

## Art and Literature

**LOVE AND SEXUALITY IN MODERN ARABIC LITERATURE.** Ed. Roger Allen, Hilary Kilpatrick and Ed de Moor. Saqi Books: 26 Westbourne Grove, London W2 5RH, UK, 1995. Pp.271 (HB). ISBN 0 86356 062 8.

Attention to the themes of love and sexuality are not new to the study of Arabic literature or literature in general; new, however, are the strategies of inquiry. By invoking feminist literary theory or psychoanalysis, Foucault or Bakhtin, critics have been able to suggest numerous innovative readings. Fedwa Mali-Douglas has done this in *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton, 1992), and, to cite but one example outside of Arabic, Mieke Bal in *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington, 1987). The critics writing for the volume under review deploy new strategies but unfortunately do so unevenly. The result is a mixed bag.

*Love and Sexuality in Modern Arabic Literature* opens with an introduction by editor Hilary Kilpatrick (Lausanne). Entitled 'On Love and Sexuality in Modern Arabic Literature', it is an introduction to the volume rather than the topic. It is regrettable that she has not, drawing on her knowledge of both modern and medieval literature, also contributed an article.

In 'Love and the Birth of Modern Arabic Literature', Boutros Hallaq (University of Paris III, Sceaux) writes: 'In both the practice and the theory of the members of the Jena school, literature, understood in its ontological sense, is inseparable from the subject of love, or, more generally, of the relations between men and women' (p. 16). Hallaq attempts to show the connection between love and the birth of modern Arabic literature by discussing the work of the Jena Romantics. He refers to the works of al-Taḥṭāwī, al-Shidyāq, Jibrān and al-Manfalūtī, the last two instrumental in 'the emergence of a literature ... connected in a real sense with love' (p. 19). The 'theoretical reflection' (p. 23) of this parallel ('not a comparison as such' [*ibid.*]), though interesting, needs to be fleshed out further to be convincing.

Robin Ostle (University of Oxford) writes about the Arabic Romantic movement proper in 'The Romantic Imagination and the Female Ideal', positing that 'the single most significant message which came to the Arab world from the perceived wisdom of the European Enlightenment was that of the sanctity of the individual' (p. 34). In 12 pages, Ostle manages perceptively to catalogue the Romantics' ideal female in writers such as Muṭrān, the Dīwān poets, Abū Shādī, and al-Shābbī. Ostle writes that 'It would be misleading to imply that the poetry of platonic adoration was the only form of love poetry practised by the Arab Romantics' (p. 41), but it is no doubt the dominant mode, where women are like Maḥmūd Mukhtār's 1920s statuettes, 'remote madonna-type figures whose effect is anything but erotic' (p. 40). Ostle concludes his excellent conspectus with the observation that the love poetry of the period 'provides an intriguing commentary on the dislocations between theory and practice, and on the contradictions and ambiguities of its age' (p. 45).

'Love and Beyond in Mahjar Literature' by Cornelis Nijland (Dutch Institute for the Netherlands, Leiden) is a very quick look at three themes in the works of Nu'ayma, 'Awn, Jibrān, Najīb Ḥaddād, and Shaḥīq Ma luf: Relations within the law, breaking the law, and prostitution. Though the themes are themselves of interest, Nijland's article is not. It is too brief, dwells too long on Nu'ayma's real-life relationships, and the little-known Anjal 'Awn is given only eight lines of text.

Rosella Dorigo Ceccato (University of Venice) is ideally placed to discuss 'The Figure of the Lover in Popular Arabic Drama of the Early Twentieth Century': she has for long established herself as a scholar of early Arabic drama. Her conclusion, that 'Overall, society as portrayed in many shadow plays seems to revolve around the figure of the woman, pole of attraction of both man's physical desires and his marital fears' (p. 31), however, does not reflect the tenor of the article.

