtures to a Washington administration that is ready to play a little nicer, and maybe even make some deals. It is perhaps no coincidence that Syria is no longer being fingered for the Rafik Harriri (Lebanon's former Prime Minister) assassination. Faheem

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40 Year-Old Classic Remains Influential: Sadiq Jalal al-Azm's 'The Critique of Religious Thought'

BY ELIE CHALALA & MICHAEL TEAGUE

For over 40 years now, Sadiq Jalal al-Azm's "*Naqd al-Fikr al-Dini"* ("Critique of Religious Thought") has been one of the most controversial and influential books about the role of religion in Arab politics. Originally published in 1969 by Dar Al Talia and reprinted in 2009 by the same publisher, al-Azm's work has been cited in countless articles and books about Arab politics and, according to the Qatari weekly, Al Raya, more than 1500 pages have been written about it. Though small sections of the book have appeared in translation in various works, the entire manuscript has never been fully translated into any of the major Western languages. However, the author has recently revealed that this will change in 2011, when an unspecified publishing house in the United States, and Editions Demopolis in France will finally make the book available to English and French speaking readers. Considering that its radical conclusions and timely subject matter contain a bold critique of religious and traditional thinking in the Arab world, it is incomprehensible that this book has remained un-translated for such a long time.

From left to right: Adonis, Joseph Mughayzel, Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, Aref al-Rayyes, Basim al-Jisr, Abdallah Lahoud, Bashir Daouk (publisher of Dar Al Talia), Edmund Rabbatt (photo courtesy of Ms. Ghada Samman).

The criticisms put forth in the book are harsh, especially when considering the parameters allowed in past and current Middle East discourse. Al-Azm saw that the disastrous outcome of the 1967 War shattered both traditional religious thought and the exaltation of pan-Arabism, exposing the deluded thinking of many intellectuals of the time who were convinced that the secular and nationalist Arab regimes had the situation under control and were on the sure path to victory. His contention was that the swift defeat of the combined Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian armies at the hands of Israel was symptomatic of the failure of these regimes to synthesize outmoded religious dogma with mild socialism and progressive reforms. This unwillingness to more aggressively rethink the role of religion in society on the one hand, and steadfastly push social and political reforms on the other, ensured that the reforms that did get implemented during the 1950's and 1960's were superficial. If the Arabs were to achieve the same level of emancipation and development as their Western counterparts, they would have to seriously question the compatibility of traditional thinking with the concrete circumstances of the modern world.

Speaking during a 1997 interview with Ghada Talhami, al-Azm suggested that there was a direct link between the failure of the '67 War and what he considered a static approach to Islamic thought. According to al-Azm, "The Arab liberation movement was very guarded in its approach to Islamic thought, avoiding direct contact with it and ignoring the need to renew and rebuild it with openness and clarity. I was becoming very conscious of the ability of this body of thought to continually reproduce the values of ignorance, myth-making, backwardness, dependency, and fatalism, and to impede the propagation of scientific values, secularism, enlightenment, democracy, and humanism." Al-Azm accused many intellectuals of performing tortuous acrobatics in order to interpret the Quranic scripture into the 20th century model of progress. He underlined the dishonesty and willful self-delusion in the idea that it was possible to reform Islam without performing a social, economic, and political overhaul of Arab society.

After the publication of the "Critique of Religious Thought" in 1969, the Lebanese government imprisoned al-Azm and tried him for allegedly "inciting sectarianism," a rather dubious charge considering that the book also questioned with equal rigor the inconsistencies in Christian thinking. In actuality, the crime he was really guilty of was his call for a critique of all aspects of Arab society, up to and including the misleading rhetoric of the monarchist, republican, secular, nationalist, and what were termed Arab progressive and socialist regimes. That he stirred up the ire of the Islamists and ruling regimes alike exposed the

fact that the latter were concerned less with achieving progress and freedom and more with staying in power and maintaining the status-quo. His books are still widely banned in most of the Middle East, though they are certainly just as widely read.

Sadiq Jalal al-Azm was born in 1934 to parents who were descendants of a prominent aristocratic Ottoman family from Damascus. Their admiration for Mustafa Kemal Attaturk and his brand of modern secularism deeply impressed him from an early age. His education reflects this – he received primary early schooling at protestant and French schools and went on to study philosophy at the American University of Beirut. Al-Azm subsequently received his doctorate from Yale, writing his thesis on the 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. He would later write two books about Kant, both available in English. He returned to Beirut to teach at the American University in 1963, but was dismissed five years later following several controversial activities, which, among others, included the signing of a petition calling on the United States to leave Vietnam and the publication of his first book "Self-Criticism After the Defeat" (1968), the precursor to his "Critique of Religious Thought." Al-Azm himself has speculated that the university's refusal to renew his contract was heavily influenced by his differences with Professor Charles Malik, a pro-Western former Lebanese foreign minister and diplomat.

The most significant event during this part of his life, however, was the aforementioned publication of the "Critique of Religious Thought" in 1969, and the storm of controversy it ignited. For this he spent two weeks in prison, although he was freed after the Lebanese government was unable to substantiate its charges of sectarian incitement during trial. At this point, he went to Amman with the ostensible goal of teaching at the university there, only to find that his connections to the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine had led to his name being put on the Hashemite monarchy's blacklist. Out of options, he returned to Beirut to do research for the Institute for Palestine Studies, but the publication of another book "Critical Studies of Palestinian Resistance Thought" provoked the displeasure of the P.L.O. leadership. Arafat expelled him from the Institute and he was barred from publishing articles in its journal Palestinian Affairs (during the '80s, the journal's editor, Anis Sayegh, allowed him to resume writing under a pseudonym).

In the '90s he taught Philosophy at Princeton for five years, and then did the same at the University of Damascus, where he was the head of the philosophy department. When he retired recently, he was quoted as laughingly having said, "they got rid of me and I got rid of them," according to Hussein Hamza of the Beirut-based Al Akhbar newspaper. It is rumored that he had trouble returning to the United States to work at Princeton after the events of September 11. He is also well-known for his vocal defense of Salman Rushdie in the wake of Khomeini's fatwa after the publication of "The Satanic Verses." Indeed he was one of a surprisingly small number of Arab intellectuals to take this stance. The two books he wrote about this subject, "The Notion of Prohibition: Salman Rushdie and the Reality of Literature," and "A Post-Prohibition Doctrine," presented a vigorous defense of intellectual freedom in the Arab and Islamic worlds. It was clear that the Rushdie affair in many ways reminded him of his own trial in 1969.

Cover of the newest Arabic edition of al-Azm's "Critique of Religious Thought"

"The Critique of Religious Thought" consists of an introduction, six chapters, and a supplement of material relating to the author's indictment, trial, and not-guilty verdict. In the book, al-Azm criticizes religion, not as a spiritual phenomenon (as seen, for example, in the lives of Saints, Sufis, and philosophers), but rather as a force that interferes in our daily lives and influences the essence of our psychological and intellectual experience. It is the religion employed to determine the methods of our thinking, and our reactions to the world in which we live.

Al-Azm traces the decline of Christianity in the West back to four major events: the Renaissance, the revolution in scientific thinking from Copernicus to Newton, the advent of the Industrial Revolution, and the publication of Marx's "Das Kapital" and Darwin's "The Origin of the Species." The challenges to and the skepticism of the myth of creation led to a fundamental shift in European culture. Religion had to make significant concessions to science in order to salvage some of its essential ideas and convictions. In stark contrast, the Middle Eastern response to scientific developments was not one of adaptation to new ideas, but rather one of reaffirmation of traditional thought on the basis of the idea that the Quran includes the totality of scientific knowledge. Al-Azm saw the impact of this religious thinking on the politics of his day: even secular leaders like Nasser were not willing or able to embrace Arab socialism without a religious justification. Unlike in the West, Arab socialism from its inception had to accommodate religious thinking rather than challenge it. He also criticizes the political use of religion, a process exemplified by the two drastically different regimes of Saudi Arabia and Egypt. In each country, the clerical establishment was critical to providing legitimacy for the government, doing so through the use of fatwas.

In the chapter titled "The Tragedy of Satan," al-Azm explores the symbolic function of the mythology of the devil, analyzing it outside of its theological and spiritual contexts. Another chapter devoted to mythology, titled "The Miracle of the Virgin

Mary's Apparition and the Elimination of the War's Consequences," examines the reliance on superstition and mythological thinking in a contemporary context. In Egypt, the Coptic Pope Cyril VI claimed to have seen the divine apparition of the Virgin Mary in the Olive Church. This "miracle" was uncritically written about in all the newspapers of the Arab world, including progressive and secular publications. Furthermore, the press willfully disseminated the idea that the recurrence of the divine apparition somehow constituted proof that Jerusalem would be liberated. Al-Azm was appalled by the fact that it took a needless tragedy to put this religious hysteria to rest. It was only when many innocent people, including numerous children, were injured or trampled to death in a frenzied rush to see the place where the Virgin Mary had appeared that the Church publicly denied the miracle and was closed down by the government. Al-Azm was similarly astounded that there was not one single intellectual, socialist, secularist, literary figure, or journalist in the entire Arab world that had the wherewithal to denounce the whole affair from the outset. Rather than pointing out some of the very obvious contradictions in the evidence that was presented, they preferred to manipulate the religious inclinations of the people in an attempt to gloss over the military and political failure of the 1967 War. What was perhaps even more disappointing was that all the talk of science and progress that had been taking place before 1967 became totally obscured by the "Virgin Mary apparition."

In the chapter "Distortions in Western Christian Thought," al-Azm criticizes the tendency toward rationalization and justification taking place in Western Christianity as well. It is a response to the Philosophy Symposium "God and Man in Contemporary Christian Thought" that was held at the American University in Beirut (AUB) in late August of 1967, just two months after the Six-Day War, and was published as a book under that title in 1969. He was particularly suspicious of a lecture in which one of the Symposium's participants claimed that the decline of the role of the Church and the concessions it made to its secular opponents did not constitute a defeat of the Church. On the contrary, the participant argued that the political power enjoyed by the Church did not rightfully belong to it in the first place. Al-Azm implies that there are some similar elements of rationalization in both Christian and Muslim Arab discourses, particularly in the impulse to turn a defeat into a victory.

When asked by the Qatari weekly, Al Raya (January 1, 2008), if he had changed any of his thinking since the publication of his "Critique of Religious Thought," al-Azm made the observation that, if anything, the impoverishment of religious thinking is worse now than it has ever been. He recalls how in 1969 and 1970, many religious figures wanted to engage him in debate. Though they knew little to nothing about the concepts of modern science and technology, they grasped the necessity of addressing and understanding the social impact of these developments. He contrasts that situation to what is happening today, where certain fundamentalist groups reject outright anything that has to do with modernity, science, or the West. That the violent rhetoric of Jihadi groups has managed to overshadow the debate in and about Islam is due in large measure to the impotence of official institutions. The religious figures and intellectuals who represent these institutions tend to regurgitate the same rigid and nostalgic ideas in order to remain consistent with state policy. This creates a void that is easily filled by those who embrace the ideology of Islamist thinkers like Sayed Qutub. When al-Azm was asked by the same interviewer if he would revise anything in the book, he replied that the "Critique of Religious Thought" is a document of the period, and that he did not find it appropriate to change or substitute anything in it, especially since it has been available on the market since its original publication.

Nothing better describes the goal of the "Critique of Religious Thought" than the publisher's statement on the back cover of the book: "Rarely does modern Arab thought attempt to openly challenge the intellectual structures and the dominant metaphysical ideology of our society, because penetrating this realm touches its most sensitive area, which is the religious question. But the contemporary Arab revolution cannot endlessly avoid addressing vital questions that are connected with metaphysical religious ideology and its relationship with the revolution itself – including all the problems that arise from reactionary Arab forces using religion as a major 'theoretical' weapon to mislead the masses. Thus, this series of critical studies of religious thought form a daring and necessary attempt by Sadiq Jalal al-Azm to destroy the dominant mythological mentality and substitute it with contemporary revolutionary and scientific ideas..." ***AJ***

A Postcard from My Heart

BY GHADA SAMMAN

Globalization? And why not?
As long as all of us,
The blacks, the whites,
the yellows, the reds,
Cry tears of the same color
And bleed the same deep red
And die the same death,
And are buried in the soil of the same planet?

Translated from the Arabic by Rewa Zeinati

From Ghada Samman, "Al Qalb al-Ari...A'shiqa" (The Naked Heart...Lover), Beirut: Ghada Samman Publications, 2009.

Iraqi Actor Jawad Shukraji on Childhood, Working Under Saddam and His Recent TV Series

BY REBECCA JOUBIN

When you think back on your childhood, what is the first thing that strikes you?

I was born in Baghdad in 1951 near the shrine of Abdel Ghader al-Gaylani, a Sunni holy man. My mother was from Karbala and my father from Najaf. I was born Shii, yet I spent the early days of my childhood near this Sunni holy shrine. I believe this exposure as a child to different religions made me inherently above the Sunni-Shiite division we now see ripping Iraq apart. Until this day, I refuse to say I am a Shii or Sunni. I refuse to say I am from Baghdad, Najaf or Karbala. I'm just proud to be an Iraqi.

Iraqi Actor Jawad Shukraji

When did art and theater first touch your life?

What drew me first to the arts was Thursday's "Raising the Flag" national program in the school system, which the Iraqi Ministry of Education and Upbringing sponsored. Our art and music teachers prepared us during the week for Thursday's artistic performances, which each class would present to the school in the morning. From early childhood, I adored performing. I remember playing the part of a roaring lion when I was just six years old.

Indeed this Thursday "Raising the Flag" program extends way back into history and even continued through Saddam's time and until today. During the time of the monarchy, students were mostly free in their performances, and often spoke about what the country meant to them. Then during the Republic, students often eulogized Abdel Karim Qassem. I was seven at the time he came to power in 1958. Qassem, who even resembled my father, was a real hero to me. I still remember singing this song on Thursday: "Abdel Karim Qassem – all our hearts reach out to you!" Then, unfortunately, during Saddam's time, the day was transformed to a time of praising the Baath party, transforming students into military soldiers from the time they were just six years old.

I have to say that the whole political arena of Iraq – the manifestations, plots, and sagas – were like a living theater to me, and inculcated in me a sense of drama from early on. For example, I used to cry whenever there were manifestations against Qassem. I still remember one occasion vividly. It was in 1959. The Baath party put fire on gasoline at a station in al-Karada in protest of Abdel Karim Qassem. I climbed up on our rooftop and watched the flames from afar, worrying about the fate of my beloved leader. High on our rooftop – the colors, fears, and uncertainties – whirling around me, felt like a live theater production that I was a part of. The drama of the situation, reasons and background behind the event all came together to create a vivid story, and gave me a sense of storytelling.

What are your first childhood memories?

I remember driving my parents crazy from the beginning of my existence. Before I was born, my parents first had a boy and then a string of three girls. As in most traditional Middle Eastern families, a son was regarded more highly, and my mother was absolutely distraught about having three girls in a row, to the point that her third daughter eventually died of neglect. After her third daughter passed away, my mother did the impossible to get pregnant with a son. She went from one fortuneteller and sheikh to the next, memorizing all sorts of formulas and eating all sorts of remedies. Then when she was pregnant, she did everything in her power to make sure her baby was a boy, adhering to all sorts of traditional folklore. She even visited a Jewish shrine in Baghdad, which according to folklore would ensure you have a boy. She walked across and then back, and then again, and then in a circle, reciting all the required formulas and prayers to ensure God was pleased and would bless her with a son.

So when it turned out that I was a boy, my mother was thrilled. I was named Jawad, one of the names of God. But then

I turned out to be a different kind of boy, who listened to nothing my parents told me. My eyes were always open with curiosity, and I already felt the yearnings of adolescence as a toddler. When I was just three, I already had crushes on my female cousins. At four years old, I was kicked out of the public bath for harassing the women.


"Untitled" by Youssef Abdelki

I refused to participate in the traditional afternoon nap, and used the time when my whole family was sleeping to discover my surroundings. For example, I would steal grapes from my father's garden trellis. It was not the act of stealing which concerned me, but the theatrical process of it all – the secrecy, plotting and escaping untouched.

Art is crisis. It is the curiosity of the forbidden. This is complicated in an Eastern society such as Baghdad, where everything is forbidden. And so I was referred to as my parents' son from hell. Instead of calling me Jawad, my mother called me Judi al-Yuhudi (Judi the Jew). To the day she died, may God rest her soul, there were many misunderstandings between us.

When did you realize you wanted to become an actor?

I was 14 when I knew I wanted to become an actor, but the process was complicated and I did not realize what was happening all at once. I just felt from early childhood that I was searching for something; that something strange was happening in my body. From around age seven I was sleepwalking. My parents often had to search the whole house and neighborhood for me. We used to sleep on the rooftop and I often disappeared. My mother used to look all over the house for me, and when she couldn't find me she would wake up my father. They often found me walking on the wall of our second rooftop, and they feared I would fall. My father would approach me slowly from behind me and catch me.

I was trying to find myself at the time. I pursued all the arts, even sports like gymnastics, soccer and swimming. Though I loved swimming, especially crossing the Tigris River, I was a failure in most everything I did and knew I had still not found what I was searching for.

Then at 13 I had an important role in a play in the school theater, under the guidance of a well-known director, Qassem Sobhi. When the theater ended I kneeled down and kissed the ground of the theater, which was sacred to me, and I would continue this tradition of kissing the ground of the theater until this day. At 15 I knew for sure that I wanted to act, and everything came together for me. It was around then that I stopped sleepwalking.

