CONTEMPORARY ARAB WOMEN WRITERS

CULTURAL EXPRESSION IN CONTEXT

ANASTASIA VALASSOPOULOS

Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures

Contemporary Arab Women Writers

This book engages with contemporary Arab women writers from Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon and Algeria. In spite of Edward Said's groundbreaking reappraisal of the uneven relationship between the West and the Arab world in *Orientalism*, there has been little postcolonial criticism of Arab writing. Anastasia Valassopoulos raises the profile of Arab women writers by examining how they negotiate contexts and experiences that have come to be identified with postcoloniality such as the preoccupation with Western feminism, political conflict and war, the social effects of non-conformity and female empowerment, and the negotiation of influential cultural discourses such as orientalism.

Contemporary Arab Women Writers revitalises theoretical concepts associated with feminism, gender studies and cultural studies, and explores how art history, popular culture, translation studies, psychoanalysis and news media all offer productive ways to associate with Arab women's writing that work beyond a limiting socio-historical context. Discussing the writings of authors including Ahdaf Soueif, Nawal El Saadawi, Leila Sebbar, Liana Badr and Hanan Al-Shaykh, this book represents a new direction in postcolonial literary criticism that transcends constrictive monothematic approaches.

Anastasia Valassopoulos lectures on World Literatures at the University of Manchester, UK. She is the author of articles on Arab women writers, Tunisian film, Egyptian and Algerian popular culture, and has also written on the Iranian graphic novelist Marjane Satrapi.

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In memory of my uncles
Iskandar Abu Abdullah and
Albert Abu Abdullah
who left us too soon

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Note on transliteration

Contemporary names and places are spelled out as they are found in standard Western publications (for example Nawal El Saadawi rather than Nawâl al-Sa'dâwî). In quoted materials, I have preserved existing spellings, even when they differ from the transliteration system used here.

Introduction

> None of the many books mentioned in these pages has truly seized the imagination of the people in the way that the songs of Oum Khalthoum or Feyrouz do.
> (Kaye and Zoubir, *The Ambiguous Compromise*)

In 2000, I read an article by Amal Amireh that has influenced me ever since. Amireh appealed for a 'vigorous critical discussion about Arabic literature and culture in the West' that 'should go beyond "appreciative" criticism that condescendingly praises Arab women writers for "daring" to put pen to paper'.[1] Ultimately, Amireh argued, we need more 'serious debates about fiction [to] remind readers that they are reading not documentaries, but "literature," which draws on particular conventions and emerges from specific traditions'.[2] It seemed to me then that although Amireh had written these words back in 1996, there was still very little criticism available of the type that she envisaged. Though certain secondary sources did exist, as Majaj, Sunderman and Saliba noted in their introduction to their 2002 collection *Intersections: Gender, Nation and Community in Arab Women's Novels*, these did not 'fully reflect either the availability of this literature or its significance'.[3] Their collection in fact was the first successful attempt to put into practice Amireh's vision. Here, a wide range of Arab women writers from Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine and Algeria received critical treatment and genuine engagement. It is with this book in mind that I set out to build on the principle of active negotiation with Arab women's writing.

Zed books is currently re-issuing three works by Nawal El Saadawi with new introductions. This development leaves me in no doubt that more excellent work on Arab women writers is right around the corner and that we are perhaps entering a new phase of criticism. Certainly the introduction of two new journals on the publishing scene, *Hawwa: Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World* and the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, alongside the well-established *Banipal: Magazine of Modern Arabic Literature* and *Journal of Arabic Literature* among others, has brought a much-needed specialist focus in English on issues that concern the production and dissemination of knowledge and criticism on the Arab world. I also want to acknowledge the growing field of translation and distribution of Arab women's literature. Specifically, Syracuse University Press's 'Middle East Literature in Translation' series has made available much work in

translation, such as Hoda Barakat's *Disciples of Passion* (translated by Marilyn Booth), Radwa Ashour's *Granada: A Novel* (translated by William Granara) and Nadia Tuéni's *Lebanon: Poems of Love and War* (translated by Paul B. Kelley and Sam Hazo).[4] The American University in Cairo Press has made available a wealth of excellent material. In particular, their Modern Arabic Writing series showcases work by Hala El Badry, Ahlem Mosteghanemi, Betool Khediari, Randa Ghazy, Somaya Ramadan, Leila Abouzeid and Buthaina Al Nasiri among others. This is testimony not only to the creativity and productivity of Arab women writers but to the commitment by publishers to produce and distribute their work. The recent Manchester Festival of Palestinian Literature (13–15 October 2006, the first of its kind in the UK), where internationally renowned Palestinian writers and intellectuals congregated, is testimony to this commitment.