In 'The Four Ages of Husayn Tawfiq: Love and Sexuality in the Novels of Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm' by Paul Starkey (University of Durham), al-Ḥakīm's novels are examined against the background of the view of al-Ḥakīm as a misogynist ivory-tower dweller. Although I have not seen it, I suspect this article draws from Starkey's *From the Ivory Tower: A Critical Study of Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm* (London, 1987). *Awdat al-raḥ*, *Uṣfūr min al-sharq*, *Yawmiyyāt nā'ib al-aryāf*, and *al-Ribā' al-muqaddas* are analyzed and the conclusion is that although 'the theory of individual liberation (including women's) ... has been accepted by Egyptian intellectuals ... society itself remained unchanged. Starkey suggests we avoid the temptation of taking al-Ḥakīm as seriously as he takes himself!

Although it is written as a collection of critical vignettes, 'Erotic Awareness in the Early Egyptian Short Story' by joint editor Ed de Moor (University of Nijmegen) does justice to its subject by invoking and evoking stories by Ḥaqqī, al-Manfalūtī, Jun'a, Fawzi, the Taymūr and Lāshīn. Of special interest to me is de Moor's account of Lāshīn's Yuḥkā'anna ... which resonates the medieval anecdote of a cloth-seller who is robbed by a man who disguises himself as a cloth-seller (see Ibn al-Jawzī, *Akhbār al-uqalā'* [Cairo, 1969], pp. 201-2 and al-Tanūkhī, *K. al-Faraj ba'd al-shidda* [Beirut, 1978], IV, pp. 256-8). (Note: Rotraud Wielandt's book on Maḥmūd Taymūr is not mentioned in footnote 8, as indicated.)

Also on the subject of the short story and also in vignette style is 'The Arabic Short Story and the Status of Women' by the remaining joint editor Roger Allen (University of Pennsylvania). Here the aim is to explore the role of women in society. To that end, Allen explores the portrayal of the individual in two principal domains, within and outside the traditional family structure, and does something de Moor does not: he concentrates on writings by women. He has many insightful things to say about women's writing, especially in his last section, 'The Narrative Voice': his article thus repays close reading.

For Allen: 'In retrospect, it seems reasonable to suggest that writers such as Ba' albakki, al-Sammān and al-Sa'dāwī, whatever one's verdict may be about the literary merits of their fiction, have considerably expanded the creative space within which contemporary writers of both sexes may portray their worlds.' The fictions they create and narrative strategies they employ, then, 'are to be regarded as contributions to the technical repertoire

of Arabic fiction' (p. 88). This circumspect view of al-Sa'dāwī is not shared by Sabry Ḥafez (SOAS) in his 'Women's Narrative in Modern Arabic Literature: A Typology', where five full pages (166-70) are given over to a virulent and sometimes inconsistent attack on her novel *Suqūt al-imām* (and one sometimes feels, on her). This critique falls under the penultimate rubric, 'Feminist' Inversion of Codes', and is the second of three stages that Ḥafez borrows from Elaine Showalter's analysis of English literature (equated with Kristeva's identification of the feminist struggle as described in Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* [London, 1985]). Very briefly, feminine corresponds to a prolonged phase of imitation of values, feminist to one of protest against these and the advocacy of minority rights, and female to self-discovery, a turning inward. There are definite problems with the Ḥafez piece. There is, for example, the al-Sa'dāwī trade: the insensitive use of language (e.g. 'In their seminal book, *The Newly Born Woman*, Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément' [155]); or the omission of editor Miriam Cooke's name in the reference to *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (pp. 161, 245). But Ḥafez is often perceptive in his comments, as for example with: 'Arabic narrative has been used to enforce the patriarchal social order by enshrining its values in the major works of its genre. The *Trilogy* ... by Maḥfūz is the patriarchal novel *par excellence*' (p. 156).