Though I was acting in the theater a lot, my peers who were older than me, such as the famous actor Qassem al-Malak, advised me to finish my education first and then to act, but I didn't listen. When al-Malak's theatrical group rejected me until I had completed my education, I searched for another one. And so at 15, in 1966, I joined the theater group working in the Soviet Cultural Center in Baghdad. I began acting in earnest and stopped going to my classes at school, and then I was expelled. During this time, I read extensively on Russian theater and literature, and listened to music. I was content with my acting and studying on my own, but a problem arose when in 1969, a new government proclamation stated that if a student had not finished middle school he must be drafted in the army. So from 1970-71, at age 19, I was forced to join the military. Those two difficult years in the army were a turning point in my life. I had learned much while acting, had gained direction, and was now ready to go back to school once my military service ended. So In 1972, just two months after I left the army, I entered middle school again. As my elders had advised me many years before, I ceased all theater activities until I completed my education. I was so focused that by 1973 I was able to enroll in the Institute of Fine Arts, and I completed my studies in 1978.

What was it like acting during the time of Saddam Hussein?

I was not a communist, so I did not really bother Saddam Hussein. He was not fond of me, since I refused to accept gifts from him, but still he left me alone. In 1979 I joined the national theater and acted and directed, though I preferred acting. Then in February 1982, like many others, I was forced to serve in the lengthy Iran-Iraq war. I was not keen on joining the army, but the choice before me was simple: either to serve or be executed. When I entered the army, I joined the army theater along with others, like singer Kazem al-Saher. And so I still acted in theater during this time. I was in the army, but would prepare my lines while fighting, and then go to Baghdad to perform.

As an actor or director, you were much freer than writers, poets or musicians; they had to eulogize Saddam. We actors were also forced to praise Saddam, but we would disguise our theater pieces in symbols so that the discourse against the government was not recognized. It was easier for us in the theater to hide our intentions, than writers or musicians, for example.

So I acted while in the army, except in the last two years where I was sent to the mountains to fight. During that time, in the line of fire, I wasn't able to go to Baghdad and act, but with bombs and explosions around me, I memorized the lines for the piece called "If," a 31-actor show I would perform in Baghdad in 1988. Just 15 pages, this simple story speaks out against the government, which no one understood. It is a story of a poor man expelled from his job when he lost his leg. He becomes an alcoholic and his addiction eventually causes his son's death as

well as that of his wife. The whole story is in the form of flashbacks. Alone now, he sits next to his horse, thinking of the past, saying "if I had done this, oh, if I had done that . . ." In the background are actors showing a panorama of Iraqi society – you can see the dirty streets, class differences, lost places, poor people. But no one in the audience really focused on our hard message in the background. They were more interested in the fate of the man. I won several awards for my performance, and became a star in Iraq to the point that I could not even walk in the streets without being surrounded by people.

Did you ever have any confrontations with the regime?

Yes, on several occasions. For example, in 1990 my wife left me and took my son, Haydar, with her. In Doha, Qatar where I had gone to perform "If," I saw my son for the last time. Shortly after I returned to Iraq, Kuwait was invaded. I knew I would never see my son again when in January 1991, at beginning of war, I heard that my ex-wife was talking against Saddam on live radio broadcast. The *mukhabarat* approached me to make me a spy and try to help them capture her. But I told them I was an actor, and could not do their dirty work.

In 1991, I acted in a play called "A Love Story of Our Time," a story of two disenchanted intellectuals, a man and a woman, who yearned to leave Iraq. The show was well received and won four prizes, despite the fact that critics accused the piece of being anti-Saddam in character. But I was not afraid, and continued working. Then in 1992 "Wolves of the Night," a 30-show serial that I had acted in, was televised over a period of three months. It was a story of four criminals hunted down by the police, and it made a splash in Iraqi society. Everyone empathized with the four criminals and hoped they would survive and escape from the evil police. There were stories in the news of women offering sacrifices to God if the characters did not die. But in the end, all four characters met their death at the hands of the police and the masses mourned them like real people and cursed the police.

From the time the series was broadcast, I could not go out, since everyone recognized me as the character Abu Jahil. Once I went out, there was a large crowd surrounding me and when I entered my car, they lifted me in the air. Saddam had some slogans like "Nothing is Impossible." But the masses started creating new slogans like: "Nothing is impossible. Long live Abu Jahil. God is Great." The popularity of the characters on the show caused problems with the regime, since Saddam did not appreciate stars in society. He needed to be the only one who was eulogized.

After the show ended, the Culture Ministry approached me and said that Saddam thanked me for my performance in the series. However, the regime wondered how I could show that criminals were good and the police bad. The members of the Culture Ministry told me that Saddam would forgive me if I performed in a new series and showed the opposite message, that police were good and criminals bad. Saddam's personal request was for me to play the part of the main policeman. I refused, and nine months later, in 1993, I left Iraq out of deep frustration, planning never to return.

I traveled to Tunis where I had to start my career from scratch again, since no one knew me here as they did in Iraq. In 1997, after four years in Tunis, I returned to Baghdad. Saddam appointed me director of the National Theater. Actually, the director of cinema was my friend and he helped me get the position. I worked for one year and 10 months, but when I saw all the corruption, I resigned. Saddam never bothered me, though, since I merely carried out a few personal projects that did not harm the government.

You have been living in Damascus for several years now. What is the life in exile like for you?

I left Iraq in 2003 for Damascus. Those of us who stayed in Iraq throughout Saddam's brutal dictatorship grew up there. Wherever we may find ourselves now, we still long for our country, unlike those who left early on. The memories I have in Iraq are deep and vivid. But in Damascus I found a new community. I always feel Iraq is close by. And Damascus is in many ways like Baghdad in the 70's. Plus, I found a whole community of exiled Iraqi intellectuals here, so I never feel I'm living in exile. Last year I was planning to leave Syria and emigrate to England. I even traveled there a few times to prepare for moving my family there. But the thought of living far away from Iraq, separating myself from my homeland forever, cutting myself off from the East, made me recant my decision.

The majority of the pieces you have acted in were extremely sad. However, in Ramadan 2008 in Syria, you acted in a new piece, a one-man series shown over a period of 30 days called "Abu Haghi." Some have even criticized you for acting in this comic series. Can you tell us about this experience?

I've never done comedy before, so when I was approached with this script I was hesitant. But eight days after I accepted, we began filming, which lasted for 10 days.

I decided to accept the part when I saw the director would allow me to interpret Abu Haghi freely. Abu Haghi is a stupid man, naïve and uneducated, who tries to do everything. It is a caricature of a political man – he becomes a vizier and president, yet does not even have his elementary school education. Some people have said Abu Haghi is Saddam. But I believe this is not Saddam. It is no one real, and it can be everyone. He's from the imagination, not representing anyone. This kind of political figure can exist at every time and place in Iraq since 1963 when Abdel Karim Qassem was killed.

I've been criticized for acting in this comedy, but for me the experience was a positive one, especially since children loved this piece. When I walk in the area around the Sayyida Zeinab Mosque they approach me, screaming out "Abu Haghi! Abu Haghi!" If children can be touched in some way, then I feel the series was a success. There is a big chance we will do a second series, since it was very popular. **AJ**

Film Comments/Lynne Rogers

Garbage Dreams
Directed by Mai Iskander
Iskander Films. 2009, 79 minutes

Mai Iskander's new documentary, "Garbage Dreams," delves into the lives of the "Zaballeen," the 60,000 Coptic Christians who live on the outskirts of Cairo collecting and recycling the garbage of Cairo's 18 million people. Iskander's deft camera keeps both the small picture in focus as she follows the lives of three young men and the larger picture as her lens floats above the modern skyscrapers of Cairo. The three teenage boys wake at dawn to collect the garbage and return to Mokattam, a suburb on the outskirts of Cairo, to sort it. Their lives are spent surrounded by garbage yet dreams of matrimony alleviate their monotony and poverty. When Cairo's Municipality signs contracts with Spanish and Italian waste removal companies and the upscale garbage trucks manned by men in uniforms begin appearing on the streets, the equilibrium of this unlikely paradise is seriously threatened. The Zaballeen can no longer recycle the garbage for their livelihood. The multinational companies claim ownership of this previously neglected "gift from God" forcing the Zaballeen into illegal scavengers and dashing the boys' hopes for marital bliss. In an admirable grassroots effort, the Zaballeen community begins to mobilize their forces. They discover that their hand-method of sorting recycles 80% of the city's garbage while the ultra-modern international companies only manage to save 20%. This engaging film captures global economic tensions of modernization through the endearing aspirations of youth and is a heartfelt asset for economic, globalization and urban studies.


Courtesy of Iskander Films

Occupation 101, Voices of the Silent Majority
By Sufyan Omesh and Abdallah Omesh,
A Triple Eye Film, 2008

The next time someone asks me "what was it like to live in Palestine?" I will simply recommend the documentary "Occupation 101, Voices of the Silent Majority." Deserving winner of eight film festival awards, this impressive film begins by placing the Palestinian resistance into the broader context of the struggle for human rights and democracy. The film opens with clips of political unrest from the civil rights movement that are familiar to many Americans, as well as footage from similar struggles in Northern Ireland, Algeria and South Africa, as it dismantles the prevalent myths surrounding the military and political occupation of Palestine. Supplemented with charts, maps, news clips and chilling scenes of aggression shot in Gaza and the West Bank, "Occupation 101" provides the viewer with an intense, concise and thorough historical narrative. Interviews with some of the most well-respected scholars such as Rashid Khalidi, Noam Chomsky and Phyllis Bennis, veterans of the State Department and the United Nations, Israeli human rights activists, Christian clergy, Rabbis, women's organizations, and Amnesty International are reinforced with unquestionable scenes of despair and oppression that are, in the words of Alison Weir of If Americans Knew, "deeply disturbing."

While the situation in Palestine has proven irresistible to film makers, few documentaries have been as authoritative and professional as "Occupation 101". The film moves from the Balfour Declaration and the intifadas to more recent concerns over the issue of settlement construction, the home demolitions that cost the life of Rachel Corrie, and the effects of the "security" wall that stands at twice the height of the Berlin Wall. The multitude of Israeli voices, including an Orthodox Jew who recounts a time when his grandmother baby-sat the children of Palestinian neighbors, and the Rabbi-educators who lament the propaganda within the Israeli education system and feel hostage to the machinations of the settlers, cannot fail to move even the staunchest Israeli supporter. The deleted scenes alone make this DVD worth the price. "Occupation 101" will make formidable viewing for any religious group, peace organization, classroom, or as the charts and history demonstrate, any American taxpayer.

Fixer: The Taking of Ajmal Naqshbandi
Directed by Ian Olds
The Cinema Guild, 2009

In March 2007, Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo set out with his Afghan driver, Sayed Agha, and his 'fixer,' the 24 year old Ajmal Naqshbandi, to interview a "notorious one-legged Taliban commander." Instead, the trio found themselves in a nightmare, where the rules of back-room diplomacy had been replaced by savagery and camcorders. The disturbing documentary, "Fixer: The Taking of Ajmal Naqshbandi," begins by defining a fixer as "a person hired by foreign journalists to facilitate the gathering of news stories. Especially in the context of war." But as the viewer watches the cherub-esque and likeable Ajmal, widely known at the time as one of Afghanistan's best fixers, at work with the American journalist Christian Parenti (also one of the film's producers), it becomes obvious that the job of 'facilitating' is far more involved than the word would suggest. Ajmal must not only be acquainted with some extremely dangerous people, he must also translate the intricacies of local manners and customs for his employer in this dangerous context.

In one of the film's lighter moments, Christian and Ajmal record a fake trial staged for them in an official court room as "proof a justice system exists in Afghanistan." Yet this unabashed corruption fosters unbridled lawlessness. All the same, Ajmal does not hesitate to arrange visits with the Taliban for foreign journalists because he is certain that the Taliban have not yet


Courtesy of The Cinema Guild

acquired the "western habit" of claiming friendship when only enmity exists. Even when he is eventually kidnapped, his video message tries to reassure his parents by reminding them that the Taliban are Muslims and fellow countrymen. Unfortunately, Ajmal overestimated these bonds of kinship. While the Italian journalist is set free in exchange for five prisoners, like the driver, Ajmal faces a grizzly decapitation. Above all, "Fixer" memorializes Ajmal as more than a professional casualty, but it also poses a variety of ethical questions for journalists, and admirably does not flinch in its recording of the harshness of the political landscape: Karzai's regime, Pakistani involvement, and the Taliban.

Unveiled Views Muslim Women Artists Speak Out
Directed by Alba Sotorra
WMM, 2009

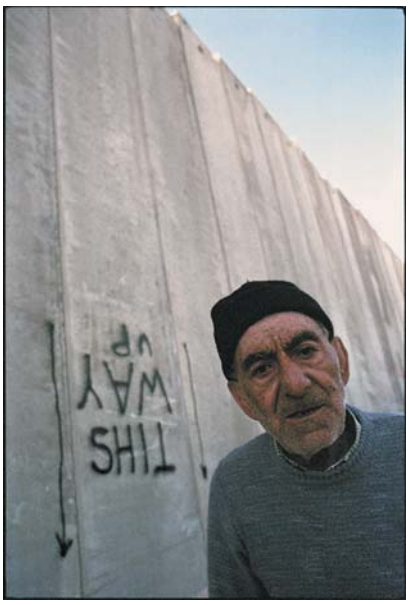
In the documentary, "Unveiled Views", Muslim feminists with and without the veil, speak of their costly pursuance of art and freedom. In Turkey, the glamorous and tenacious Eren Keskin, a human rights attorney with a classically trained singing voice, withstands constant death threats, imprisonment and harassment as she perseveres in the struggle to resist repression of Muslim rights. Iranian filmmaker, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, disappointed with post-revolutionary reforms, looks to the media "to inform, to educate and to expose those issues they prefer to keep silent." The film footage of adorable teenage girls illegally "cruising" illustrates Bani-Etemad's sympathy for her country's restricted youth. She resolutely confesses that, "Unfortunately my hands are too small to take the world into my arms." In Bosnia, Alma Suljevic, an artist and demining activist, refuses to be a victim and instead commits herself to creating a "bigger space for mankind." Tense footage shows her at work cleaning the minefields where Bosnian children play football. Later, as she travels through Europe exhibiting her work, she sells potted jars of soil from the minefields to finance further demining. The camera then looks at a family of admirable sisters in Afghanistan who have grown up with war. While this episode of the documentary is slightly confusing, the clips of the young woman reading her poetry and her older sister discussing the needs of her community in their confined spaces are both quite moving. The film concludes with the Pakistani dancer, Nahid Siddiqui


Courtesy of Women Make Movies

who went from a young dancer with her own weekly television show to a political exile when the military government banned dance and accused her of spreading "Indian" culture. Still a vibrant artist, Siddiqui returns to Pakistan to teach the beauty and independence offered by dance. All of these courageous artists offer a response to military repression with a commitment to beauty motivated by a humanistic patriotism that does not ignore the past but looks to the future.

This Way Up
Directed by Georgi Lazarevski
Icarus Films, 2008

While most documentaries on the occupation of Palestine focus on the abuse of innocent civilians,"This Way Up," winner of several awards including the 2008 Human Rights Watch International Film Festival, takes an original and poignant view of the social effects that Israel's nine meter high cement wall has on a unique Jerusalem community. Lazarevski's unrelenting yet artistic camera locates itself in the Notre Dame des Douleurs nursing home, rendering the restricted isolation as the nearness of death reverberates in a circumference of cement. The entire nursing home community, including the patients, the nuns and the workers, becomes a startling metaphor for the occupation. Beginning at daybreak, the film tells the story of housewives and businessmen, teenagers and children, as they climb down the wall to enter the



Courtesy of Icarus Films

Continued on page 27

The 'Unchanging' and 'Man as a Nation' by Rebecca Joubin

The Koran: The Origins of the Book
A Film by Bruno Ulmer, 2009
Icarus Films

Courtesy of Icarus Films

"The Koran: The Origins of the Book" challenges the prevalent Muslim belief that the Koran has remained unchanged since it was revealed to the Prophet Mohammad between 610-632 AD. Director Bruno Ulmer commences by recounting a standard version of Islamic history, interspersing sounds of Koranic recitations, shots of the faithful praying, and artistic images that instill in us a powerful respect for Muslim tradition. He discusses how the Muslim belief that there has been no change in the Quran since its inception was challenged in 1972, when the caving in of Yemen's Great Mosque revealed a hideaway cache of some Koranic manuscripts dating back to the 7th century. In the eyes of European scientists, these Koranic manuscripts—with their different arrangements of suras and assortments of foreign and non-Arabic words— were invaluable for acquiring knowledge about the Holy Book of Islam. Like the Holy texts of Judaism and Christianity, it was clear that the Koran also had a history that demanded researching.

With a keen sense of the visual, Ulmer goes on to describe the birth of Islam, its early history, the subsequent death of the Prophet Muhammad, and finally the historical schism between Sunnis and Shiites. Both Umayyad Caliph Uthman's struggle to unite the Islamic community by permitting only one version of the Koran, and Umayyad Caliph Abdel Malek's later success in improving upon his predecessor's rendition are examined. Ulmer explains how it came to be that by a mere century after the death of the prophet, Uthman's was the sole accepted Koranic text. Perhaps in contrast, numerous versions of the Koran, with their many colors, motifs, and decorative bands are featured. The film also contains footage of Muslims studying and interpreting Koranic verse alongside western scientists. Since the different versions can spur multiple (and sometimes inconsistent) readings, many believers have chosen to be a part of a process of determining where Muslim tradition and scientific research merge, so as to prevent faulty or prejudicial interpretation.

