

Thus do such moderns reveal their total ignorance about the nature and attributes of God described so vividly in the work under review.

It would have been inconceivable for the traditional Islamic sciences to study creation without any reference to the Creator. Rather, nature was contemplated as a reflection of the signs of God and not for its own sake as an end in itself.

Sachiko Murata presents masculinity and femininity according to these Islamic thinkers as having both positive and negative aspects. She considers negative masculinity in craving dominion over the earth without submission and accountability to God as the most dangerous trend of our times. This has resulted in the spectacular scientific and technological 'progress' since the European 'Renaissance', the present environmental crisis and the rape of the earth. Tragically the militant activist groups in Muslim lands uncritically endorse technological 'progress' and oppose the Islamic intellectual tradition almost as bitterly as Westerners themselves.

In conclusion, the author of this work regards the aim of the Muslim is to fully realize his or her spiritual potential as male or female in the noblest sense. Islam asks of us nothing but to truly know ourselves and be human. The feminist conception of a unisex society is diametrically opposed to everything Islam stands for. As Murata concludes, the question of the 'equality' of women with men is completely irrelevant here. What matters only is that men be truly male and women truly female in the positive sense in order to conform to the nature and purpose for which Almighty Allah created the two basic kinds of human being.

Lahore, Pakistan

Maryam Jameelah

WOMEN OF SAND AND MYRRH. By Hanan al-Shaykh. Translated by Catherine Cobham. Quartet Books: 27-29 Gooch Street, London W1P 1FD, UK, 1989. Pp.280. £14.95 (PB). ISBN 0 7043 2736 8.

Women of Sand and Myrrh (*Misk al-ghazāl* (1988)) is al-Shaykh's (b.1945) fifth book and her second novel translated into English. *Hikāyat Zahra* (1980; *The Story of Zahra*, London, 1986), banned in several Muslim countries, was a critical success and established al-Shaykh as a major writer of Arabic fiction. Her two novels, however, are quite dissimilar. *The Story of Zahra* is a 'haunting tale of a young woman driven crazy by sexual abuse who finds in the war a solace and a temporary normalization of her madness' (M. Cooke, 'Arab Women Writers', in *Modern Arabic Literature*, Cambridge, 1992, p.455). *Women of Sand and Myrrh* treats the broader themes of patriarchy and oppression, themes which characterized al-Shaykh's early short stories, notably freedom, boredom and infidelity ('An Interview with Hanan al-Shaykh', *Mich. Quart. Rev.*, XXXI, p.627).

Women of Sand and Myrrh is told from the point of view of four very different women, all of whom live in an unnamed desert society. It is a comment on the absurdity of a system in which the only legitimate roles for women are as wives, sisters, daughters, and mothers, or as factories, producing enjoyment (p.210) and male children (p.267); in which the word 'pork' on the packaging of an otherwise *halāl* product must be vigorously effaced (p.13); in which the 'neighbour's daughter . . . [says] that she's

known about her father's second marriage [only] because there had been so many baskets and metal containers around' (p.117).

The novel opens with the story of Suha (pp.1-80), a Lebanese expatriate who with her husband has fled the war in Lebanon. She hates the oppression in her new home and yearns to return to Lebanon, preferring war to being silenced and to the incredible boredom forced on her by a society that secludes and disempowers thinking individuals. Al-Shaykh daringly channels Suha's yearning into an intimate, if uncomprehending, relationship with one of the other protagonists. The real solution, though, is escape, announced throughout Suha's story and confirmed in 'Epilogue - Suha' (pp.275-80).

In many respects, the novel's centre of gravity is Tamr's story (pp.81-158). She is a local woman who works to surmount the obstacles in her way, not least of which an aunt who tells her that women who do not bleed have to dig themselves 'into the sand like cats do . . . [lie] down and stay quiet and never get up again' (p.121). Divorced, Tamr lives with her brother Rashid who unsuccessfully resists her attempts to get an education, to start a business, and to live to some extent on her own terms. He cannot understand her need to learn more than just the Qur'ān and to learn to fill out customs forms (p.103); echoes here of al-Shaykh's belief that women are oppressed 'not due to the teaching of the Qur'ān but to the chauvinism and arrogance of Muslim men' ('Interview', p.629; cf. *Peifecting Women*, tr. B. Metcalf (Berkeley, 1990), 'Introduction'). When his sister complains that her husband drinks, sometimes to excess, Rashid replies: 'What business is it of yours? It's not you doing the drinking, is it?' (p.107).

Suzanne, an American housewife, whose husband is bored with her, and who takes an Arab lover, Maaz, tells the third story (pp.159-236). Hers is a tale of obsession: 'I began to think of him in a different way, almost jealous of his quick perceptions and secure tradition, his grasp of what was happening around him . . .' (p.204). Maaz is not jealous of her ways but curious that she can enjoy their intimacy; she must be a hermaphrodite (p.210). It is the weakest of the four sections but integral to the overall treatment and criticism of the gender system and of sexuality.

It is in the final, and shortest, story, Nur's (pp.237-74), that we encounter the most sexual and sexually liberated protagonist. A bored and spoiled playgirl, she best represents in this novel that intersection of the oppressive and the erotic with which E. Accad has characterized al-Shaykh's works (*Sexuality and War*, New York, 1990). Though Nur and the other three protagonists in *Women of Sand and Myrrh* give the impression of being more acted upon than active (C. Larson, 'The Fiction of Hanan al-Shaykh, Reluctant Feminist', in *World Lit. Today*, LXXV, 14), they are all trying to find a way to create their own future and to master their own destinies.

It is worth noting that one of the vehicles of al-Shaykh's critique of patriarchy and gender dynamics is an exploration of sexual permissiveness and a seemingly liberating exploration of sexuality: Suha's sexual relationship with another woman, for example, or Suzanne's unrepenting adultery, both activities in direct conflict with Islamic values.

School of Arts and Sciences,
Dept. of Asian and ME Studies,
University of Pennsylvania, USA

Shawkat M. Toorawa