Maḥfūz's *Trilogy* forms the basis, together with al-Ḥirānī's *al-Zaynī Barakāt*, of 'Love and the Mechanisms of Power: Kamāl 'Abd al-Jawwād and Sa'īd al-Juhaynī', by Richard van Leeuwen (University of Amsterdam), who shows that there is a structural congruity between the characters under examination in their love for 'Ayida and Samāh, and as regards power. According to van Leeuwen, this fits 'neatly into Foucault's representations of power' (p. 97), demonstrating once again how useful Foucault can be when used with care. (Cf. 'Foucault' aujourd'hui', *magazine littéraire* 325 (October 1994), pp. 16-77.)

Egyptian writing figures also in 'The Function of Sexual Passages in some Egyptian Novels of the 1980s' by Stephan Guth (Institute of the German Oriental Society, Istanbul) who explains the presence of the sometimes pornographic elements in the frank writings of Sun'allāh Ibrāhīm and others as the product of 'an era of polarization, of extremes' (p. 128). Guth observes - in reading these passages not as a call for a new system of ethical values but rather as a radicalization of traditional morality - that 'Looking only at the surface of what is written, the *satāfīs* have obviously failed to notice that, in the end, the targets of the author's critique may be nearly the same as their own' (p. 129).

An Iraqi writer is the subject of 'Distant Echoes of Love in the Narrative Work of Fu'ād al-Tikrī' by Wiebke Walther (University of Frankfurt). In the space of eight pages, Walther succeeds in giving the reader an overview of al-Tikrī showing his progression from severe criticisms of typical Iraqi Arab forms of male-female relationships in the 1950s to attention to the socially determined ambivalence of the male psyche concerning relations with women in the 1960s. At all times, including in the recent *al-Raj' al-ha'īd* (Beirut, 1980), he questions the moral and ethical traditions that have dominated male-female relations, tying the domination of men to repressive socio-political conditions: 'As long as society is unable to free itself from its obsolete social traditions, it will be unable to organize a life of political freedom' (p. 139).

Miriam Cooke (Duke University) explores 'Death and Desire in Iraqi War Literature'. This interest has been sustained ever since *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* (Cambridge, 1988) where she wrote about the Beirut Decentrists. Here, she is interested in the intersections of sexuality, love, marriage and death. Taking what Freud described as the three reactions to death - anxiety, fear and fright - as a point of departure, and adding denial, she shows that 'Arab literary accounts of reactions to death accord with these four categories' (p. 185) and that *eros*, the sexual instinct as the embodiment of the will to live, is the body's most resilient resource against *thanatos*, death as libidinal sublimation. Cooke shows that it is not only male protagonists who experience arousal in war, citing works by Nuḥā Samāra and Hanān al-Shaykh, but that a crucial difference is that 'whereas the men's desire is activated by battle participation that confirms gender identity, women's desire marks the assumption of a role that is in contradiction with social expectations of gendered behaviour' (p. 190). The article - occasioned by Daisy al-Amir's mailing of two gunny sacks filled with literature written during the last three years of the Iran-Iraq war (1986-88) - closes with plausibly: 'Since the reason for the disturbance [in power and gender relations] is the war, it is the war itself which threatens the very fabric of a society it had been fought to defend' (p. 199).

Stefan Wild (University of Bonn) examines similar intersections in 'Nizār Qabbānī's Autobiography: Images of Sexuality, Death and Poetry'. This is a short, clumsy, opinionated piece consisting mainly of a series of quotes from the work in question, *Qisṣatī ma'a al-shūr. Sira dhātīya* (Beirut, 1972). Consider the closing line: 'It would be fascinating and productive to compare the growing corpus of Arab women's autobiographies with all their anger, frustration and bitterness, on the one hand, with Nizār Qabbānī's frank and iconoclastic but at the same time slightly flashy bravado on the other' (p. 219).

Using Edwār al-Kharāṭī's question about whether the Arabic novel really exists, 'Fathers and Husbands: Tyrants and Victims in Some Autobiographical Works from the Arab World' by Hartmut Fähndrich (Polytechnic, Zurich) is a reflection on 'the idea of a regional differentiation of Arab literature' (p. 107), via a brief thematic and stylistic analysis of several novels from North Africa and Egypt. The author concludes: 'On the evidence of the very limited number of works examined . . . there do appear to be regional differences between the Maghreb and the Mashreq in how family relationships are presented' (p. 115). Much as Wild, Fähndrich concludes, 'it would be interesting to explore this point further on the basis of a wider sample' (*ibid.*).