Bruno Ulmer treats a highly controversial topic with sensitivity, striving for understanding, as opposed to judgment. By zeroing in on the actual compiling of the Koran, with heavy attention given to artistic image, the documentary makes a noteworthy contribution to the study of Islamic history. Both the beginner and more advanced scholar of Islamic history can appreciate the spirit and substance of this film.

Mustafa Kemal Ataturk: The Birth of a Republic
A Film by Séverine Labat, 2005
Icarus Films

"Mustafa Kemal Ataturk" commences with images of Modern day Turkey, replete with contradictions and tensions between Islamists and secularists. Since September 11 Turkey has often been hailed as an example of a successful Middle Eastern democracy, in contrast to the multitude of non-democratic Muslim countries that seem prone to Islamic fundamentalism. But Labat hopes to show that the matter is more complicated than this. Through archival footage, newsreels, photos, and interviews with Turkish and Western historians, sociologists, and biographers, Labat's documentary tells the story of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's rise to power, and the complex state of affairs he has left behind. Indeed, the legacy of the founder and first President of the Republic of Turkey continues to stir heated debate, which is one of the film's major themes.

Courtesy of Icarus Films

Debating the nature of Ataturk's authoritarian rule in breaking with the imperial and Islamic past, the film asks: Was he a visionary or simply another enlightened despot? Although Ataturk abolished the Sultanate and Caliphate, he also did away with parliament, which was among the most democratic legislatures Turkey has ever had. His suppression of the Kurdish revolt led to accusations of dictatorship. One Western academic even says that Ataturk was merely copying the Western dictatorial experience of the inter-war period.

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Re-evaluating the Syrio-American School

BY MICHAEL NAJJAR

Aida Imangulieva's book "Gibran, Rihani & Naimy: East-West Interactions in Early Twentieth-Century Arab Literature" is a translation of the Russian version, which was published shortly before her death in 1992. It focuses on three of the most prominent members of what Imangulieva calls "the Syrio-American School," named after the then-Syrian immigrant writers who left their homeland (now Lebanon). This literary group was greatly influenced by both American writers (in the case of Gibran and Rihani) and Russian writers (as was the case with Naimy). The book focuses specifically on Gibran and Rihani's preoccupation with Western Romanticism, and Naimy's focus on Critical Realism.

Gibran, Rihani and Naimy: East-West Interactions in Early Twentieth-Century Arab Literature
By Aida Imangulieva
Translated by Robin Thomson
Anqa Publishing, 2009, 256 pp.

It is Imangulieva's contention that these authors "perceived and transformed the ethical and artistic values of European and American literatures in a new way, synthesizing the achievements of those with the best of their own national traditions." The author argues these immigrant writers were not merely derivative stylists, but rather innovative artists who utilized elements of foreign literatures in order to address the concurrent social developments in Arab countries.

Imangulieva credits these writers with introducing a literary style freed of archaisms, ponderous syntactical constructions, and artificial ornamentations, thereby creating a new Arabic literature. In contrast to the Philo-Orientalism that developed during the 18th and 19th centuries, writers like Gibran, Rihani, and Naimy brought forth a literature that integrated both Eastern and Western traditions. The author rightly assesses that, had these writers not been Christian (which allowed them to overcome many barriers of ideological rejection of Western cultural values), they might not have been able to incorporate such ideals into their works. Therefore, the principles heralded by Romanticism, Sentimentalism, and Critical Realism were anathema to neither their world-views nor their literary styles.

Imangulieva makes a convincing case for Naimy's incorporation of Russian Realism into his work by outlining the latter's study at Russian missionary schools in Syria and Palestine, his travels to Ukraine as a student of Russian literature and criticism, and by using quotes that showed Naimy's high regard for Russian writers such as Tolstoy, Belinsky, and Turgenev. Although it is known that both Gibran and Rihani also studied in missionary schools in their homeland, Imangulieva provides little in the way of direct evidence that they specifically studied the writings of transcendentalist writers, such as Emerson and Thoreau. Furthermore, Imangulieva makes some generalized statements about her subjects; for instance she says the following about Rihani: "of all his creative writings only "Jahan" can be considered a purely artistic work, with a developed and finished plot."


"Untitled" by Yaser al-Safi

Overall, "Gibran, Rihani & Naimy" is a valuable addition to the criticism focused on the early Arab-American literary movement. Imangulieva provides context for the lives and works of these authors, focuses on their lesser-known writings (such as Naimy's drama "Fathers and Sons" and Rihani's story "Jahan"), and successfully argues that these works are important not only to their own national literature but also to world literature as a whole. Perhaps critical studies like this one will promote more translations of Arab literature into English and might even inspire a re-evaluation by the academy that would remove these works from their present state of obscurity into their rightful place as modern literary classics. **AJ**

Film Comments

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Occupied Territories in order to go about their daily business. A brilliant marriage of form and content, "This Way Up" presents the indeterminable slowness of life in the nursing home, the endless ambling down the halls, the endless wait for family visits and the painful phone calls postponing those visits because of the 'situation.' The unhurried camera shots of the seeming endless cement wall around the enclosed sunlit churchyard of a nursing home echoes the angry and futile political commentary made by the bed-ridden and wheel chair-bound patients. In a valiant attempt to endure this last curse on their final days, the patients bicker and remember and celebrate a semblance of Christmas. The patients' spirit and humor momentarily alleviate the bleak irony of a 'security' wall around a Christian nursing home. In his film, Lazareski blends art and life in such a way that the viewer can almost smell the antiseptic halls, the white starch of the nuns, and the suffocating dust from the cement. **AJ**

Reform, Repression and the 'Negative Balance' in Syria

BY HILARY HESSE

Prior to 9/11 and its membership in George Bush's "axis of evil," Syria and its politics was a subject commanded best by Middle East experts. That Syria has become a hot topic among pundits and media alike has a lot to do with the Arab-Israeli conflict and the "war on terror" (a term the Obama administration has been refraining from using). As a result, TV and newspaper coverage tend to stress Syria's shadowy political maneuvering and relationship with Hezbollah, Lebanon and Iran at the expense of the country's internal politics and economy. Even now most Westerners know less about Syria than they do about other strategically important Middle Eastern countries.

Syria: Ballots or Bullets
By Carsten Wieland
Cune Press, Seattle 2006

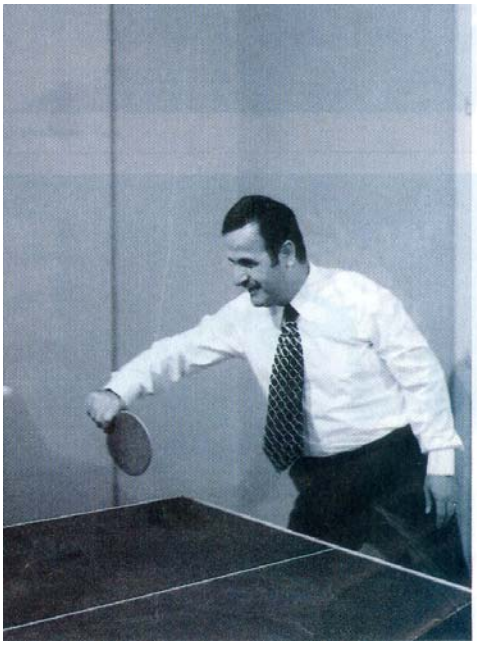
In his book, "Syria: Ballots or Bullets," Carsten Wieland introduces the reader to a country that is a mosaic of peoples and traditions, and to a regime that is teetering between reform and collapse – at least this was the case upon publication three years ago. Historian, political scientist and journalist, Wieland has worked and lived in Syria several times, most recently from 2003-2004. "Syria: Ballots or Bullets" is the product of long nights spent conducting countless interviews with political opposition figures, entrepreneurs, members of government, analysts, Islamic clerics and many friends. The result is a portrait of a deceptively socially progressive Middle Eastern police state that could crumble if the political and economic systems are not revamped from within.

The book's 12 chapters work to create an overall impression of Syria's domestic and international position at the end of 2005. Wieland defines and differentiates between Baathism and pan-Arabism, while supplying the reader with relevant historical information. We learn about some of the disparities in character and ruling style between the current president, Bashar al-Asad, and his "feared and revered" father, Hafez al-Asad. Bashar, in particular, is painted in an almost sympathetic light – as a would-be reformer who has been forced to capitulate to Baathist hardliners in order to stay alive, both politically and physically.

The prevalence of intrigues and behind-the-scenes conniving is especially chilling – in Syrian politics it is seldom obvious who exactly is moving the chains and to what end, which Wieland emphasizes in the first chapter. This lack of transparency and accountability helps erode the regime's credibility – creating what Wieland terms "the negative balance."

Added to the mix of corruption, economic woes and rampant human rights abuses is Syria's vitriolic relationship with its neighbor, Israel. Like Jordan and Egypt, Syria received Saudi financial support on several past occasions in return for being a confrontation state or for being in a state of war with Israel, prompting analyst Samir Altaqui to state, "The best export product Syria has is its foreign policy." Yet, despite having sometimes milked the situation for economic advantage, Syria has never wavered in its aim to recover the Golan Heights and will not consider lasting peace until Israel relinquishes them. This deadlock also prolongs the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since Syria, due to its leverage over Palestinian groups like Hamas, could play a key role in its resolution.

As a quirk of fate, 9/11 thrust Syria into the center of the international stage. Wieland notes Bashar's vocal opposition to the Iraq war, which bought him some political capital on the Arab street. He also discusses the regime's juggling act between securing its own interests and pacifying an increasingly hostile Bush Administration, which accused Syria of harboring and supporting terrorists. In fact, as the book went to press, talks of "regime change" in Damascus had not entirely died down in Washington. The European tactic of engaging Syria via Bill Clinton's ideal of "change through trade" is contrasted to Washington's sticks-only approach.


The Late Syrian President Hafez al-Assad

And then there is Lebanon, where Syria's true flair for corruption comes out. After decades of political meddling and military presence there, Syria was forced out by the United Nations following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, which pointed to Damascus. Wieland takes us through the events leading up to and succeeding the murder, assessing the damage that was done to Bashar's presidency, and to Syria's economy and international reputation as a result.

An unexpected ray of light is the peaceful, communal relationship among Syria's diverse social and religious groups, which sharply contrasts with the current situation in neighboring Lebanon and Iraq. Nor has radical Islam gained any visible social or political foothold (which Wieland implies is not exclusively attributable to Hafez al-Asad's infamous massacre of the Muslim

Brotherhood in the ancient city of Hamma). In fact, the reader is so impressed by the depiction of Syrian social tolerance, with the abidance of secularism, that he wonders why the West, and the U.S. in particular, would not consider it a natural Middle Eastern ally? Wieland presents a social fabric that is threaded with various Western ideals in a short chapter titled "Che Not Usama." Most impressive are the statistics on women, who "account for more than half of the students in the universities…and receive equal pay for equal work, which is not always the case even in some Western countries."

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as a Child

In spite of this optimism, Syrian social calm and cohesion are largely products of the iron fist with which the country has been ruled for the past 40-odd years. As was true in Saddam's Iraq, there is simply no leeway for any group to assert itself in a fashion that would threaten the social balance, and, in turn, the ruling elite. Also, although Syrian women appear to have greater freedom and opportunity than those living in many other Middle Eastern countries, it is worth noting that, according to the UN, Syria has one of the world's highest rates of honor killings – attributable to Damascus turning a blind eye in order to appease and gain political clout among conservative groups. Lastly, while Syrian students are fond of hanging pictures of famous communists on their walls, the government is similarly partial to imprisoning them; the regime has detained thousands of secular protesters of all stripes over the years, particularly communists.

Not withstanding these things, "Syria; Ballots or Bullets" leaves the reader with a broader understanding of Middle Eastern politics in general. Though getting through it may at times require patience, the persevering non-academic will come away knowing more about several prominent political issues, movements and players. Because "Syria" was published in 2006, some of the information is outdated – the menace of the Bush Administration, for example, has passed, leaving the regime less imperiled from without. In fact, both President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have expressed interest in talking with the Syrian regime.

A strong indication of this new mood was a celebrated April 6th article in the New Yorker magazine by Seymour Hersh, appropriately titled "Syria Calling." There have also been signs that negotiations on the Golan Heights may soon begin. But

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Historical Novel Examines Coptic/Muslim Conflicts and Common Ground

BY REBECCA JOUBIN

"I was still kneading the dough for the Eucharist break, working on getting it just right, with the intention of leaving it after that to rise. I had washed the earthenware kneading bowl in ritually pure water, as well as the lid and the sieve. The priest was standing over me, reciting the Psalms and making the sign of the cross."

The Man From Bashmour
By Salwa Bakr
Translated by Nancy Roberts
Cairo University Press, 2007, 296 pp.

From the opening line of "The Man from Bashmour," we see great effort on the part of noted Egyptian novelist Salwa Bakr to enter into the Coptic culture, understand its religious rituals and traditions as if her own. Indeed, Salwa Bakr embarked on this project as a way to underscore the spiritual and practical similarities in Muslim and Coptic religious and cultural practice. Though a Muslim herself, she aspired to offer an objective reading of Muslim-Coptic history. However, when the novel was originally published in 1998, it met with a wave of mixed response in Egypt, with some accusing her of stirring up sectarian conflict between Muslims and Copts. However, many came to her defense, lauding the novel as an important historical document providing a re-examination of early medieval history that had previously received no attention.

The story, which is based on historical events, takes place in 9th century Egypt, when an Arab Muslim elite ruled over Coptic-speaking Christians, who formed the majority of the country. When a peasant revolt is sparked by a land tax, the mission of Budayr, "a good-hearted servant," is sent off to convince the rebels to stop fighting. Dispatched to the Basshmourites' territory by Father Joseph, he soon becomes embroiled in a series of events that lead him to a new and unforeseeable path, opening his eyes to values shared by Muslims and Coptics alike.

The original novel in Arabic contains six languages: ancient Egyptian, Coptic, Syriac, Greek, Farsi and Arabic, and is based on an extensive bibliography of historical books such as Adam Metz's "Tarikh al-Hadara al-Islamiya," Al-Tabari's "Tarikh al-Tabari" and Banub Habashi's "Misr al-Qibtiya," from both the Coptic and Muslim perspective. Exhaustive in historical and linguistic approach, this highly academic historical novel could prove to be a challenge to the most adept of translators. However, the smooth and beautiful translation by Nancy Roberts shows tremendous effort and loyalty to the original novel. Her effort to render this difficult Arabic text into clear and eloquent English prose is indeed a feat to be applauded. **AJ**

The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict

BY MICHAEL TEAGUE

Misconceptions and oversimplifications of the Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict are all too common to really constitute a surprise for anyone who pays close attention to the matter. All the same, it is nearly impossible, especially when imbibing mainstream media coverage, to shake the notion that the participant antagonists are neatly divided between Arab-Muslims and Israeli-Jews. Rachel Shabi's recent and excellent "We Look Like the Enemy" can firmly be placed in the genre of book that provides an antidote to the lamentable still life of received discourse. Shabi offers a brief history of Israel's Mizrahi-Jewish population: which Arab countries they came from, how they arrived in Israel, and what their experience has been in the years since their migration.

We Look Like the Enemy: The Hidden Story of Israel's Jews from Arab Lands
By Rachel Shabi
Walker & Company, 2008, 272 pp.

The strength of this book is derived in large measure from the fact that it dispenses with the two great over-arching stereotypes about what sort of country Israel is — for some a glistening island of democracy and Western values floating upon a sea of bloodthirsty aggression, for others a completely foreign colonial entity grafted onto an otherwise unwilling region. Shabi, an Israeli-born journalist of Iraqi descent, achieves this feat by focusing on the reality that Israel's Mizrahi Jews make up at least forty percent of the population. Similar to the work of the American historian Howard Zinn vis-à-vis the Indians and African-Americans of the United States, Shabi gives voice to a history that is often ignored or otherwise distorted by the official register.

While European Jews had been establishing themselves in Palestine since the late 19th century, ancient Jewish communities from the Middle East would do so mostly in the years after the establishment of Israel in 1948, when the resulting political situation made life in their native lands all but impossible. Having meticulously researched official policies towards these "brown" Jews, including public statements from political leaders (David Ben Gurion, Golda Meir, etc.), as well as having conducted interviews with Mizrahi communities all over Israel, Shabi demonstrates that while the Israeli state was eager to welcome these Arabs into their midst as a means of swelling the population, it considered their history and culture to occupy at best an insignificant place in official identity.

A great deal of the book details the many grievances shared by Mizrahis against their marginalization by the predominantly

"Guardians of the Revolution" (1994) by Shirin Neshat from "Art of the Middle East" (Merrell, 2010)

Ashkenazi establishment. Even today, there is a considerable gap in socio-economic development between Ashkenazis and Mizrahis. Mizrahis arriving in Israel in the 1950s and 1960s were often carted off on trains by cover of night (a cruel irony the author is quick to point out) to development towns in the middle of the desert where they would be mostly neglected, and in the case of Sderot, would later on be bombarded by rockets from fellow Arabs in the Gaza Strip. As well, Shabi discusses seemingly credible allegations that Mizrahi babies were actually abducted from their parents during the migration process to be raised in Ashkenazi families.