It is of course with regret that it was not possible to incorporate work on more writers than I have. I read and studied with interest and enthusiasm the work of Sahar Khalifeh, Latifa Zayyat, Faïza Guène, Leila Aboulela, Leila Al-Atrash and others. In the end, I had to make a choice and the chapters that follow are the result of that choice. In the case of Assia Djebar in particular (on whom I reflect very briefly), I felt that much illuminating and sophisticated critical work was already being done. My overall aim with this particular book was to revisit some established authors, such as Hoda Barakat, Assia Djebar, Mai Ghoussoub, Nawal El Saadawi, Hanan Al-Shaykh, and Ahdaf Soueif, whilst also profiling some less-established in criticism in English such as Liana Badr, Hamida Na'na, Ahlem Mosteghanemi and Leila Sebbar. This has allowed me to return to authors whose work is well known outside of the Arab world and to interpret their work alongside authors whose work has attracted far less attention. My decision to work on novels rather than drama, poetry and short stories is due in part to the fact that the novel form currently seems to be the most popular and therefore, I felt, more representative of literary production. I chose for various reasons to write on works translated into English (from Arabic and French). One was that I felt that there was a need to write about material that readers consulting this book could then go back to, reflect on and engage with. Another is that I am concerned with the visibility of these works in the public sphere and wanted to actively participate in promoting them. The final reason is simple. I did not want to engage with material on which I would have the last word. I write in the spirit of transcultural and transnational communication, and if a work has been translated and is readily available, then I invite a community of readers to participate openly in its interpretation.

As this book reveals, my choices were not guided by location but by issues of theme and form. In many ways, I hoped to balance the need to burden the reader with socio-historical material by combining this with a critical context. I have avoided explicit reference to questions of faith and ethnicity, not because I do not consider these to be significant but because it is my understanding that these issues may come to dominate the discussion on Arab women's literary production. Nevertheless, there are new ways of approaching these issues, as

Lindsey Moore's forthcoming *Arab, Muslim, Woman: Voice and Vision in Postcolonial Literature*, Suzanne Gauch's *Liberating Shahrazad: Feminism, Postcolonialism and Islam* and Brinda Mehta's *Rituals of Memory in Contemporary Arab Women's Writing* show. My decision not to go down this route stems from my desire to engage with the material in the form of a gesture; a gesture towards the merit of these works in their capacity to benefit, participate and inform contemporary literary criticism and theory. My aim for this book was to offer a broad and comprehensive critical coverage for Arab women writers. I want to show how feminist, queer, postcolonial and cultural theories can all play a part in the negotiation of these texts. Specifically, I refer to visual culture and other forms of popular culture in the Arab world that can contribute towards our engagement with Arab women writers. Popular culture holds a very central place in Arab culture, and literature is more often than not reacting to or negotiating different forms of popular culture. Though I hope to work on this in more detail in the future, I have here indicated ways in which it could be very productive. I feel strongly that when we try to 'translate' or interpret another culture, it is not enough to provide a socio-political context. Forms of culture that persons engage with daily, such as other literature, music, posters, films, art and magazines, though they are doubtlessly formed and produced within a politicised context, nevertheless elicit a more immediate effect. Engagements with these forms of culture can only enrich a contextual understanding of the texts we read.

Where Amireh writes that Arab women's literature is not 'documentary', this rings very clearly in my mind, for the core issue of *representation* is often left by the wayside in a discussion of Arab women's cultural production. I am not speaking here of inaccuracies but of a reluctance to study and interpret the writing alongside a tradition of criticism that we seem to be accustomed to performing with other literary traditions. I have attempted to foreground this in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 1 concentrates on debates surrounding the reception and subsequent critique of Arab women's writing. It also sets out to address the relationship between Arab feminism and cultural production. Here, I discuss the inevitable feminist framework that has taken precedence, though I argue that this is no longer the strategy of choice for many critics. Through a discussion of Arab feminism, Arab social thought and feminist postcolonial theory, I show how possibilities of engagement have opened up new ways of reading. Here, I participate in wider issues around the notion of influence and social responsibility. Postcolonial theory, then, seems an apt (both geographically and historically) and relevant tool with which to investigate certain experiences in Arab women's writing not only to do with the much-debated issues of dislocation and hybridisation but also with the discourses of modernity and cultural influence. I argue that it is possible to conceive of many productive contexts within which to study and analyse contemporary Arab women's writing without recourse to tried and tested feminist methods. Where feminist methods are foregrounded, I suggest a nuanced approach that listens to the text and avoids imposing a political or social meaning where it seems to resist this. In general, I show that it is critically