Susanne Enderwitz (Free University of Berlin) treats one of the same regions in 'The Foreign Woman in the Francophone North African Novel' and attempts to show that, in spite of the clichéd images exposed by the studies of Wielandt (*Das Bild der Europäer in der modernen arabischen Erzähl- und Theaterliteratur* [Beirut, 1980]) and Déjeux (*Images de l'étrangère. Unions mixtes franco-maghrébines* [Paris, 1989]), 'the European woman . . . sometimes gains a face, a shape and a personality of her own' (p. 116). The three novels used to illustrate this point are Mouloud Feraoun's *La terre et le sang*, Albert Merzouk's *Agar*, and Boudjedra's *La réputation*. A short piece but it succeeds in illustrating the contention.

Mattiyahu Peled (Tel Aviv University) looks at one novel in 'Sexuality in Jabrā's Novel, *The Search for Walīd Mas'ūd*'. Like Enderwitz, Peled succeeds in proving his point. But he is not really writing about sexuality in the novel but rather about how the novel is structured, and how and why it works. To do so, he draws on Bakhtin and his theory of dialogics. He finds Jabrā's writing carnivalesque, and demonstrates that Walīd's amorous and carnal encounters culminate in a form of protest. As with much of Peled's work, the analysis is keen, and the fact that Jabrā's novel is itself so compelling contributes further to the article's interest.

Angelika Rahmer (University of Münster) concentrates on 'The Development of Women's Political Consciousness in the Short Stories of the Kuwaiti Author Laylā al-'Uhmān'. This article is divided into four sections, entitled *Submissive Woman*, *Rebellious Woman*, *Woman as Oppressor*, and *Woman and National Symbol*, which are flanked by an Introduction and Conclusion. In each of the middle sections, one or more stories is used to illustrate the typology. The analysis is not very searching and in at least one case naive: 'The heroine is not an independent fictional character - this is confirmed by the story's autobiographical elements' (p. 178). Moreover, it is only in the Conclusion that political consciousness is discussed at length.

Although little attention is paid in the volume to modern poetry, As'ad Khairallah (University of Freiburg) closes *Love and Sexuality* with 'Love and Body in Modern Arabic Poetry' which, given its mere 18 pages, admirably surveys the subject in the verse of the 'poignant' al-Ḥaydarī; the self-centred Don Juan; Qabbānī; the 'private and hermetic' Ṣayigh; the explosive '*enfant terrible*', al-Ḥājjī; and Adūnīs: 'I do not write, I declare an interpretation of my body' (p. 221). For some of the poets, the intersection of love and body is corporeal and blasphemous (al-Ḥājjī); for others evanescent and incantatory (Adūnīs in 'Mufrad biṣīghat al-ḥam'); Qabbānī is proud of his conquests; al-Kharāṭī seeks to eternalize the fleeting moment of artistic/erotic ecstasy. Indeed, Khairallah uses al-Kharāṭī's 'outstanding' *Anwāj al-layālī* (Cairo, 1991) as a starting point for discussing what one may call the metaphysics of sex in modern Arabic poetry' (p. 213), in the defensible belief that 'The body is . . . the place of all questioning, all exploration of the self and the other, all doubt and fascination, hope and despair, tenderness and violence' (p. 210).

A mixed bag, but *Love and Sexuality* is a volume that, hopefully, will catalyze further inquiries into the status of the themes of love and sexuality in Arabic literature. If this seems un-Islamic, it should be remembered that it is often when broaching such topics that writers succeed in underscoring social, political, and artistic problems within their environments. To paraphrase Guth (quoted above): looking only at the surface of what is written, one fails to notice that, in the end, the targets of the authors' critique may be nearly the same as one's own. The production of such literature, and the perusal of it, thus becomes essential.

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