As much as Shabi concentrates on the often deplorable civil rights conditions to which the Mizrahis were and are subjected, she does not shy away from some of the more salient contradictions existing within the community. Thus, we not only hear the voices of those Mizrahis who harbor resentment against the Ashkenazi establishment, but also those who have found their place in and support it. According to the author, Israel in the1970s saw two diverging tendencies within the Mizrahi community. On the one hand, there were the Israeli Black Panthers, who advocated Mizrahi rights, and made contacts with the PLO and the Black Panthers in the United States. On the other hand, there were those who supported the right-wing prime minister Menachem Begin, perhaps the first Israeli pm to see this group as a significant voting block and exploit it. As Shabi points out, Mizrahis are currently represented by some of the most conservative parties in the Knesset and play a significant role in Israeli politics.

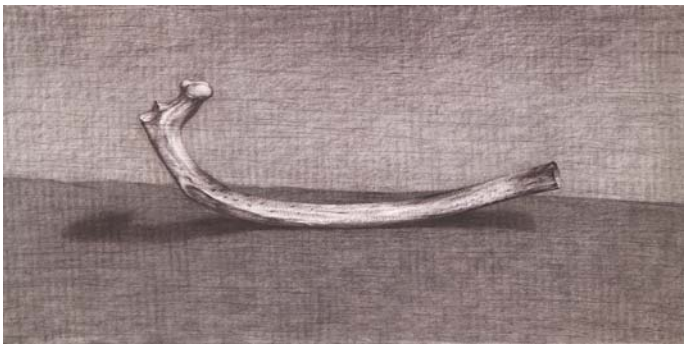
With excellent research from a variety of sources, and a biting yet casually ironic style, Shabi explores a reality of Israeli society that otherwise invariably takes a back seat to the Palestinian issue. And perhaps most importantly, she corrects the view that Israel is a separate and distinct entity in an Arab neighborhood. **AJ**

A Poetry in Past/Present

BY CAROL FADDA-CONREY

In "Geographies of Light," Arab-American poet and literary scholar Lisa Suhair Majaj offers us an intricate tapestry of poems, with memory, identity, and cultural roots being some of the main thematic threads of this resonant collection. The strong narrative voice throughout the poems evokes a complex past that is unwavering in its hold on the narrator's present. Marked by the anguish of losing close family members, the lingering effects of war, the bittersweet labor of parenthood, and permeated by images of olive trees, orange groves, corn fields, and the streets of Amman, Jerusalem, and Beirut, these poems offer up pieces of a personal landscape that is very much defined by, but yet transcends, geographical boundaries.

Geographies of Light
By Lisa Suhair Majaj
Del Sol Press, 2009



"Untitled" by Youssef Abdelke

With a Palestinian father and an American mother, Majaj is someone who is intimately familiar with the difficulties of negotiating the legacies of inherited cultures and the burden of loss tied to that inheritance. Such negotiation lies in the quiet gravity of these poems, which help us look closer and appreciate what is described in a poem like "Homemaking" as "the space between moments / the silence between words." These spaces, however, and the past they evoke, are not always comfortable. The memories they entail are not restricted to childhood summer days or endless sunlit afternoons. They also include stifling wars and a present filled with stories of "bulldozed trees, / smashed wells, . . . [and shriveled] exposed roots." The poem "The Past," for one, with its stark interplay of sensory images, offers an anti-nostalgic snapshot of a past that "smells like afternoon rain / cumin and coriander / stone dust and cactus flowers" (lines 1-3), and also "reeks of gunpowder and garbage / candles and kerosene." Focusing on poignant details of living through horrifying events such as Black September and the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, poems like "Amman, 1970" and "Beirut, 1982" provide us with images that make the immediacy of war come crashing home (such as chicken feeding in a yard "littered" with shells ["Amman, 1970,"] and " . . . gray light / behind web-cracked hospital glass" ["Beirut, 1982."]

> "The strong narrative voice throughout the poems evokes a complex past that is unwavering in its hold on the narrator's present."

But more than only relaying personal experience, these poems contain a narrative urgency for articulating those unheard stories and voices in places like Jenin, Beit Henoun, Baghdad, and Fallujah that are filtered out of more grandiose narratives of war. They force us to acknowledge the loud presence of conflicts and oppression that seep into our everyday lives even when we are thousands of miles away, reminding us that, "whatever we do or don't do may come to haunt us" ("Living in History.") What ultimately becomes clear in Majaj's poetry is that overcoming geographical boundaries and collapsing temporal and emotional distances requires discovering new itineraries for human connection. As she writes: ". . . may we remember the generosity of light: how it travels through unimaginable darkness, / age after age, to light our small human light" ("Living in History.") ***AJ***

Reform, Repression in Syria

Continued from page 29

despite the ever-evolving state of Middle Eastern politics, the book remains a valuable source of information up to 2005 and will aid the reader in understanding future political issues involving Syria and the region.

Decades ago, a British journalist described Syria as holding the key to controlling the Middle East. In his classic book, "The Struggle for Syria," Patrick Seale makes a strong case for his argument – a thesis that Wieland seems to agree with. There are a lot of reasons to pay attention to Syria, and "Ballots or Bullets" is a timely study of a country whose international relevance will likely continue to grow in the coming decades. One thing the Bush Administration did flawlessly was demonstrate that military might cannot compensate for political and cultural ignorance. Those seeking a better understanding of Middle Eastern politics should familiarize themselves with "Syria: Ballots or Bullets," as it offers a sound point of departure. ***AJ***

> "…'Ballots or Bullets' is a timely study of a country whose international relevance will likely continue to grow in the coming decades."

Religious Harmony in Jaffa Before 1948

BY SUSAN MUADDI DARRAJ

In the ongoing rhetoric of the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, it is not unusual to hear some in the political arena talk about the pre-Nakba days in which Jews and both Christian and Muslim Arabs lived peacefully side by side. Those nostalgic days are referred to less and less, but they still live in the memory of many who remember the days before the state of Israel was created.

In "City of Oranges: An Intimate History of Arabs and Jews in Jaffa," writer Adam LeBor recreates that idyllic world, focusing on the coastal city that, in the past, was referred to as "the bride of Palestine," as well as the "groom," the nearby city of Tel Aviv, which later overwhelmed Jaffa.

Detailing the changing landscape of politics in the region, LeBor carries the reader through the tumultuous history of Jaffa from the start of the 20th century until the present day. Yet, it is an "intimate" history, as his subtitle declares, as LeBor keeps his emphasis always on the individuals and the families – Jewish, Christian, Muslim – who inhabited the city. Indeed, the book opens with maps of Jaffa from both 1911 and today, as well as genealogical lists of the major families who were its foundation, the "Dramatis Personae," as he calls them: the Chelouches, Aharonis, Andraus, Geday, Hammami, Abou-Shehades, and others.

It is also a tragic history, the tale of "what could have been." The respectful coexistence of Jaffa's Jews, Christians, and Muslims had withstood the Ottoman occupation and most of the British colonial period, but gave way to the rise of Zionism and Palestinian nationalism. Jaffa's beautiful culture of tolerance was wiped away seemingly overnight: in 1948, when Jaffa surrendered to the Jewish Irgun forces, only a few thousand of its original 100,000 residents were left. Those who had fled the fighting thought they would be returning, but were never permitted to do so.

City of Oranges: An Intimate History of Arabs and Jews in Jaffa
By Adam LeBor
WW Norton & Company, 2007

In his introduction, LeBor clarifies his purpose in delving into the lives of Jaffa's residents, past and present: "The relationship between ancient Jaffa and twentieth-century Tel Aviv is a metaphor for that between Israel and the Palestinians." He treats the individuals whose lives he documents with respect and care, detailing the horror of what new European Jewish émigrés to Jaffa suffered under the Nazi regime, as well as the plight of Palestinian refugees from Jaffa, who had left everything behind and now struggle to make new lives in Jordan, Lebanon, Gaza, and elsewhere. The book ends hopefully, with a quote from Israeli artist Eyal Ziv, who has worked on restoring historic Jaffa: "We are starting not just to rebuild things but to try and connect them together again. Because Jaffa has to be the place where Jews, Muslims, and Christians can connect, like they used to." AJ

Songs of Exile and Return

BY MICHAEL TEAGUE

"One can uproot a man without slaying him…"

I have just had the great pleasure of reading "Baghdad, Mon Amour," a collection of heart-rending poems and prose sketches by exiled Iraqi artist and activist Salah al-Hamdani. Skillfully translated from the French by Sonia Alland, the book serves as an excellent introduction for English-speaking audiences to Hamdani's life and work. These selections are arranged in such a way as to provide a loose narrative of the author's life, from his impoverished childhood on the streets of Baghdad, through his flight from Iraq in 1975 to his subsequent life as an exile in Paris, and finally his tearful return home after the U.S. invasion in 2003. The result is a picaresque autobiography woven together by a number of recurring themes and, perhaps more strikingly, an unapologetic throttling of language through which Hamdani exposes himself to the reader in all his despair, anger and, at times, joy.

Of the various themes explored by Hamdani in this unconventional little volume, the one that is without question the most prominent is that of life in exile. Hamdani was agitating against the Baath regime in the early 1970s, and spent several months in prison as a result. During his incarceration he was subjected to various brutal forms of torture (the most sadistic of which was a mock-execution), but it was also during this period that he learned to read and write, and especially to write poetry. After his release, he fled to Paris where he continued to write, at first in Arabic and eventually in French as well.

Baghdad, Mon Amour: A Journey of Exile and Return
By Salah Al Hamdani
Translated from the French by Sonia Alland
Curbstone Press, 2008, 202 pp.

The writings contained in "Baghdad, Mon Amour" are quite scarred with the author's memories and longings for Baghdad. One gets the impression that Hamdani uses the medium of poetry to confront the immense void created by his absence from his beloved home and his separation from his family. Poems that begin in the present often refract into anguished images and sensations from the past. Palm trees, smells, faces, streets, the desert, the sun and moon, the Tigris and Euphrates, all converge upon the author in a sort of bittersweet vortex from which the ideas of time and meaning themselves are not spared.

If Hamdani masterfully translates his despair to the page, he does so without ever completely succumbing to it. These poems are a means of negotiating his irrevocable loss, and the pervading feeling of meaninglessness he experiences living in a land that is not his while his family and compatriots are left behind in a protracted hell-scape. But they are equally part of the author's political engagement. Hamdani constantly addresses the suffering of the Iraqi people at the hands of the Baath regime and the sanctions of the West, and is also ever mindful of the plight of the Palestinian people — indeed in one particularly delightful sentence, Bush, Saddam and Sharon are succinctly dispatched as "bastards" and "butchers of men." This preoccupation with exploitation and oppression is reflective of the fact that Hamdani is not just a poet, writer, and stage/screen actor but also carries on his political activism in exile, involved simultaneously with French labor and anti-war movements alike.

"Baghdad, Mon Amour" is not only an expression of pain. Some of the most touching verses in the book, where Hamdani seems to achieve some sort of inner peace, deal with love and fatherhood. Perhaps the most wrenching part of the book, however, deals with his return to Baghdad post-invasion. The author is so very adept at conveying the most impossible and conflicting of emotions in a language so intuitive and spoken from the blood, that one could not imagine a being callous enough to not be moved. After decades of living within his memories of Baghdad, Hamdani has to confront this experience and the inevitable question that arises from it — namely, can one return to the place from which one was exiled? ***AJ***

Syria: Open Sesame?

Continued from page 17

makes this connection in his piece, though without putting too much emphasis on the hypocritical nature of the regime.

Fahim and Nawra Mahfoud also made much of a poetry reading group that has been meeting in Damascus. The article, titled "Evenings of Poetry Provide a Space for New Voices," tells of how Lukman Derky, a veteran of the Syrian artistic class, has been hosting this weekly gathering for two years now, in full view of the authorities. Young poets gather, drink arak and beer, and read their own work as well as that of others. They are not afraid to take an occasional jab at the authorities, and they even recite the work of controversial exiled and imprisoned poets. But there are a few elements embedded in this story that also deserve scrutiny. The writers claim that for all this risky behavior, the evenings are not motivated by insubordination – indeed, Derky is quoted as saying, "We don't do things because they are forbidden," which he follows up right away with "the night is about freedom." Aside from this contradiction, there is something almost irritating about how the article fails to mention the great number of Syrian artists and intellectuals who have been imprisoned and tortured by the regime under ridiculous pretexts over the years (most recently, the journalist Michel Kilo received a three-year prison sentence for simply signing his name on a petition; Kilo completed his sentence and was released). In addition, the descriptions of the bar in which these readings take place make it seem like any trendy hipster spot in a big U.S. city: pictures of Malcom X, Ghandi, and Charlie Parker adorn the walls, and the place is apparently frequented by large groups of Americans on poetry night.

A similar dynamic is at work in another article, in which Fahim finds hints of "opening" in the fact that the regime is now encouraging and even funding the creation of certain civil society groups. The example central to this story is Chavia Ali, a wheelchair-bound 29 year old Kurdish woman, who over the last five years has been trying to start a civic organization that would advocate for the rights of the disabled. Until a group led by Asma al-Assad, wife of President Bashar al-Assad, agreed to cover one third of the group's costs last year, Ali's efforts were beset by rather pernicious forms of opposition from the regime. Now, however, Ali is all over the place, doing television interviews, speaking at ministry conferences and being photographed alongside the first lady. Though the article is titled "Doors Start to Open to Activists in Syria," the only concrete example it provides of such an opening is Chavia Ali's group. It also states that those activists who are demanding substantial political reforms, such as an end to arbitrary imprisonment, are being shut out as much as ever. Ms. Ali herself refuses to elaborate on the circumstances surrounding her sister's arrest in a raid on her Kurdish village not long ago. It might be fair to deduce from this that her silence is at least in part due to the fact that her "civil society" organization is actually dependent on the good graces of the regime, and as such is not much of a civil organization after all. Fahim does not shy away from these contradictions, and this makes the optimistic titles sitting atop his articles look all the more dissonant.

The final piece in this optimistic series was penned by Robert F. Worth (with contribution by Nawra Mahfoud), and is by far the most grotesque. Worth's article "Syrian Actress Tests Boundaries Again" is based on an interview he did with the famous and controversial screen sex symbol, actress Igraa, who is best remembered by Syrians for almost getting naked in the 1970 film "The Leopard." Worth claims that Igraa "embodied the openness and liberalism that reigned in the Arab world during the 1960s and '70s", assuming somehow that these two decades constituted a particularly "liberal" time period in the history of the secular regime. He forgets that this cinematic near-disrobing actually occurred during a time when Syria was awash in all manner of radical ideas – socialist, Marxist, and nationalist as well as Islamist, certainly not just "liberal" ones – and thus was tolerated to some extent like all the rest. This misrepresentation is exacerbated by the fact that Worth seems to interpret Igraa's renewed fame as a sign that Syrian society must be gearing to "open up." Furthermore, the source of Igraa's renewed fame is itself not totally evident. Apparently an upcoming movie about Igraa's life has something to do with it, as well the fact that "she has returned as a ferocious critic of the Islamist wave sweeping the Middle-East," after a 15-year self-imposed seclusion. Aside from Worth's interview with her, no specific example of any such "ferocious criticism" is given. Now, this is not to detract

from Igraa's courage in denouncing the chauvinism and backwardness of fundamentalists, which is surely real and sincere, but rather to question Worth's assumptions. But unverifiable claims are not enough, because unlike the previously discussed articles, there is also a tasteless element at work here, something bizarrely designed to appeal to American readers perhaps, when the actress is described in her current cougar-like state: "she now lives mostly nocturnally, rising in mid-afternoon…In her late 60s, she still dresses like the precocious teenager she once was, with tight jeans, pancake makeup and a spectacularly bouffant wig hiding her gray hair. She married only eight years ago, to a man decades her junior, and has never had children."

Each of these reports is trying to give examples of the myriad different ways that civil, and by extension liberal, society in Syria is gaining momentum – is perhaps even thriving. But on many occasions, it seems that merely making the statement that such is the case substitutes for concrete evidence. The political reality, sadly, remains the same. Syria is run by a dictatorship that has never had any intention of loosening its grip on society any more than it has to in order to survive, and that, furthermore, has a history of using its artists to beautify itself when facing West. **AJ**

The New Exiles

BY REBECCA JOUBIN

In "Eclipse of the Sunnis: Power, Exile, and Upheaval in the Middle East," celebrated reporter Deborah Amos gives voice to the four million Iraqis forced into exile following the removal of Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime. Amos explains that while five million Iraqis had been slowly driven into exile during Saddam's three decades in power, in the aftermath of U.S. occupation and the downfall of the Iraqi state, in less than five years, almost as many millions of Iraqis were displaced. Instigated in 2004 by criminal kidnapping gangs and Sunni insurgent attacks, the mass exodus increased in 2006 with Al Qaeda's bombing of the Golden Dome mosque in Samarra, and then again in 2007, provoked by further sectarian cleansing. Intellectually armed with decades of experience in the region, Amos set out on a journey to Damascus, Amman, Beirut, and Baghdad to piece together the story of this lost generation of Iraqi exiles, whose absence was remaking Iraq as well as transforming the politics of their host countries. In places as varied as cafes, sparse rentals, and nightclubs, Amos listened to hundreds of accounts of dispossession, which included nuanced stories of kidnapping, torture, extortion, rape, and death threats.

Eclipse of the Sunnis: Power, Exile, and Upheaval in the Middle East
By Deborah Amos
Public Affairs: New York, 2010, 256 pp.

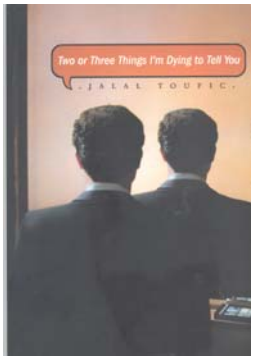
What is remarkable about this book is Amos's effort to understand the stories of members of Iraqi exiles from all segments of life, allowing us to enter the soul of this community. There's Um Nour, a single mother, who fled Iraq after her husband left her and a Shiite militia threw acid on her. Arriving in Damascus with her two children, Um Nour found a job at a beauty salon, which was in reality a hub of prostitution. Working in prostitution allowed her to make money and send her children to school in Syria, where unemployment was high and Iraqis were forbidden to work. The famous Iraqi actors of "Selling the Country," forced out of Iraq because extremists deemed their profession unIslamic, via satellite channel Al Sharqiya, depicted the anxiety and anger of the exiled community. When the star of the "Selling the Country," Rasim al-Jumaily, died in December 2007 Amos vividly describes the gathering of Iraq's exiled artistic community in the outskirts of Damascus to bury their beloved star in "The Stranger's Graveyard," many wondering if they, too, would die in exile. Those Iraqis who felt uncomfortable with Damascus's prohibition against work, fled to Lebanon, where the sectarian system benefited the new arrivals. Those who left for Jordan, though, reported harsh treatment of Iraqis there. One Iraqi dentist wrote on his blog a piece titled "Last of Iraqis," recounting the humiliating way he and his wife were treated upon arrival. Against the background of her vivid accounts is a clear description of how Iraqi refugees were powerless in the face of politics. For example, Jordan began shutting down its border to fleeing Iraqis in 2005, and Syria shut its border in 2007. Desparate to be home again and end a life of dispossession and helplessness, in November 2007 swarms of Iraqis in Damascus took advantage of the $800 offer to return home again, only to face disillusion and death, sending back the heartbreaking message to Iraqis still exiled: "Stay where you are."

"Amos shows how the 'Sunni eclipse,' as she aptly calls it, has consequences for the region and world that have been largely ignored by politicians…[Amos] gives voice to the four million Iraqis forced into exile following the removal of Saddam Hussein…"

Amos shows how the Sunni eclipse, as she aptly calls it, has consequences for the region and world that have been largely ignored by politicians. Amos shows how the refugees call to question Iraqis' identity, and her book poignantly asks whether "restoration" is at all possible or wished for by the current government in Baghdad. Told with great heart and intelligence, and remarkable historical depth, "Eclipse of the Sunnis" is a must read in college classes on current events, history, and politics of the Middle East, and anyone interested in understanding the region better. **AJ**

Two or Three Things I'm Dying to Tell you

By Jalal Toufic
145 pages. $20
ISBN 0-942996-55-0



What was Orpheus dying to tell his wife, Eurydice? What was Judy dying to tell her beloved, Scottie, in Hitchcock's "Vertigo"? What were the previous one-night wives of King Shahrayâr dying to tell Shahrazâd? What was the Christian God "dying" to tell us? What were the faces of the candidates in the 2000 parliamentary election in Lebanon "dying" to tell voters and nonvoters alike? In his sixth volume Jalal Toufic goes on investigating his environment with his magnifying lenses."There is nothing else in literature like it," writes Publisher's Weekly. He is an "amazing writer" says Richard Foreman.

Seasons

By Etel Adnan
2008, 77 pages $18
ISBN: 978-0-942996-66-1

"Seasons" is a series of prose poems concerning the seasons, but that's a starting point. It's in fact a meditative endeavor that encompasses the whole of "Being" in new, innovative ways. The boundaries are blurred between mind, body and matter throughout. The poet takes us (and herself) into nooks, crannies and abysses numberless as the sands. Surrender and revelation throughout.

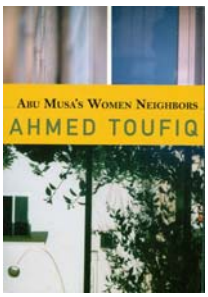
Rumi & Sufism

By Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch
Translated from the French by Simone Fattal
Illustrated with 45 photographs, charts, and maps; index and bibliography
1989 2nd edition, 167 pages. $12.95
ISBN: 0-942996-08-9

"In this fine volume all of the arts come together in a splendid unfolding of all that is Rumi Sufism. The photographs and paintings play against vibrant prose, and open all of the locked doors leading to the universality of Rumi and his teachings. The great care taken in the translation is a marvel unto itself."
– The New England Review of Books

Abu Musa's Women Neighbors

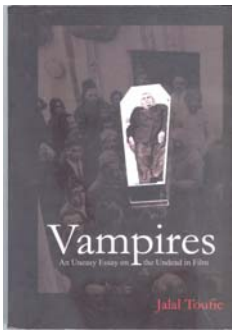
By Ahmed Toufiq
2006, 338 pages. $18
ISBN 0-942996-56-9



"Abu Musa" is a novel translated from the Arabic by Roger Allen and is an unforgettable book. Abu Musa is a Sufi saint whose Maqam can still be found in Salé, a suburb of Rabat, Morocco. Ahmed Toufiq has recreated the circumstances of his life. He tells his tale with love and care for the history and culture he depicts as well as a tender exploration of the human soul. Toufiq made it accessible to a modern and international audience. Already a motion picture in Morocco, the novel is to have a German edition soon.

Vampires: An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film

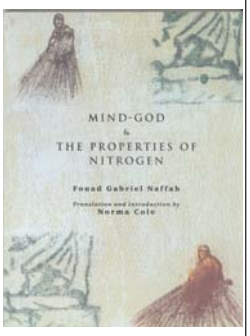
By Jalal Toufic
With color and black and white photographs.
295 pages. $26
ISBN 0942996-50-X



Jalal Toufic uses the meataphor of cinema and the character of the vampire in particular in order to read the historical period we are living in the Arab East right now. The vampire is the character that most renders the situation in Lebanon and the whole region, living "disaster surpassing disaster." Drawing on altered states of consciousness, films, psychiatric case studies and mystical reports, the author tackles many dubious yet certain characteristics of the undeath state, and analyzes the current Lebanese art and political scene through these lenses, and his encyclopedic mind joins it to the whole history of cinema. An absolute must for the readers and teachers of modern Arab cultural studies.

Mind-God and The Properties of Nitrogen

By Fouad Gabriel Naffah
Translation and Introduction by Norma Cole; Pastels by Irving Peltin
2006, 96 pages. $24
ISBN 0-942996-53-4



Lebanese poet Fouad Gabriel Naffah's "Mind-God and The Properties of Nitrogen" charts the mind's progress through the material world to the realm of pure spirit. Crystalline and elusive, his poetry frustrates our tendency to consume form and meaning whole, without first appreciating the subtleties binding them more closely together. Fouad Gabriel Naffah is one of the great poets still unknown in the U.S. to be discovered at last thanks to the masterful translation of Norma Cole. Cole further distills the text, disintegrating and reintegrating its spirit into English. Beautifully illustrated by Irving Petling, who contributed five pastels for the cover and inserts.

A Retrospective Look at the Present

BY THERI ALYCE PICKENS

Precious few books are written in the vein of Paule Marshall's "Praisesong for the Widow." That is, not enough stories are told from the perspective of seasoned women. In this way, Alia Yunis's debut novel is a refreshing change. "The Night Counter" inverts the *bildungsroman* and invites us into a retrospective look at the present. If her text feels long at times, it is because she has taken care to develop the characters – even the minor ones – exposing their humor, flaws, and charisma. The result is a finished product that traverses temporal, geographical, and emotional boundaries and forces us to examine who we are and how we got here.

The Night Counter
By Alia Yunis
Three Rivers Press, 2009

"The Night Counter" traces the history of the Abdullah family from the perspective of their matriarch, Fatima Abdul Aziz Abdullah. Fatima believes she is dying and seeks to bequeath her home in Deir Zeitoon to her grandson, whose homosexuality she refuses to acknowledge. As she awaits death, she keeps company with the wise Scheherazade, who regales her with the goings-on in the lives of Fatima's eight children and multiple grandchildren: a recovering alcoholic, a flighty fortune-teller, a right wing Republican, a cancer survivor, an unwed teen mother, and so on. The novel is intricately woven, but Yunis keeps the reader's attention throughout, a testament to her ability to write clearly in multiple voices.

Fatima and Scheherazade make a comically odd, yet very likely pair. At times, Fatima becomes the petulant daughter of Scheherazade and, in other moments, the roles reverse. This constant ebb and flow in their relationship, the movement between the ethereal wisdom of the ages and the earthly wisdom of the years, encapsulates several of the main themes of the text. As Scheherazade watches over Fatima's progeny, their lives compel us to reckon with the legacy of early twentieth century Arab immigrants. Yunis' prose affirms the difference supposedly wrought by American soil, but remains skeptical of the distance – especially emotionally – that it creates. Moreover, Yunis explores the meaning of growing old, a question that is usually tangential in ethnic American writing. Fatima's children, grandchildren, and even the wise Scheherazade constantly patronize her and attribute her behavior to an erratic nature germane to her age. The omniscient narrator does not seem to endorse this view, but rather suggests that Fatima's isolation is symptomatic of a larger familial ill.

Yunis has a gift for creating multiple compelling characters, from Fatima to her great granddaughter, Decimal, to the reinvented Scheherazade. These women are so complex that readers will feel as though they know them and still be surprised by them (much like Toni Morrison's "Paradise"). Alia Yunis does not just breathe life into her characters, she writes life itself: surprising, tender, funny, and compelling. **AJ**

Faith, the State, and the Soap Opera

BY HILARY HESSE

Professor of anthropology and gender studies at Columbia University, Lila Abu-Lughod has authored many books, including "Veiled Sentiments" and "Writing Women's Worlds." In "Local Contexts of Islamism in Popular Media," she follows on her earlier book, "Dramas of Nationhood," and discusses the depiction of Islamism in the Egyptian media via television serials, which are finite, melodramatic series that often treat political and social issues.

Egyptian TV Dramas — 'The Faith and the Nation'
Local Contexts of Islamism in Popular Media
By Lila Abu-Lughod
Amsterdam University Press, 2006

Abu-Lughod describes how the Egyptian government began waging a television propaganda war in the mid-1990s against Islamism by means of the dramatic serials. She goes on to analyze what this campaign ultimately revealed about Egyptian society and the Egyptian concept of nation. She drew the content for this book from a lecture she delivered in 2004 at ISIM (International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World).

She centers the piece on her early question: "Can religion any longer be understood without reference to the nation-state?" As she guides the reader through the anti-terrorist themed serials of the mid-90s, describing the public debates that ensued as well as some of the shows' unforeseen consequences, we come to see that, at least in Egypt, it cannot. Despite contending that "religion has again become the ideological hub of the public sphere," Abu-Lughod maintains that "'the nation,' and what is good for the nation, now form the only legitimate grounds for debate about religion." This, she writes, is due to "the entrenchment of the modern nation-state," thanks to the politics of Nasser and his Nationalist predecessors. Furthermore, she sees television as a vehicle for fostering national debate. In other words, while the content of the ongoing debate may be religious, the media facilitates a national discourse on Islam and the nation.

Arguing her point in a concise 15 pages, Abu-Lughod shows clear reason and makes a strong case for her conclusions. "Local Contexts of Islamism in Popular Media" is an excellent supplemental read for students and scholars of Middle Eastern Studies. **AJ**

Awakened and Unforgetting: Discovering Bones in the Pantheon of Loss

BY MARK GRIMES

In the 1991 preface to his astounding and graphic book of poetry, "The Rising of the Ashes," Moroccan poet Tahar Ben Jelloun writes that the Gulf War is only "officially" over: "And the dead are buried. But not all the dead." No. The thousands of faceless men who died in battle, and the countless refugee families who fled Saddam Hussein's vengeance against the uprising encouraged by the United States immediately after the war, only to be annihilated? No. They are not "officially" dead because "homage" has not been paid, the honoring of righteous suffering, the recognition of even the bone of a corpse in a mass grave, of someone who once lived, finally to be discovered and memorialized in the bitter pantheon of loss.

The Rising of the Ashes
By Tahar Ben Jelloun
City Lights Publishers, 2010

To Tahar Ben Jelloun, we, in the West, were only allowed a passing, cursory glimpse of this tragedy as it was played out in our media, the sanitizing of war, America "washing its hands and soothing its conscience." Those who have died remain unknown to us. "It is to these anonymous bodies, bodies burnt to ashes seen briefly in television images, that this text intends to give homage."

And, so, the title poem, "The Rising of the Ashes" begins:

> This body that was once a body will no longer stroll
> Along the Tigris or Euphrates
> Lifted by a shovel that will not remember one
> Single pain

And, why? Because it ("this body") has become mere "detritus," an "absence," a person who was once capable of living, capable of speaking of a life (and death) which the poet must now do for the dead. And Ben Jelloun's vision is as unflinching as the war was devastating. Bodies are dismantled into the searing images of body parts still aflame from bombs dropped from the sky. ". . . in a flash/ skin shredded/a lit candle kept vigil inside a lifeless ribcage." And, "The eyes are holes where flies live."

If homage is the act of recomposing a life, Ben Jelloun finds himself beginning in the past tense, where:

> This body which was once a word will no longer
> look at the sea and think of Homer

And:

> The body which was laughter
> is now burning.

Only by our glimpsing the past, which was life – its words and laughter – and then being immersed (as near as language can bring us) in the suffering that was death, can we finally awaken to the shame of not fully knowing.

> When the wind rises, the ashes will go settle on the
> eyes of the living.
> They will know nothing,
> will walk in triumph with a bit of death
> on their faces

The second of the two epic poems in this volume, "Unidentified," in essence, resurrects the Palestinian victims of the 1982 war in Beirut in the sacred and humble act of a prayerful recognition. Samia Hussein will not live again. Nor will Yusra Akel, Ibrahim Khodr Najjar or Fatima Abou Mayyala. But, "in the contemplation grief provokes," empathy is born in us. We come to live their lives, however far short of the suffering they endured, and the heroism they embodied for their people. Here is Imad Rachid Ismaen:

> He had just left El Ansar camp
> He thought himself the salt and rock for his
> mother
> The fever and the voice for his people
>
> —
>
> Imad Rachid Ismaen was twenty-two years old,
> had a beard
> and a piece of land for which he had the title.

He had lived. He had had a claim on life, "a tree and bird for his fiancé," and a "fever" perhaps only a great poet can sense.

And though, regrettably, it may often be true that, as Ben Jelloun admits, "The poet must consider the powerlessness of language in the face of history's extreme brutality." After reading "The Rising of the Ashes," we find ourselves thankful and awakened to his admonition that "one cultivates forgetting," we respond – we won't forget. **AJ**

Understanding Who We Are

BY MICHAEL NAJJAR

Alia Malek's "A Country Called Amreeka: Arab Roots, American Stories" is another collection of Arab American narratives in the tradition of Evelyn Shakir's "Bint Arab" and Moustafa Bayoumi's "How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America." Malek, an author and civil rights lawyer, writes that her book is "an attempt to populate *Amreeka* with human faces, emotions, thoughts, and stories, adding another chapter to the story of the country that we all share." Her theme, Amreeka, serves as the spine connecting stories of various Arab Americans — Christians and Muslims, naturalized and native-born, men and women, rich and poor — from all regions of the United States. "The purpose of this book isn't to separate them," she states, "but to fold their experience into the mosaic of American history and deepen our understanding of who we Americans are."

A Country Called Amreeka: Arab Roots, American Stories
By Alia Malek
Free Press, 330 pp, 2009

> "...each of Malek's narratives is preceded by a brief historical summary and how that time period affected Arab Americans in general. She then focuses her lens on the individual lives of Arab Americans dealing with the aftermath of those events in their personal lives."

Beginning in 1963, each of Malek's narratives is preceded by a brief historical summary and how that time period affected Arab Americans in general. She then focuses her lens on the individual lives of Arab Americans dealing with the aftermath of those events in their personal lives. She introduces us to Ed Salem, a star football player whose family was caught up in Birmingham's struggle for civil rights; Luba Sihwail, a Palestinian woman having to deal with the occupation of her homeland as it was happening; Alan Amen, a Dearborn auto laborer fighting for worker's rights during the Vietnam era; Rabih AbuSahan, a gay man dealing with homophobia and prejudice following the Oklahoma City bombing; Alex Odeh, the ADC director who was murdered in his Santa Ana office; Monsignor Ignace Sadek, a Maronite priest having to defend his church during the aftermath of 9/11; and Abraham Al-Thaibani, a U.S. Marine deployed to Iraq.

Malek is part historian, part journalist, part littérateur, managing to simultaneously take readers on an intellectual and emotional journey. Given her copious bibliography, one desires footnotes of her specific quotes and facts, allowing future researchers to pinpoint her sources. Also, given her background as a civil rights lawyer, it would have been a useful addition to include the legal machinations behind the governmental actions that have been leveled against Arab Americans. "A Country Called Amreeka" is the kind of book every Arab American should read if they wish to know more about their history, their culture, and their fellow Arab Americans. **AJ**

Chariots and Street Corners

BY LYNNE ROGERS

D. H. Melhem, who has written extensively on the black American poet Gwendolyn Brooks, exhibits the influence of Brooks's later work in her own collection of poetry, "Art and Politics, Politics and Art." Melhem's poetry reaches back to the ancient classics of Western tradition, yet still observes the day-to-day in the American city. This accessible and refreshing collection includes ekphrastic poems and short tributes inspired by the works of others. Divided into three sections, the book begins with three "kwansabas" (a recent poetic form consisting of seven-lines, in which each line contains no more than seven words) for the black artists and writers Richard Wright, Amiri Baraka, and Jayne Cortez, followed by an elegy for Angela Davis. In her opening tributes, Melhem identifies herself with the black political left and situates her work within a diverse urban literary tradition.

Art and Politics/Politics and Art
By D. H. Melhem
Syracuse University Press, 2010

In reference to T. S. Eliot, Melhem opens her second section, "Mostly Political", with "April is the cruellest month" and laments the endless cycle of war and greed. Like Brooks, these poems sometimes voice a seeming naïveté that, nevertheless, ends with a twist, renewing and enlarging the poet's observation. In the final section, "Wars", her poems grieve for the international loss of life and hold fast to the belief that "Another world is possible." In the post 9/11 climate, Melhem's poetry lends an emotional and intellectual depth to the concerns of Arab Americans, as they witness their own country wage war on other Arabs in distant lands. Her poems would appeal to any humanistic sensibility. **AJ**

> "...Melhem identifies herself with the black political left and situates her work within a diverse urban literary tradition."

The Night of the Blind One

BY MOAYYAD ALRAW

Blind is one who passes by hole-ridden bodies
And does not become stained with blood
Ascribes the stumble to a coincidence among stones
And moves on.
Shut-eyed is one who washes one's hands
Performs an ablution
Eats
Then sleeps.

The blind one sees not but one's night
Congested with a black tunnel.
And with one's cane touches the body tossed in one's path
Walks upon the pond of blood,
Knocks upon the chest and feels for the leg
But remains lost to the details.
His eyes are two holes and for him ordinary things are barricades.

The poet of darkness sings his jolly song
In the valley that he owns,
A blind wanderer
Without words
Describes what he cannot see,
Jots down a rhyme about death, writes poetry,
Oblivious, or pretends to be, to the funerals around him,
Counting bodies like he would the rocks that surround him:
Such are his numerations of things.
He does not own them,
Nor do they own him.
He uses them as an excuse
Just for the sake of knowledge.

It takes one death to destroy the kingdom of God
Whereupon the imagination's portal is shut.
It takes one death
To rock the gates of heaven.
And the false witness
Is a blind poet
Whose sky is gridlocked in black.

Translated from the Arabic by Basil Samara

"The Night of the Blind One" is from Moayyad al-Rawi's: "*Mamalek*" (Kingdoms), Beirut 2010, Manshourat Al-Jamal.

Killing Yourself to Write

BY MICHAEL TEAGUE

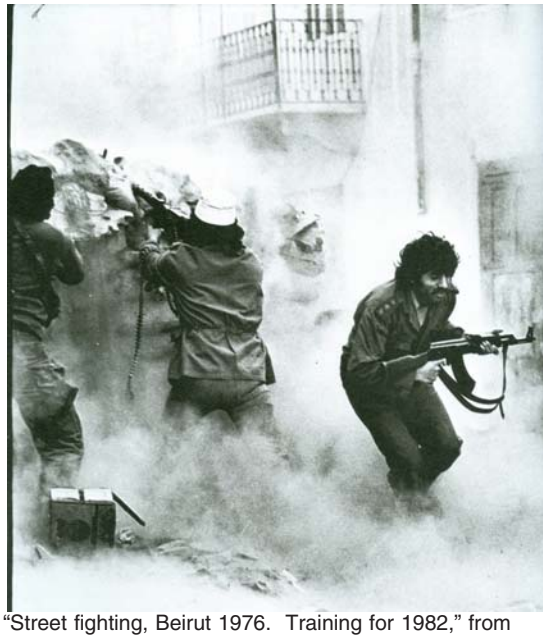
Richard Millet's recent work "La Confession Negative" is a harrowing tale based on the author's participation in the Lebanese civil war in 1976. Residing in a grey area between memoir and novel, the book's central theme is Millet's becoming an author through the experience of war. Millet has previously written of this experience, albeit in a more roundabout fashion, in his first novel, "*Sur un Balcon a Beyrouth*."

Currently an editor at Gallimard, Millet's other title might as well be the reigning *enfant terrible* of French literature. He is routinely dismissive of his contemporaries, and as a devout Catholic is vocally critical of the West's lack of capacity for religious belief. At the same time, it would be grossly inaccurate to characterize him as a conservative; indeed many of Millet's books have dealt, to no small degree, with the subject of sexuality in a most open manner. His knowledge of French authors is encyclopedic, and gravitates naturally towards the mystical and dissident: Georges Bataille, Marcel Proust, Maurice Blanchot, Drieu la-Rochelle and so on. In terms of quality of language, Millet has unquestionably earned these comparisons.

La Confession Negative
By Richard Millet
Gallimard, 2009

"La Confession" is a non-linear journey between the three main stages of the author's young life: his childhood in the rural south-central Limousin region of France, his move to the suburbs of Paris in his late teens, and his journey to Lebanon to fight with the Phalangist militia against what he contemptuously calls the "Palestino-progressivist" forces. Millet's impetus throughout the adventure is his ardent desire to become a writer, a desire he seems to have recognized at a young age. When his estranged mother comes to pluck him out of his pastoral innocence, and discovers her son's aspirations, she advises him that he must experience war to truly become a writer. Already under the spell of Gerard de Nerval's "*Voyage en Orient*," Millet's encounters with a beautiful young Druze girl at university set him on his path to Lebanon. It is not long before he is recruited by a mysterious man connected with the Phalange, and makes his way to Beirut.

Millet's first participation in hostilities takes place during the war of the hotels. He does not fight, at least at first, out of any clearly defined political or religious conviction. This is not to say that he is without convictions, but rather that these convictions are mostly of a negative character. His disdain for what he sees as an ugly and hypocritical abuse of language on the part of the liberal European left, distilled for him into its most contemptible forms by the events of May 68, and unquestioning sympathy for the Palestinian cause, simultaneous with utter disregard for the plight of the Christians of the Middle East, serve as justification enough (and, irrespective of one's feelings about the Palestinian cause, one must concede this last point to Millet).



"Street fighting, Beirut 1976. Training for 1982," from Tony Clifton and Catherine Leroy's "God Cried" (Quartet Books 1983)

It is only gradually, as the brutality unfolds, as his bonds with his fellow militiamen solidify, as he becomes impervious to the act of killing and the scenes of death, that he starts going to church and praying. All the while the preoccupation with becoming a writer never disappears, affording Millet a certain perverse sort of detachment from what is going on around him.

It is never quite clear, from the perspective of Millet-as-warrior, what it is exactly that he wants so badly to write about. But it does reveal the author's mystical relationship with his French language, which he comes to see as a battlefield not entirely different from that of Beirut itself. His Phalangist friends call him "the grammarian" because of his bookishness and his insistence on speaking French while everyone around him is more inclined to learn English and listen to Bob Dylan albums.

Millet's stint comes to an end after about a year with the dreadful – and beautifully rendered – orgy of violence that is the siege of Tal el-Zaatar. However unpalatable one may find this scene and the many others like it throughout the book, it is clear that Millet is no savage. Rather, that the experience of war necessitates that one become a savage to at least some degree. To be sure, no party to Lebanon's civil war ever perpetrated such a large-scale act of butchery as the amphetamine-fueled Phalanges and their Israeli handlers at Sabra and Chatila. But Millet's work reminds us that atrocities on a smaller scale were a daily reality for innocent folks, regardless of whose side they chose to be – or unwittingly found themselves – on. As a document about the utter insanity of this period of Lebanese history, "La Confession Negative" is an important book. It is also one of the most visceral and beautifully written in the tradition of becoming-a-writer narratives. **AJ**

Writing Their Own Stories, Becoming Visible

BY THERO ALYCE PICKENS

Consider that one of the main thrusts of what would obliquely be termed "Arab Diaspora Studies" is to wrest Arabs out of the simplistic dichotomy of being invisible as racially white, or visible as a problematic cultural other. Layla al-Maleh's edited collection, "Arab Voices in the Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature," makes a significant contribution to this complex discussion about what it means to write while Arab. I commend the collection for laying out a schema useful for understanding Arab-American, Arab-British and Arab-Australian writers and successfully delineating the main literary concerns of the field. Despite my concern that some essays contain uncomplicated discussions, I think this deserves to be a part of every scholar's collection.

Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature
Edited by Layla al-Maleh
Rodopi Books, 2009, 504 pp.

In the introduction, Layla al-Maleh gives a chronological overview of Arab-American, Arab-British and Arab-Australian literature. She makes the point that much of the issues of the field are bound up in immigration/migration issues, and publication. She downplays the importance of historical events like 1948 and the 1967 Arab-Israeli War in creating the Arab diaspora, preferring instead to group the literary history based on other segments of time. The essays proceed in something of a chronological order from Khalil Gibran to Ameen Rihani to more contemporary artists. The collection becomes more eclectic toward the end with a personal essay and a series of shorter sketches.

Several essays are of particular interest to scholars for their complicated analyses. Yasmeen Hanoosh's "Tomorrow They Write their Story: Chaldeans in America and the Transforming Narrative of Identities" was particularly spectacular in its amplification of Chaldean-American literature. Hanoosh explains, through a series of footnotes and textual analyses, that the current discourses about Chaldeans have some critical gaps. Her filling of these gaps and explanations of their origin(s) provides a necessary complication in a series of what Hanoosh herself terms "reductive and predictable" narratives. Carol Fadda-Conrey and Cristina Garrigós have significant contributions to the work on Rabih Alameddine's corpus. Both of their essays discuss Alameddine's "I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters," ably expanding on discussions like that of Syrine Hout (not in the collection). Geoffrey Nash's meditation on Leila Ahmed's "A Border Passage" was also quite illuminating as it pointed out the complexity of creating cross-cultural meaning.

Some of the essayists have pieces that tend to regurgitate others' arguments or pieces that present un-nuanced arguments. For instance, Maria Cariello's second piece, "Search for Room to Move: Producing and Negotiating Space in Leila Abouela's 'Minaret,'" does not have the depth of critical analysis as her first essay in the collection. She argues that movement produces space in Abouela's migration narrative, an idea which has been discussed in terms of the Lebanese diaspora and the Lebanese Civil War. Certainly, it remains a worthwhile conversation – especially because Cariello adds Abouela to the discussion – but given the breadth of her first piece, I expected a more complex meditation on how Abouela's voice nuances these arguments. Layla al-Maleh's essay within the text contemplates hybridity and shifting identity in Arab-American literature. Inasmuch as reading this information would be excellent for beginners in the field, it does little more than restate the ideas present in other introductions to the field like those printed in books by Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber, Ernest McCarus, Steven Salaita, Gregory Orfalea, or various authors in the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS) Winter 2009 issue. Both discussions and others like them are worthwhile, but they add little in the way of presenting complexity for a field that remains under siege from outsiders who insist on simplifying it. Given that Arab Diaspora Studies is a new field, I understand the impetus and necessity of introducing the field to others; nonetheless, I question the critical utility of more introductions of this sort, particularly when the genre reduces depth for the sake of presenting breadth.

Layla al-Maleh's essay within the text contemplates hybridity and shifting identity in Arab-American literature. Inasmuch as reading this information would be excellent for beginners in the field, it does little more than restate the ideas present in other introductions to the field…

Ultimately, I commend "Arab Voices in Diaspora" for its breadth of subject matter and the useful schema it presents for looking at Arab diaspora studies. I would strongly recommend that it be a part of any critical introduction to the field. If teaching, it would be a useful companion to scholarly work written by Lisa Suhair Majaj, Evelyn Shakir and Steven Salaita. Because the vast majority of essays were complex and nuanced reflections on important literature, I look forward to the time when the contributors write books of their own. **AJ**

A Woman Speaks of the Phoenix of Love

By Mark Grimes

Ghada Samman's most recent collection of poetry, *Arab Women in Love and War: Fleeting Eternities,* begins with the poem "Love and Apples," where we quickly learn of a "you and I"— the poem's narrator and a someone who remains unnamed and who will follow us throughout these poems, each seeming to reflect the other's fears and hopes, and an eternal longing for refuge, "where love is only for the last lover."

Arab Women in Love and War: Fleeting Eternities
Ghada Samman
Translated from the Arabic by Rim Zahra
BookSurge Publishing, 2009

The "apple" in this opening poem at first appears to be too blithe an image, an easy exercise in listing the ways apples have appeared in myth, religion and Newtonian science. For, "Adam trips over an apple/ and falls seven skies down to earth" and another tears through cosmic time where it "falls onto Newton's head/ and gives him sight and insight." But, then, just as we're about to too blithely turn the page, we realize what Samman has done with this image of the apple. It is as protean as our own souls. The "apple" is Adam's sin and Newton's painful discovery of gravity, but it is also our every failure, the apple a home to the worms of bitter regret and devouring envy, so that,

> "You and I are still trying to learn, not how to eat
> the apple
> but how not to be eaten by it,
> Not to be bitten by the snake
> and not to let worms dwell in our hearts.

The poet concludes, respectably, that there is no escape, of course, only the conundrum that "we die if we devour/ die if we don't, / and die if it devours us."

Next, in "Time-Worn Lover," the "you" that the poet addresses inhabits a wildly passionate world of inverses, made so by the unleashed powers of love, where:

> Since the day I met you,
> the fish fly in the skies
> the birds swim below the water
> roosters crow at midnight
> and the buds surprise the winter branches.

But this love, too, like the time-worn heart that is the apple in the first poem, is ultimately unknowable, "for half your love is light, the rest darkness."


Author Ghada Samman

Still, from the opening pages of this volume we venture forth with the poet, coming to embrace duality as if it were indeed a chosen unity of its own kind, both "summer and winter on one roof,/ maybe that is why I still love you."

And, again we are returned to this persona of "you," who seems distinctly masculine at times as in "Tam Tam in Alayh," where a voice we have quickly come to recognize as the poet's— vibrant, feminine, exuberant—imagines a former lover against a backdrop of war-torn Beirut,

> Do your eyes still beat like drums
> and aim like African spears?
> When I remember your savage sweetness, I hear
> the sun-burnt drums and become an innocent
> crocodile
> that chases its tail over the sand.

At other times, the "you" transcends the limitations of gender, place and even time itself to merge with an effervescence of the spirit that is pure "ether" to the poet, a notion reminiscent of Carl Jung's theory of the "numinous" experience, an indescribable event "which puts the subject into a state of amazement."

In the poem "You or Beirut," Ghada Samman asks,

> What transforms me from a human lump
> Into ether? Is it your love or is it Beirut that glimmers like a phosphoric sky?
> The moon is a football that I kick into the nets
> of the Raouche Rock. Fish fly over the sky.
> And birds and butterflies swim between the waves . . . I hold your hand.

But, perhaps as with all love, all life, it is a tenuous "holding of your hand." For Ghada Samman, it will always be Beirut as in "The Desirable Death":

Every night, I dream that Beirut stands at Raouche's Rock,

At midnight, she jumps into the ocean to die

It is also a vision for her, a universal vision – that life escape the very disappointment it will inevitably hand us. In "Memory of Another Coat" she writes:

This coat, my poor coat,
how it hangs
like a corpse . . .
On one rainy day, you filled it
with a woman in love . . .
It moved with all her longings, secrets and desires and, suddenly, came to life.
Now that you're gone,
it's like a man hung and
left forgotten, and unhurried
at night's doors
Of misery.

But no reader of *Arab Women in Love and War: Fleeting Eternities* can be left with a sense of defeat at the hands of life—and its wars. We are imbued, instead, with the presence of a poet who can say later, "I gather myself between one death and another. . . . I allow the Phoenix that dwells in me to sigh , , , and soar in the skies of pale light, searching for a lighthouse. . . ." ***AJ***

Conference to Honor the Life and Work of Michael Suleiman

Arab American Studies Expert, Michael Suleiman died on May 12, 2010. Just before he died, Michael expressed his preference for a conference on Arab American Studies to honor his legacy. He wanted to be remembered by an activity that would advance the field to which he had dedicated much of his scholarly life. He requested that Suad Joseph, Lisa Suhair Majaj and Elaine Hagopian serve as the Conference Organizing Committee. We are pleased to announce that the conference, entitled **Contemporary Research in Arab American Studies: New Trends and Critical Perspectives**, has been scheduled for November 4 to 6, 2011. It will take place at the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, a co-sponsor of the conference. **Those interested should submit their abstracts of no more than 300 words by March 15, 2011 to echagop@verizon.net.** A separate review committee will evaluate and announce the final selection by April 15, 2011.

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49. THIEVES IN RETIREMENT
By Hamadi Abu Golayyel

Contributors

Youssef Abdelki ("Untitled" artworks appearing on p. 10, 12, 14, 22, 31) is one of Syria's most prominent artists.

D. W. Aossey ("Drawing Conclusions: Shedding a Vital Light on Middle Eastern Art," p. 52) is a novelist and writer based in Southern California.

Mohammad Ali Atassi ("The Veiling of the City," p. 12) is a Syrian author and critic. His articles and reviews appear regularly in An Nahar Literary Supplement.