stifling to assume that Arab women's writing only has one thing to offer: an affirmation of oppression. Read critically, many of the works that I discuss reveal a deep-seated mistrust of any foreclosing arguments that would seek to predetermine their meaning. The history of reception of Arab women's writing is often troubling and quick to provide easy answers. Where more recent criticism has been successful is the ways in which it has opened up the approach towards this material. Where some critics are more comfortable with providing rigorous socio-historical contexts, others are keener to foreground a cultural one. Either way, both of these directions can only enrich the critical reception of some very interesting and admirable writing. Reading Arab women's writing, because of and despite the difficulty surrounding its reception, is the challenge. These texts should be read for their experiences of location, cultural influence, the expression of national identity, the experience of sexuality, the performance of gender roles and the interrogation of and responses to colonial discourse and postcolonial theory. It is within these broad parameters that the most productive and enlightening negotiation can take place.

In Chapter 2 I argue for a transcultural and transational potential (with all its problems) located within the early work of Nawal El Saadawi, prominent Egyptian activist, social critic, doctor and, more significantly for this book, writer. I am here interested in El Saadawi's potential to construct characters that awaken to the paradoxes inherent in the social and cultural institutions that produce them. I admire El Saadawi's fiction for its participation in a call for a universal site for female emancipation. Through this, I believe, El Saadawi creates a human dignity – which should be universal – especially for women; she offers a way of humanising women *as women* through their own terms and definitions. I argue that much of El Saadawi's work is open to broad interpretation and can be used to demonstrate the potential for a universal feminism that seeks these spaces of experience from which to construct a 'universal' or global discourse on women. In Chapter 3 I concentrate on writing on the Lebanese war in general and on the work of Hanan Al-Shaykh and Mai Ghoussoub in particular. I argue that critical writing on war representations need not always reach out for politically reassuring interpretations. Very often, women writers who tackle the subject of war are keen to represent a host of reactions, coping mechanisms and new forms of negotiation. Although writing may be primarily an act of non-violent resistance, the themes tackled by Al-Shaykh and Ghoussoub encourage an entirely new and dynamic direction in criticism. I here offer readings that argue for the recognition that war opens up new spaces for the understanding of how gender is socially configured. In seeking to understand regulatory norms that are created during a situation of war, I show how these norms reflect the experiences undergone. Here, sexual and militant resistance is understood as paving a way for understanding oneself and one's capabilities. The situation of war blurs and redefines ideas of reality, and actions undertaken during situations of conflict are understood productively rather than negatively. I argue that the circumstances of war are unique in that they may allow women to manipulate their own experiences in order to understand themselves as

women and to re-interpret what they are capable of *outside* of the norms that govern societies in peacetime. Importantly, it is with the destruction of the old social fabric that women may achieve a liberation of their desire. In this chapter, I emphasise that we cannot always take a simple anti-war view if we are to reveal the contradictions at work in any given text. The examination of the war narratives shows that certain events within the narratives are themselves often controversial and do not fit into a comfortable feminist framework that may seek to align women as agents of passive resistance. Here, women are represented as capable of cruelty and sacrifice, selfishness and selflessness. To confront these events as possible and probable is to give women an active role in the understanding of their position in the situation that is war.