Brigitte Caland ("Springtime Renewal: First Exhibition of Lebanese Art in Washington D.C.," p.50) is a Los Angeles and Paris-based writer, translator, and a contributor to this magazine. She translated Edward Said's "Out Of Place" into French ("*A Contre-Voie*"), published by Le Serpent a Plumes (2002).

Elie Chalala ("A 40-Year Old Classic Remains Influential" p. 18) is an editor of this magazine.

Carol Fada-Conrey ("A Poetry in Past/Present," p. 31) is an assistant professor in the English Department at Syracuse University, where she teaches a variety of undergraduate and graduate courses on Arab and Arab/American literatures and cultures. She has taught at the University of Sharjah, Purdue University, and St. Joseph's University. Her essays on gender, race, ethnicity, war, trauma, and transnational citizenship in Arab and Arab-American literary texts have appeared in a variety of journals and edited collections. She is currently working on a book manuscript titled "Between the Transnational and the Ethnic: Arab-American Literary Renegotiations of Self and Home."

Susan Muaddi Darraj ("Religious Harmony in Jaffa Before 1948," p. 32) is an author and editor whose essays, book reviews, and fiction have appeared in the Monthly Review, Baltimore Magazine, Al Jadid, and others.

Rania Ghamlouch ("Lantern," an artwork, p. 3) is a Boston-based graphic artist.

Mark Grimes ("Awakened and Unforgetting," p. 37; "AWoman Speaks of the Phoenix of Love," p. 42) is an associate professor of English at Harvard Community College, Columbia, MD.

Hilary Hesse ("Reform, Repression and the 'Negative Balance' in Syria," p. 28; "Faith, the State, and the Soap Opera," p. 36) is a Los Angeles- based writer.

Rebecca Joubin ("Iraqi Actor Jawad Shukraji on Childhood, Working Under Saddam and Recent TV Series," p. 21; "Historical Novel Examines Coptic/Muslim Conflicts and Common Ground," p. 29; "The Unchanging" and "Man as a Nation," p. 26) is assistant professor of Arabic at Davidson College.

Lisa Suhair Majaj ("Remembering Michael Suleiman and Evelyn Shakir," p. 6) 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 Writer and Artist," and "Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers."

Emile Menhem ("Untitled," appearing on pp. 46-49) is a prominent Lebanese fine artist and art director of the Lebanese daily Al Akhbar.

Michael Najjar ("Reevaluating the Syrio-American School," p. 27; "Understanding Who We Are," p. 38) is a doctoral candidate at UCLA in the Theater and Performance Studies program with

The Koran and Ataturk

Continued from page 26

While the documentary tends to favor the image of him as an autocrat, Labat nevertheless attempts to present a balanced view. Although some of the scholars interviewed dismiss Ataturk as having been no more than a dictator who tried to do too much too fast, others hold that he cannot be classified as such since his modernizing goals were admirable. A few examples include his introduction of a Civil Code that announced the equality of men and women, his abolishment of polygamy, and his having given women the right to vote. Given all this, Ataturk might most accurately be referred to as simply a modernizer, as opposed to the all-or-nothing labels of dictator or democratic statesman.

Despite varying views, the documentary makes clear that his quick secularization and attempt to supplant Eastern culture with Western culture – such as replacing the Arabic alphabet, abolishing Islam as an official religion in the Constitution, making Sunday a day of rest, and prohibiting the wearing of the veil and other traditional clothing- have not been as a penetrating as is often claimed. His reforms touched on a nerve, delving to the very core of Islamic beliefs and traditions, and affected the city very differently than the countryside. This rendered mixed results for the Kemalist legacy, which accounts for some of the contradictions and tensions in modern day Turkey. ***AJ***

Contributors

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an emphasis on Arab-American theater. He is co-editing the first anthology of Arab-American/ Arab-Canadian Drama.

Theri Alyce Pickens ("A Retrospective Look at the Present," p. 36; "Writing their Own Stories, Becoming Visible," p. 41) is a visiting assistant professor of English at Pitzer College.

Lynne Rogers ("Film Comments," p. 24; "Chariots and Street Corners" p. 38; "From Al Jadid's Bookshelf," p. 46) is a professor and author whose articles have appeared in various publications.

Mamoun Sakkal (Illustration of Samira Chalala, p. 2) is an artist, calligrapher, and type-designer from Syria, now based in Bothell, W.A. He is a Ph.D. candidate writing about the use of Arabic calligraphy in modern art and design.

Andrea Shalal-Esa ("Clearing a Path for Mainstream Arab-American Literature," p. 10) is a Washington-based journalist with a great interest in Arab-American literature.

Michael Teague ("The New Christian Question," p. 8; "Syria: Open Sesame?," p. 17; "A 40-Year Old Classic Remains Influential," p. 18; "We Look Like the Enemy," p. 30; "Baghdad, Mon Amour," p. 32; "La Confession Negative," p. 40) is a Los Angeles-based writer and graduate of French literature from the University of California, Irvine.

Forthcoming in Jadid 63

ESSAYS

THE LEGACY OF SAAD ARDASH: AN EGYPTIAN PLAYWRIGHT
By Michael Teague

WRITING TOGETHER: TWO GENERATIONS OF ARAB- AMERICAN WRITERS SERVE THE PUBLIC PURPOSE
By Holly Arida and Richard Alan Popp

TOWARDS ANOTHER ARAB ERA: ON MOHAMMED ARKON'S LATEST BOOK
By Hashem Saleh

From Al Jadid's Bookshelf

By Lynne Rogers

In The Olive Grove, a Palestinian Story

By Deborah Rohan
Saqi Books, 2001 and 2008

Deborah Rohan's "In The Olive Grove, a Palestinian Story" is a family history told within the framework of return. The novel's protagonists are Hamzi Moghrabi and his father, Kamel, a secular and civil conscious man whose life trajectory symbolizes the destruction of a nation and an agrarian way of life. This epic story begins in 1913 when Kamel joins the Ottoman Army, believing the Turkish Army will pave the way to a future where Arabs, Jews, Turks and Armenians can all live together. He quickly marches into reality.

An older, married Kamel steadfastly refuses lucrative offers made by Jews who want to buy his land, and eventually finds himself imprisoned by the British Army. As fighting edges nearer to home and friends are murdered by Zionists, Kamel finally flees with his family. Later, destitute in Lebanon, he bitterly questions his decision to leave, as the novel highlights the moral and economic dilemmas of Palestine's former land-owning class. When Hamzi returns to the Occupied Territories, he visits the olive grove that his father bought for him when he was born only to find it "completely barren," a closing image that dismantles the Israeli myth of "greening the desert."

Although Rohan's stilted dialogue and reliance on clichés can be distracting, her novel offers a broad outline of tumultuous social upheavals, while her attention to the period between the two world wars addresses a gap that modern fiction tends to overlook.

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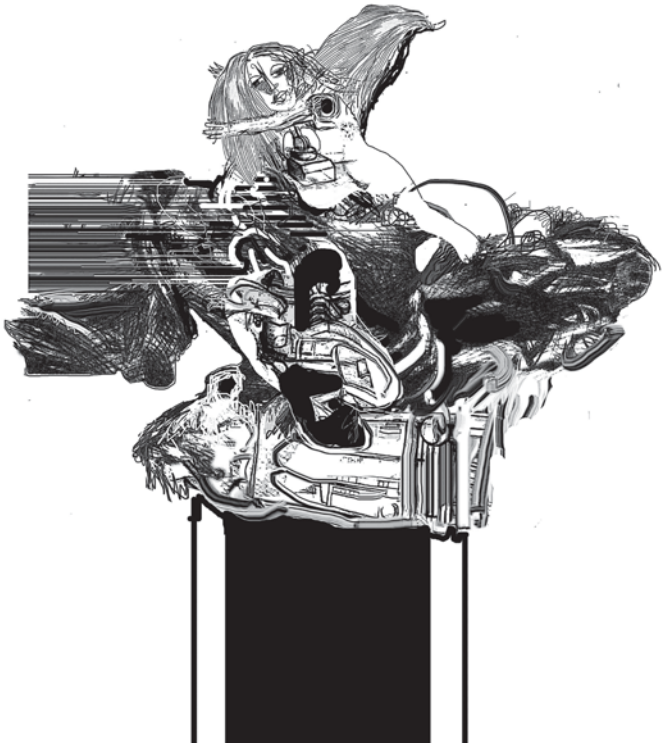

"Untitled" by Emile Menhem

Memories in Translation: A Life between the Lines of Arabic Literature

By Denys Johnson-Davies
American University in Cairo Press, 2006

In his foreword to Denys Johnson-Davies's "Memories in Translation: A Life Between the Lines of Arabic Literature," Naguib Mahfouz appropriately acknowledges that the author "has done more than anybody to translate modern Arabic fiction into English and promote it." Given the vibrancy and the breadth of Johnson-Davies' translations, he has literally created a canon of modern Arabic literature for Western readers, making an immeasurable contribution to the study and understanding of the contemporary Arab world.

Johnson-Davies's engaging memoir shines with charm and wit as he recounts a young man's discovery of a vocation that led to his present elevated status in the international world of letters. Born in Canada, Johnson-Davies grew up in Cairo, Sudan, Uganda and Kenya, being sent to boarding school in England at the age of twelve. Fortunately for readers throughout the Western world, his father had the foresight to pull the young boy from that school and support his son's desire to study Arabic at the School of Oriental Studies in London. After earning a degree from Cambridge and working for the BBC during World War II, Johnson-Davies returned to Cairo. There, in 1947, he translated a small collection of short stories by Mahmoud Teymour, which Johnson-Davies claims was the first volume of Arabic short stories to be published in English. Approaching translation as an art rather than a science, he went on to translate the works of such Arab literary giants as Tewfik al-Hakim, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Ghassan Kanafani, and Tayeb Salih, who also became his friends.

Today he is a cultural maverick who has made major inroads — although never a living — from his translations. Johnson-Davies's memoir brings the contemporary Arabic world of letters to life and dazzles with its conclusion that "Nothing moves without translation."

Folktales from Syria

Collected by Samir Tahhan
English version and introduction by Andrea Rugh
University of Texas at Austin, 2004

In "Folktales from Syria," Andrea Rugh offers an English version of oral folk narratives from Aleppo collected by the Syrian poet, Samir Tahhan, whose own life reads like one of his tales. After losing his hands, eyesight and much of his hearing in a mine explosion, Tahhan, with the help of his wife, recorded this collection of folk narratives from the coffee houses of Aleppo and the laps of Syrian grandparents to preserve the timeless social values of a fading oral culture. The surprise endings of the folktales, worthy of Maupassant, include the universal loving mothers, devoted daughters, greedy villains and unjust kings. As transmitters of the need for justice and human dignity, these two engaging collections will appeal to adults who have maintained their sense of wonder and younger readers who are cultivating an appreciation of life's ironies and twists of fate.

From the Land of Sheba, Yemeni Folk Tales

Retold by Carolyn Han
Translated by Kamal Ali al-Hegri
Interlink Books, 2005

Replicating the transmission of oral narratives, Kamal Ali al-Hegri first listened to the tales of the Yemeni day laborers and then, acting as a mediator - translator, passed them along to Carolyn Han who retells the stories in "From the Land of Sheba, Yemeni Folk

Tales." This linguistic marriage of written and oral, Arab and English, listener and reader produces a delightful variety of stories from the culturally specific to the universal, from the discovery of coffee to the educational tales that instill the values of cooperation and kindness. In the tale "Henna Leaf," the Western reader easily recognizes the Arabic roots of Cinderella and how the similarities between the Yemeni story "The Wisdom of the Porter" and the Syrian "Story of the Miser and the Porter" reinforce the cultural heritage that unites the Arab world.

The Tree & Other Stories

By Abdallah al-Nasser
Translated by Dina Bosio and Christopher Tingley
Interlink Books, 2004

"The Tree & Other Stories" by Abdallah al-Nasser arrives from Saudi Arabia. Translated by Dina Bosio and Christopher Tingley, this compilation of 24 contemporary short stories clearly pays tribute to the stylistics of the classical Arab anecdote and folktale. While the settings of the story reflect the diverse landscape of Saudi Arabia – from the vast and unconquerable desert to the inner machinations of the corporate world – these stories shine a minimalist spotlight on a single incident or situation to infer the rich details of an entire life or environment. Recounting the death of a migrant worker, the mature loneliness of financial or emotional failure and the small triumphs of the everyday worker, al-Nasser's sparse episodic stories delve into the incongruities of modernity and tradition, the village and the city, and the powerful and the powerless to invigorate the reader's own imagination.

Muntaha

By Hala El Badry
American University in Cairo Press, 2006

Hala El Badry's "Muntaha" is set in the title village, where the Egyptian villagers react against the British occupation of Egypt and the events of 1948 in Palestine. The family history of Muntaha's mayor frames the novel's narrative, which extends several generations from his impromptu conference room in the fields to the secrets in the servants' quarters. While this disjointed text is sometimes difficult to follow, the poetic analogy of sparrows to describe Egypt's dead returning from World War I and Palestine situates the sacrifice of the village into the larger Arab arena. The novel also relates some wonderful folkloric antidotes to the political situation, such as the village bombshell whose sexual activities are revealed to her husband when she gives birth to a donkey.

"Untitled" by Emile Menhem

Dark Hope: Working for Peace in Israel and Palestine

By David Shulman
University Of Chicago Press, 2007

For those who have given up on the Israeli peace movement, David Shulman's memoir of an Israeli activist, titled "Dark Hope: Working for Peace in Israel and Palestine," will restore a sense of human decency to the drama, as well as administer a cold dose of reality. The book is both affectionate toward Israel and sharply critical of its policies.

A professor of Sanskrit at Hebrew University, Shulman was born in Iowa, later immigrating to Israel where he served (and his son now serves) in the army. Nevertheless, he has steadfastly protested Israeli military aggression by staging public demonstrations.

Shulman's quietly courageous memoir covers the internal debates in Israel over the refusniks, the dividing wall and subsequent land-grabs, and Israel's illegal appropriation of precious water resources as part of its campaign of "greening the desert." He documents the unabashed violence committed by camera-smashing, gun-toting settlers against Palestinian villagers. Cutting through settler hypocrisy, he questions "what black greed, what unwitting hatred" would motivate people to steal olives and plant poison pellets intended to kill village livestock — all in the name of God?" Shulman carries both his medic kit and his Dark Hope with him as he goes on staging his demonstrations. Those who truly love Israel would do well to read this book.

Absent

By Betool Khedairi
American University in Cairo Press, 2005

Betool Khedairi's second novel, "Absent," provides the escape of a good mystery set against the urgency of war. As in the setting of her impressive first novel, "A Sky So Close," art is an indicator of societal health and plays a predominate role. Khedairi's female protagonist, Dalal, comes of age during the 2003 American bombing of Iraq. The well-crafted novel offers a wonderful blend of hope and cynicism, humor and ethics.

Dalal's family and neighbors draw an unforgettable and varied civilian portrait of Iraq, the local dentist operates on an old car seat using a handheld flashlight, a nurse sells body parts to pay for her mastectomy, and a devout fortune teller, who dispenses herbs and spells to others, secretly chooses the probability of modern science to heal and takes antibiotics to treat her own ailments. As the war continues, the characters adjust their survival strategies, along with their professional, personal and moral standards. Bodies pile up, the landscape withers, and the world ceases to make sense. One character wonders, "Doesn't the West know that the people responsible for hiding those alleged weapons watch a lot of Road Runner cartoons?"

Boasting both social consciousness and humor, "Absent" would be an accessible and provocative addition to any classroom focused on contemporary Arab culture or the war in Iraq, and an equally rewarding read for those who seek a relevant and engaging story.

Understanding the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: A Primer

By Phyllis Bennis
Olive Branch Press, 2007

Phyllis Bennis's "Understanding the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: A Primer" relentlessly exposes the cynical opportunism of Israeli policy as well as the self-serving machinations of the United States. Accompanied by simple pictorial maps, Bennis's primer follows the Socratic format of questions and answers. Divided into five sections, Bennis' text not only describes the cycle of abuse and conflict in straightforward language, she also illuminates the deadly consequences of American aid for the state of Israel.

Bennis occasionally over simplifies. Brows might be raised by the claim that "Iraq's illegal invasion of Kuwait had provided a convenient pretext for the U.S. to lead the world to war, to prove it remained a superpower even as the Cold War ended." And not all historians would agree that in 1948, "As soon as Israel declared its independence, the armies [of the Arab governments] moved to oppose the well-armed Zionist militias, but were soon defeated."

Nevertheless, her primer includes some interesting, behind-the-headlines scenes for the novice, such as when President Johnson gave Israel "the final green light" to attack Egypt even as Nasser was in the midst of negotiating, or George W. Bush's refusal "even to speak with the Palestinian leader [Arafat] when their paths crossed at the United Nations." "Understanding the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: A Primer" may anger Zionist readers, but it will provide others with a starting point for answering the oft-repeated question: "Why do they hate us?"

Modern Arabic Short Stories, A Bilingual Reader

Edited by Ronal Husni and Daniel L. Newman
Saqi, 2008. 296 pp.

Teachers and students of Arabic will be delighted with Ronal Husni and Daniel L. Newman's "Modern Arabic Short Stories, A Bilingual Reader." This collection of 12 wonderful short stories, translated into English here for the first time promises to liven up the discussion in Arabic language classes. The stories include local colloquialisms and are accompanied by extensive notes explaining both the localized vernacular and its cultural implications. Husni and Newman's selection will introduce students to a wide array of contemporary writers from around the Arab world, and the different styles of contemporary Arabic literature. The first four stories explore the magical superstition, the misuse of religion, and human sexuality in the patriarchal villages of Tunisia, Syria, Morocco and Libya. Naguib Mahfouz's story, "Qismati and Nasibi," about two conjoined Siamese twins, is both humorous and allegorical. Several stories express the wrenching pain of loneliness: for a young father-to-be during the Lebanese war in Hanan al-Shaykh's "Yasmine's Picture"; for a sensitive prostitute from the back streets of Tangiers in Mohamed Shoukri's "In the Night and the Sea." Salwa Bakr's "Ancestral Hair" focuses on the middle-aged single mother of a child with Down syndrome, and Fuad al-Takarli's "A Hidden Treasure" laments the lost opportunities of love. Students will be inspired by the ghosts, the universal yearnings, the comedy and the sexual frankness of these stories while pursuing their Arabic linguistic and cultural studies.

"Untitled" by Emile Menhem

The End of Spring

By Sahar Khalifeh
Translated by Paula Haydar
Interlink Books, 2008, 281 pp.

Sahar Khalifeh returns to the raw realism of "Wild Thorns" in her new novel, "The End of Spring," translated by Paula Haydar. This coming of age tale of two half-brothers documents the siege of Arafat's headquarters in 2002, the illegal construction of Israel's wall, and the subsequent depression and desperation of Palestine's youth. Khalifeh's narrative recreates the events with an arresting sense of truth; neither the settlers nor the Palestinian Authority escape Khalifeh's penetrating eye, as she describes the loss of innocence for two sensitive and creative young men.

Even though the novel documents a crucial and tragic period in contemporary Palestine, it is as easy to follow as a soap opera, and so the character twists and turns should be left for the reader. The local character types are all there: the clueless TV personalities, the gangsters who have become cabinet ministers, the outsiders who always know how to "resist," the Israeli peace activists, the innocent and unjustly accused, as well as the pathetic collaborators and the starry-eyed young girls. "The End of Spring" is a wonderful follow-up for readers of "Wild Thorns" who want a sense of post-Oslo life in the West Bank. And those partial to the history of Nablus will appreciate Khalifeh's reverence for her brave city. A great read for students, "The End of Spring" offers a plot so easy to relate to that they will forget they are getting an education.

Heads Ripe for Plucking

By Mahmoud al-Wardani
American University in Cairo Press, 2009, 160 pp.

In his reflective and intense novel, "Heads Ripe for Plucking," Egyptian writer Mahmoud Al-Wardani soars from ancient Egypt to the sci-fi future. Using an innovative and historically appropriate frame story, al-Wardani narrates his six tales in the voice of an open-eyed, impaled head. Translated by Hala Halim (who also translated Mohamed El-Basatie's "Clamor of the Lake"), this polyphonic history of headless corpses deftly uses the past to set an eerie precedent for the future of Egypt. Leaping back and forth in time, the overlapping narratives collapse the time differences into a chorus of the oppressed. The "first season of beheadings" begins with the murder of the Prophet Mohammed's grandson, with the narratives providing a panorama of modern Egyptian political and social life, from the euphoric promise of the 1952 Free Officers Revolution to the bread riots of 1977. In the most literary narrative, a couple earnestly work together

to preserve the letters of the 1882 nationalist leader, Ahmad Urabi, but find themselves impotent before the technology and glitzy glitter of the new millennium. The final sci-fi story bitingly satirizes the Egyptian middle class whose empty emotional lives are readily rectified with required periodic "head cleanings." The multi-layered beheaded motif, which works both aesthetically and politically, boldly introduces "Heads Ripe for Plucking" as a provocative cultural achievement.

Fortune Told in Blood

By Davud Ghaffarzadegan
Translated by M.R. Ghanoonparvar
The Center for Middle Eastern Studies, The University of Texas at Austin, 2008

Translated from Persian, "Fortune Told in Blood" delineates the Iran-Iraq War in a profound yet simple allegory of death and defeat. In his introduction, translator M.R. Ghanoonparvar describes the schismatic political climate of postwar Iran at the time of publication, as the book's well-known author Davud Ghaffarzadegan pushes the boundaries of anti-war art by "humanizing the enemy."

The novella tells the story of two young, nameless Iraqi soldiers who find themselves bunkered together on an isolated mountaintop. One of them wanted to study literature and the other is a lieutenant and former law student. The two share spontaneous moments of innocence romping in the snow in spite of the class differences reflected in their ranks. Like boys, they confide in each other, and later, like men, they use these secrets against one another. When a third party arrives in the form of a Republican Guard second lieutenant, the fragile co-existence of their "Swiss vacation" violently crumbles as circumstances test each of the alliances. A haunting cliffhanger, "Fortune Told in Blood" not only humanizes the enemy, but also the proverbial young man who reluctantly finds himself in uniform.

"Untitled" by Emile Menhem

Salvation Army

By Abdellah Taïa
Semiotext(e) Native Agents Series, distributed by MIT Press, 2009

Touted as Morocco's "first openly gay autobiographical writer," Abdellah Taïa's coming-of-age novel "Salvation Army" follows a young man as he travels from Morocco to Geneva. Becoming increasingly aware of the complicated entanglement of love, sex and economics both at home and abroad, the protagonist loses his innocence but retains his capacity to love and fire to learn. Translator Frank stock stays true to the sparse and imaginative French in which it was originally written.

This oddly enchanting novel begins with the child narrator's piercing sensitivity to his parents' mating dance. He subsequently realizes, almost imperceptibly, that his love for his older brother is more than brotherly, inciting his first pangs of jealousy. Although his first sexual encounter (which takes place with an older man) makes him feel sick, he also observes honestly that he "loved it." Later, he falls in love with Jean, an older professor who helps him earn a scholarship to study literature in Switzerland. In one of the novel's most striking scenes, the narrator willingly follows a man into the sordid public toilets for a touching, anonymous rendezvous. The artistic strength of "Salvation Army" lies not only in its frank treatment of homosexuality and the economics of sexual trafficking, but also in the narrator's capacity to find and appreciate moments of love in unlikely places.

Thieves in Retirement

By Hamadi Abu Golayyel
Syracuse University Press, 2006

Marilyn Booth, the translator of "Thieves in Retirement," contextualizes this urban novel in the fringes of post-Nasser Cairo. In her introduction to the "house novel" she writes, "The history of the neighborhood is part of the story; and the documentation of this history is one of collective and individual memory, one of encounters shaped through colloquial dialogue." The story opens with the narrator, a 30-year old Bedouin, fleeing to Abu Gamel's apartment building to escape an undisclosed vendetta from the past. In just one of many patterns, this dark, bold and lively novel closes when the narrator incurs the vengeful wrath of Abu Gamel. Between those scenes, the reader becomes acquainted with the other tenants – "strangers" also plagued by fear of the past – and Abu Gamel's bango-smoking sons, including Sayf, the transsexual hairdresser. Despite the inevitable comparison with Alaa Al Aswany's popular "The Yacobian Building," "Thieves in Retirement" stands by itself as a literary and aesthetic chronicle of urban Cairo and the levels of corruption behind the "Open Door" nationalistic rhetoric. The casual philosophical tone of this endearing narrator overlays a well-constructed novel that parallels ancient history with contemporary urban economics and sexuality. ***AJ***

Drawing Conclusions:

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Middle East, are immortalized in various forms, but ultimately give way to the larger-than-life political images of Nasser and Sadat. Tributes are paid to beautiful and sensuous Middle Eastern performers in portraits by Youseff Nabil and the eclectic mixed media work of Khosrow Hassanzadeh, but later dissolve into the strangely disturbing work of Ahmed Alsoudani, whose distorted faces look toward the misery of the Gulf War, and Gazan artist Laila Shawa's bewilderment of a rifle-wielding child in "Boy Soldiers."

In this regard, "Art of the Middle East" follows an interesting progression from light to dark. Whether done intentionally or subconsciously, the book takes on an overall more introverted, contemplative tone as the images unfold; and the high spirit of calligraphy, pattern art and personality cult morphs into the sullenness of dispossession and identity crisis. A troubled history and confused identity become metaphors for the modern Middle East, its imagery often defocused, almost aimless and abstract – a stark contrast to the crisp orderly lines and the jubilant glowing colors exhibited in the beginning of the book. To some extent one has to wonder if the psychology of conflict has really taken such a deep hold of Middle Eastern peoples.

However, some of the most gripping and original images appear toward the end. Hossein Khosrojerdi's digitally manipulated photographs of isolated figures are creepy and haunting. In "Railway" and "Man with the Rocks" mummy-like forms appear ghostlike amid magically minimalist backgrounds, reminiscent of the surrealist works of Yves Tanguy. "Paysage Pleurant" by Abdallah Benanteur also stands out as a strangely conflicted landscape that appears to question human existence. Meanwhile, "Cedar Tree" by Nabil Nahas instills a sense of rebirth into the mix, perfectly capturing the horizontal form of the cedar tree with a strangely oriental sweep of the brush.

In many ways, "Art of the Middle East" is a triumph. Thorough and complete, the book captures the emotional highs and lows of a diverse collection of artists and their work in a world where anything Arab or Iranian is too often overlooked. Without a doubt, the strength of the book is the care with which the images were chosen. Visually stunning, "Art of the Middle East: Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Iran" is sure to leave the reader wanting more. ***AJ***

The Arab American National Museum (AANM) announces its fourth DIWAN: A Forum for the Arts, to be held March 25-26, 2011, in New York City. AANM is pleased to partner with Alwan for the Arts and the Middle East and Middle East American Center at CUNY in its ongoing commitment to convene and generate a national dialogue among artists and academicians on the state of Arab American art. Artistic presentations and proposals for panels and papers are welcome; please visit www.arabamericanmuseum.org for submission of information and deadline.

Springtime Renewal:

First Exhibition of Lebanese Art in Washington, D.C.

BY BRIGITTE CALAND

The arrival of spring displayed Washington, D.C. at its best: vivid pinks and vibrant whites of the blossoming cherry trees adorned the city in a pleasant allure with a brightening promise of seasonal renewal. It was, accordingly, fitting that this Washington spring was accompanied by a series of events honoring the contemporary Lebanese art scene.

A group of Lebanon's best-known artists, spanning generations and including those living in Lebanon as well as those abroad, converged in early April at the Katzen Arts Center of the American University to show in the exhibit "Convergence," enabled by the joint efforts of APEAL (Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon), and their sponsors, the Saradar Foundation, SEAL, NASCO, Quantum Communications, BrandCentral and Anis Commercial Printing Press.

The week kicked-off with an intimate dinner at the Lebanese ambassador's residence where, Antoine Chédid and his wife, Nicole, warmly greeted the attending artists and some of the sponsors. The next day, following a very successful opening organized by the American University, more than 150 honored guests gathered and dined splendidly at Nayla in Georgetown.

Two nights later, the acclaimed chef Michel Richard prepared a gala Dinner at the Katzen Arts Center, where tables were set in the large rooms on the first floor of the exhibition. Addressing the crowd were Nicole Chédid, Adrian Fenty, mayor of Washington, D.C., Cornelius Kerwin, president of the American University, Rita Nammour, founder of APEAL and Mario Saradar of the Saradar Foundation.

More than 30 recent pieces, paintings and installations were displayed on the top two floors of the center. Striking installations caught the visitor's eye when entering the exhibition: "The Temple," Mario Saba's installation, a multimedia piece reflecting ideas and illusions with video projection, suggesting a "New Tree of Knowledge," as well as new icons and the ruins of dreams and ambitions, all of them representing the Babylon syndrome. Another impressive installation was Nadim Karam's oxidized black steel and resin piece "The Fisherman and the Cloud," powered by an electric motor. According to Karam, the Fisherman is "the Carrier and the Thinker." Karam wrote "I need the Carrier to carry the burden of our collective memories, and I need the Thinker as a catalyst for ideas." The production of this piece was a long process described by the artist in a booklet.

On the surrounding walls a large painting by the Los Angeles-based Lebanese artist Huguette Caland was shown. Her piece "The Sea II," is an invitation to a journey on oceans and seas, as Caland suggests when she remembers the verses of French poet Jean du Bellay: "Happy he who like Ulysses has returned

"Self Portrait" by Hala Dabaj, 2007

"Duel Look" by Jocelyne Saab, 2008

"The Sea II" by Huguette Caland, 2007

"Merkaba" by Ayman Baalbaki, 2009

successful from his travels." Four other large canvases by Chaouki Chamoun were also displayed in this room.

The top floor offered other paintings including two by Nabil Nahas, a Lebanese artist living between New York and Beirut, as well as paintings by Joseph Harb, Paul Wakim and Marwan Sahmarani. Hannibal Srouji's diptych "Fire IV" was also exhibited, as were works by Lulu Bassiri, Chawki Frenn, Katya Assouad Traboulsi, Amal Dagher, Bassam Geitani, Oussama Baalbaki, Rim al-Jundi, Joseph Chahfé, Mansour el Habre, Jean-Marc Nahas and Jean-Pierre Watchi. Particularly strong was Ayman Baalbaki's "Merkaba" representing a keffiyeh and the war of good against evil. Also displayed was "Golgotha," an oil on panel piece by artist Chawky Frenn, who is an associate professor at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA.

Installations from artists Anita Toutikian, Mohammad al Rawas, and Mouna Bassili Sehnaoui were also displayed, as was a collection of photography by Joumana Jamhouri, Kris Seraphin, Jocelyne Saab, and Hala Dabaji. Exceptionally compelling was "Rubbles," a wall of photographs by artist Nada Sehnaoui taken of the southern suburbs of Beirut three days after the end of the Israeli attack in 2006. Sehnaoui, who says that the piece is "a meditation on the ongoing capacity of human beings to reduce other human being's lives to rubble," admits that art helped her deal with the terrible images she saw at that time.

This exhibition of contemporary Lebanese art is the first of its kind anywhere in the world. Curators Jack Rasmussen and Amal Traboulsi display an image of Lebanon from the unique perspective of its greatest living artists. Equally, inside and out, the museum and the Washington sprint setting – provided ample evidence of nature's great beauty and humanity's capacity for renewal. **AJ**

Drawing Conclusions: Shedding a Vital Light on Middle Eastern Art

BY D. W. AOSSEY

Amid so much hubbub and controversy surrounding the politics of the Middle East, one might think that the region's visual arts are uncultivated, and the role that Middle Eastern artists play in the broader world negligible. But a new book, "Art of the Middle East: Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Iran" by Saeb Eigner, rectifies any such misconception and brings the significant contributions of contemporary Arab and Iranian artists to the forefront.

Art of the Middle East: Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Iran
By Saeb Eigner
Merrell, 2010

Focused on the artists and their work, this exquisite book of images takes the reader on a journey that frames the richness of Arab and Iranian art as a continuity of styles from the ancient world to modern times. The author notes that, unlike contemporary Western art with the avant-garde movements in the late 19th century and the evolution of modern art movements after WWII, contemporary Middle Eastern art is not easily defined by key turning points. Therefore, the images displayed integrate a ubiquitous mix of the old and the new.

The point of departure is the uniquely Arabic and Iranian art forms of calligraphy and stylized scripture, the various expressions of which both amuse and astonish the reader. Where the book clearly succeeds – and what separates "Art of the Middle East" from so many others – is that, while the familiar traditional script and even the far Eastern styles with broad sweeping brush strokes are ever-present, much of the work is bold and futuristic, and presented in surprisingly unorthodox ways. In the mixed medium sculpture "The Giver of Peace" by Shezad Dawood, dry tumbleweed symbolizing the expanse of the American West is illuminated by a pink neon light that spells *Al Mu'min* in Arabic, one of the 99 names of God. In contrast, Iranian artist Ali Ajali's painting "Allah" takes the reader in a completely new direction with a dense, interlocking style of Arabic script known as Gol Gasht that is at once mesmerizing and chaotic.

"Ready to Order: Oum Kulthum" (2009) by Khosrow Hassanzadeh, from "Art of the Middle East" (Merrell, 2010)

"Silver bowl on gold and gold bowl on silver" (2006) by Farhad Moshri, from "Art of the Middle East" (Merrell, 2010)

"Lam Alif" (2002) by Ali Omar Ermes, from "Art of the Middle East" (Merrell, 2010)

Politics, war and conflict naturally play a central role in the artwork featured in "Art of the Middle East." These themes are some of the most compelling and fascinating because of the passion with which they are rendered and the emotion they evoke from the viewer. Not to be out done, the book tackles these subjects with powerful pieces that span an emotional spectrum from rage to indignation to despair. In one of the most memorable works, Algerian artist Kamel Yahiaoui laments the death of poet Taher Djaout by replacing the keys of an old typewriter with various sized bullet cartridges. In another piece, "As If Yesterday . . ." by Lebanese painter Oussama Baalbaki, a hovering sense of doom is clearly evident in a dying, decrepit Mercedes sedan.

It must be said that many of the images presented in "Art of the Middle East" exhibit a dark, almost foreboding tone. Perhaps it is a testament to the fact that so much conflict and strife has descended upon the region, and that the diversity and unity of the Arab nation, has been displaced by ethnic and religious factionalism which, sadly, seems to have become more important than the whole.

A strong sense of longing for a brighter past is present in the portraits of stars of song and the silver screen. Umm Kulthum, the cultural voice of Arab nationalism, and Omar Sharif, the most famous Arab star outside the

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