In Chapter 4 I discuss the ambitious Garnet 'Arab Women Writers' series. This project promoted the translation and publication of Arab women novelists that reflected on the concerns and issues permeating contemporary Arab women's writing such as the experience of war, political conflict, the decision to be active or passive in struggles, views towards domesticity and marriage as well as the internalisation of conflict experienced within the family and the homeland. Here, I present arguments around the broad concept of literary translation of the novels in the series. My analysis of the contexts surrounding the production of these books illuminates wider debates within the reception of Arab women writers, highlights the different expectations from academics working in the field and demonstrates how translators themselves became involved in the debates. I argue that the issue of translation is a sensitive one, in particular when texts framed as 'feminist' are being translated. Here I suggest that the 'translator-effect' can become part of an effective strategy in translation. I conclude that Faqir's aims as editor seem incompatible with the approaches of critics who have varying expectations based on linguistic or political preference, and that this series can only impartially be evaluated through a close analysis of both the events fictionalised and described and the extent to which language enables us to participate in the debates disclosed. In order to assess the lasting value of this series as an introductory point into Arab women's writing, it is necessary to explore how they each internally impart locale as well as an engagement with broad issues that makes it very difficult to homogenise their target audience, particularly in translation. Though I explore the possibility that the relationship of these novels to each other is purely incidental, I will argue that nevertheless, their formation as a focal point (in Britain at least) of Arab women's writing in the 1990s marks them as somehow indicative or designative of Arab women's issues. The rest of this chapter offers an analysis of the work of Liana Badr, Hamida Na'na and Salwa Bakr, with a brief look at Alia Mamdouh's *Mothballs*.

Chapter 5 takes a very close look at Ahlam Mosteghanemi's 1985 novel *Memory in the Flesh* and Ahdaf Soueif's 1992 novel *In the Eye of the Sun*. My aim here is to show how these two novels enact ways in which the political and social are mediated, lived, performed and experienced through the personal. I have chosen to concentrate on these two novels as they expose a certain level of introspection that specifically allows for an exploration of how personal lives and

sentiments are influenced by wider demands and how these demands, be they political or social, determine personal experience. In my discussion of the two novels, I argue against any predetermined interpretation of texts, even if this predetermination seeks to foreground seemingly progressive associations. For example, I claim that it is not always necessary to praise a work for its will towards hybridity or to criticise a book because it fails to represent positive images of women. My intention is to show how literary texts often confound, exceed and call into question theoretical suppositions. Here, I argue for readings that are determined *by* the text rather than *for* the texts. It is important, for example, to distinguish and engage with the fact that *Memory of the Flesh* and *In the Eye of the Sun* invest heavily in an idea of love, and how the experience of love, in turn, is notoriously difficult to compartmentalise, critique and most of all, narrate.

In my final chapter, I look at the novels *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* by Assia Djebar and *Sherazade*, the first novel in Leila Sebbar's Sherazade trilogy, and discuss their exploration of orientalist practice. In particular, I am interested in the way that they approach orientalist art in their work and the importance that they accord it. Specifically, I investigate whether it is possible to argue that through re-establishing the concept of exoticism as an enabling framework towards an experience of diversity, Sebbar and Djebar are able to participate in orientalist discourse. I think that this move allows them *to interrogate* the discourse from within whilst simultaneously *immersing* themselves in it. The novels will be also be examined in light of what they have to offer an expanding Arab women's literature in terms of historical revisionism and direct political intervention, and, most significantly, what they tell us about the internalisation of a colonialist legacy that sometimes appears etched in the unconscious of the text.

I think that the quantity of translated novels, short stories, poetry collections and anthologies available now makes it impossible to state that Arab women's writing is underrepresented. If one is interested and looks (not too hard), there is much great work out there. Three recent anthologies, *Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories*,[5] *Qissat: Short Stories by Palestinian Women*[6] and *Modern Arabic Fiction: An Anthology*,[7] testify to this. These works, alongside more innovative creations such as Zeina Abirached's graphic novels[8] and Leila Sebbar's contribution to *Femmes D'Afrique du Nord: Cartes Postales (1885–1930)*[9] among her other works that combine visual art and text, all pave the way for rich critical interpretations. In addition to this, a wave of writing from the Arab diaspora has begun to receive much attention. Among these are novels by Diana Abu-Jaber, Samia Serageldin and Laila Halaby as well as the poetry of Suheir Hammad and Elmaz Abinader, whose works have been well received in the USA. A growing body of criticism is beginning to emerge around these writers that, although still modest, has the potential to become very significant.

Most importantly, though, I would like to end with a thought that expresses my personal involvement in this project. Maysa Abou-Youssef Hayward, in her introduction to a special issue of *Studies in the Humanities* on 'Arabic literature in translation and Arab diasporic writing', writes: