

**JUSŪR**  
The UCLA Journal of  
Middle Eastern Studies

**WARFARE AND STATE BUILDING  
IN EARLY MODERN MOROCCO (1497-1517)**  
*Weston F. Cook, Jr.*

**COLONIAL REFRACTIONS:  
THE IMAGE OF THE WEST IN MODERN  
ARABIC LITERATURE**  
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**BOOK REVIEWS**

Vol. 4

1988

Gustave E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90024.

# JUSOR

## THE UCLA JOURNAL OF MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES

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Published under the auspices of the Gustave E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies and the Graduate Students Association of the University of California, Los Angeles.

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In 1988 *JUSOR* (ISSN 0888-9007) is published annually in one volume. The subscription price of the fourth volume is \$16.00, discounted to \$8.00 for students who submit proof of registration at an accredited university. Orders may be sent to *JUSOR*, von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies, 10286 Bunche Hall, University of California, Los Angeles, California, 90024, U.S.A.

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## THE POWER OF THE WORD

*Producers:* Colin Luke, Geoff Dunlop; *Associate Producer:* John Dollar;  
*Series Producer:* David Collison; *Production Consultant:* Basim Musallam;  
*Writer/Narrator:* Khalida Sa'id; *Director:* Colin Luke; *Film Cameraman:*  
 Mike Fox; *Executive Editors:* Michael McKinnon, Michael Peacock; *Film  
 Editor:* Edward Roberts; *Historical Consultants:* Albert Hourani, Martin  
 Hinds, Ihsan Abbas, Jacques Berque, Abdel Hamid Sabra; *Original Music:*  
 Ali Jihad Racy; *Anthropologist:* Aminia Minns; *Location Research:* Maureen  
 Abdallah; *Film and Picture Researcher:* Jill Haycock; Video, 50 minutes,  
 available in VHS and 3/4 inch format; a VATV Production in association  
 with Kuffie Films B. V., 1982; English; *Distributor:* Landmark Films, Inc.,  
 Falls Church, Virginia.

*The Arabs: a Living History* is a series of ten fifty-minute documentaries produced over a period of three years under the guidance of a number of experts on Arab affairs, writers, teachers, journalists, scholars, and poets.<sup>1</sup> In executing this project and the accompanying book,<sup>2</sup> also divided into ten parts, each dealing with different aspects of Arab life, the creators have tried to provide an accurate and "unvarnished view of the Arab people. . . . In this series, it's the Arabs themselves who lead the camera into the lives of their fellow-Arabs today."<sup>3</sup> It is the hope of Basim Musallam and his colleagues that both the series and the book will offer ". . . a unique perspective for all Westerners who want to understand better the Arab ways of life."<sup>4</sup> I shall be discussing the fourth film in the series, entitled *The Power of the Word*, which deals with literature and the challenges facing writers in the Arab world, in particular the search for identity and authenticity in the modern age. I leave the remaining films to those better versed in the issues treated in them.

Whereas the written version is penned by Musallam and co-author John Keay, the film version, in which the emphasis is on the poet Adunis and on things Lebanese or Syro-Lebanese, is written by Khalida Sa'id, noted literary critic, professor at the Lebanese University of Beirut, and Adunis' wife. Regrettably, most of her remarks are confined to Syria, Lebanon and Palestine; there is only one departure from the Fertile Crescent in the film (an interview with Yemeni writers.) The explanation for this bias can, however, be found in the set-up of the film series, each part of which deals with a particular issue from the perspective of an Arab, but in each case from a different part of the Arab world.

Khalida Sa'id's belief that Beirut is the center of Arab belles-lettres is bound to find numerous challengers, perhaps most notably the Egyptians. This narrow view is in opposition to the catholic definition Musallam himself offers us of the Arab entity: the Fertile Crescent, the Nile Valley, the Arabian peninsula and the Maghrib (including Mauritania.) Musallam stresses that each region has its own experience

and just as the contemporary Arab world is the sum of all its parts, so the contemporary Arab identity is the sum of these historical experiences.<sup>5</sup>

Despite its selective focus, the film succeeds in portraying Arabic and Arabic literature as a living organism and as an accomplished outlet for genuine artistic achievement. It does so by offering us vivid images of the written and spoken word in modern Arab life.

In the opening scene, for instance, we are presented with a close-up of a scribe paring his quill. After this we see him penning one of the most recited Islamic invocations, the heading for all but one of the Qur'anic chapters, the *hasmala*. It is a predictable and sensible prelude for a film dealing with "the word," for it is the starting point of Islamic reading and writing: the very first words the *qari'* utters before reciting from the Holy Book, the very first phrase the faithful murmurs before eating, sleeping, indeed, before doing anything. But despite this appropriate opening, one cannot but wish that the film had used the more arresting and, ultimately, more potent opening image delivered in the book. Here, the reader is first presented with the sense of urgency, immediacy and importance of literature to the Arab in the context, of all places, of the PLO Congress of 1983 in Algiers, where Arafat calls upon Mahmud Darwish to recite his latest poem, hours long, to a mesmerized hall of delegates. The *power* of the word is thus much more effectively underscored.

After a (perhaps wishful) assertion that writing brings unity to a fragmented world, since the word of the writer crosses all frontiers, we are treated to a reading of "The Beginning of Words," by Adunis himself. This is announced by the tiling, an important touch: the footage often cuts from city to city, or from mosque to mosque, and the frustration of unfamiliarity is thereby avoided. Moreover, the Arabic that Adunis recites so evocatively is accompanied by English subtitles. This allows the viewer to share in the rhythm and cadence of the Arabic while enabling him to understand the poem as well. The translations, presumably by Musallam and/or Khalida Sa'id (who is our narrator from this point on) are excellent throughout. This almost mesmerizing reading is followed by details of Adunis' life. For the next few minutes we learn of his background and history. We are transported from a place near Latakia in Syria, where he was raised, to the Poetry Society in London, where the poet is reciting the closing stanzas of one of his poems to an attentive audience. The brief history fulfills an essential function for the non-Arab audience to which the

film is targeted: it shows the possibility of progress for a poet from his obscure mountain village in the Middle East to an elite literary establishment in the West.

"Poetry is the most effective form of Arabic expression," says Sa'id. For her, the one thousand poets in Baghdad attest to this, as does the Poetry Festival in Yemen to which we travel after a brief visit to the Sa'id's home in Beirut. For Beirut is indeed home; in Musallam's words it is "... a city where all that divides and all that unites the Arab world comes together."<sup>6</sup> This unity is portrayed by the gathering at this home of some of the prominent literati of the region, while division is made perceptible by the war-ravaged scenes we are shown later. Interspersed with scenes of readings from the Poetry Festival are scenic shots of the Yemeni countryside, its mosques and its world-famous ruins, which are the backdrop for a journey back in time with our guide.

The most striking reminder of the glorious past that we are shown is the Marib Dam, captivating shots of which are introduced by a beautiful 'ud piece. This architectural wonder is the tableau upon which we gaze as we listen to a description of a type of classical poetry: the *qasida*. Sa'id points out the important social function of this poetry: "... the poet was the spokesman of the tribe." His verse had three principal themes, all of them nostalgic: the old homeland, lost love, and happy days. The informed viewer is bound to wonder about "the old homeland"; instances of this theme are infrequent in classical and medieval poetry. Khalida Sa'id then mentions the *Murallaqat* and their celebration of chivalry, heroism and generosity. With respect to the sites, she offers: "One thinks of how the pre-Islamic poet used to begin by lamenting the old historical places and the time that has come," and goes on to recite several lines from Imru' al-Qays' timeless "*Qifa nabki*..." The audience is treated to a dramatic and evocative reading of the Arabic, coupled with panoramas of mountains, with shots of immortal Sabeian inscriptions and with a scene of a solitary rider in a vast wilderness of sand, but it is denied, regrettably, an attempt to evoke the spirit of the original in English.

The words, "*yā ayyuhā al-ladhna āmanā mā lakum ida qifa lakum*..." next draw our attention. We are now in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, listening to Qur'anic recitation. Sa'id quotes a tradition of the Prophet, "The Qur'an is the only Muslim miracle," while this recitation blends into the call to prayer. From the figure of the muezzin the camera moves to shots of the city, its mosques and domes and its waiting supplicants. Sa'id then repeats the first words sent by God to Muhammad and, thereafter, to the Muslim community: "Read, read by the name of your Lord who created you..." Sa'id, like her husband, is in tune with literature and with words. She observes:

The word compensates for absence; to name something is to bring it into being and presence.

Words have taken the place of graven images and icons in Islam. Her observations on the nature and function of words, which for her husband are "... wombs for a new fertility . . ." (*rahimun li-khishn jadidin*) are followed by a recitation of the opening chapter of the Qur'an, which is shown on a beautiful manuscript page. However, the non-Arabic-speaking viewer is not aware of this or even of the significance of the passage, as it goes entirely unannounced and untranslated. This, too, is the fate of the Qur'anic chapter recited thereafter as we are shown Muslim men in prayer behind an imam, presumably still in the Umayyad Mosque. This and the fact that Saïd does not mention that Qur'an means "recitation" are regrettable oversights.

We cut from the Word, the manifestation of divine perfection, to the Writers' Congress in Aden, Yemen. It is a gathering of creative writers who want to cry out about their world's imperfections. Here we find Khalida Saïd quizzing some Yemeni writers about their problems and the cause of these difficulties. The most concise and pithy answer: "cultural extinction" (*al-inqidat al-hadari*). The writer who offers this answer goes on to accuse the West of neglecting the Arab world, of treating it as meagre and marginal. Yet another writer speaks of writing as a livelihood and suggests that the problem is "... being able to live." He continues:

I think that our problem is not a problem of criticism or of literary forms alone. It is a problem of life, overall, I mean of Arab society.<sup>7</sup>

The frustration of these writers is set against the serene waters of the Arabian Sea. But the idyllic sunset cannot hide the crisis of the Arab, not only of the Arab intellectual but of the Arab in general; here, perhaps, is the crux of the film.

The filming techniques employed at this juncture make this quite clear. This issue of identity and authenticity is explored by the director in a commanding and persuasive fashion as he creates a patch-work of the old and new, the past and the present. Saïd's words, "... but it is modern Arabic literature, especially Arabic poetry, that is the best witness to our crisis . . . and our best response to these sad times," pronounced to the sound of lapping waves, are abruptly followed by a close-up of the narrator:

The basic question they ask concerns the issue of identity. Our identity does not just involve being Arabs, but what kind of Arabs. It also means our freedom to be ourselves, not to be cut off from our roots. But also not to be slaves to our inheritance in a way that will hinder our ability to deal with our present.

The camera zooms in closer. Soon the screen is just Saïd's face:

Identity also involves a definition of what it is that we want, what we represent, and what to say and how to say it.

She is searching for answers, seeking the authenticity and validity in her heritage, not "... as a refuge but as a point of departure." She is groping

for, indeed almost requiring, that freedom to be herself, not to be a slave to her inheritance. And to illustrate this reliance but not dependence on that heritage, we are taken through a collage of modern and traditional, innovative and conformist calligraphy, from a canvas in a modern art studio in Beirut to a medieval illuminated manuscript.

This quest need not find expression in merely the graphic arts or in poetry. Indeed, the next scene, heralded by the clamorous drumming of the stock-character of the *munadi* (town-crier), is a segment from *Sahra ma'a Abi Khalil al-Qabbani* (*A Soiree with Abu Khalil al-Qabbani*), a play by the innovative and skillful Syrian dramatist Saïd Allah Wannus.<sup>8</sup>

We are transferred from the stage and the theoretical ideas of Wannus to a living-room *halqa* (gathering) of poets and critics discussing identity and Arabic literature. What most distinguishes the Arab world from the West? "Islam and the language," one of them insists. All of a sudden we find ourselves in another *halqa* of sorts: we are transported to the age-old setting, the *maqha* (coffee-shop), where the *hakkawati* (storyteller) weaves his fantastic tales, while the streets of Damascus bustle with traffic, bloat in their urbanization, and forget the legends of 'Antar and Abba and the deeds of the Bani Hilal. Cups of tea and coffee and the puffs of the marghile punctuate the scenes of extemporizing raconteurs, bawdy anecdotists and dueling shadow puppets.

Our journey through the arts is not yet over. We find ourselves next in a television studio: a director is advising a few actors before a scene take for a soap-opera. Saïd's evaluation of television is harsh: it reduces the occasions for meeting and socializing and finds inspiration in "one central dominant source instead of the many and informal sources of popular entertainment." Relevance and merit take a back seat:

Many programs are imported with no regard to the quality or relationship to local needs.

To validate these opinions, she takes us to Beirut, to popular (*shar'bi*) theater, to the drama and mime of Roger Assaf. A playwright who started in the classical French theater, he has now turned his attention to the more folkloric and anecdotal elements of performance in a radical reaction away from forms that are distant from his public. He goes to the village for inspiration. In this way he hopes to speak of and speak to the Arab psyche. In Khalid Saïd's words, "his intention is to crystallize the collective memory." And because of this *engagement*, even his "rehearsals are performances." We are privy to one of these rehearsal/performance, a mixture of stories told *extempore*, folklorish songs, mythical accounts and emotive mime, all part of an indigenous, vernacular, enchorial brand of stage-craft. We listen to a song that chants an indictment of the destruction of South Lebanon, "*wa illu ya shaykh*," and then we are shown scenarios of the very same: the crushed buildings, the broken cars, the stifled word.

Beirut is not only home for Khalida Sa'ïd, it is the embodiment of Arab civilization and the Mecca of Arabic literature. For her, the annihilation of the arts is captured in all its meaningless irony in Beirut. With scenes from the annual Book Fair and Adunis' *al-Athar al-Kamila* (Complete Works) inevitably highlighted by the camera, she tells us that Beirut is the birth-place of eighty per cent of all Arabic books, that it is the "capital of the Arab press," a city of publication houses in the hundreds and proud home of six universities. Choked with emotion and swallowed tears, Sa'ïd laments, while the camera shows us the devastation of apartment blocks, the decimation of innocent and unwilling participants in the internecine warfare and the chaos that has made of her home an urban wilderness.

Beirut for me is the physical picture of Arabic culture today. Here in Beirut everything is crumbling.

Musallam himself points out that "many would dispute the idea that in 1982 the war-sundered city of Beirut symbolized the state of contemporary Arabic literature,"<sup>10</sup> but he defends Sa'ïd's viewpoint on the grounds that it is a call for an acknowledgement by Arabs everywhere of Beirut as a point around which to rally, from which to derive common strength, moving away from the particularism that characterizes Arabic literature toward a sense of, and a belief in, a unified voice. Lebanon survives because "life is there, because it has a will . . . to celebrate life, though it suffer the 'deepest wounds.'"

We are still in the Book Fair. Titles such as *Syria and the Lebanese Crisis* and *The Origins of Arab Nationalism* flash before our eyes as we move to the Sa'ïd's living-room anew where Mahmud Darwish will spellbind his audience, and the English-speaking viewers through the subtitles, with *Qasida al-ard* (Earth Poem). This is a poem about freedom and about the nature of captivity. "The poet," contends Khalida Sa'ïd, "lives the apocalyptic moment." Although Darwish's reading is accompanied, initially, by scenes of roses, the camera soon falls upon a grave, and then street-fighting, heavy artillery, wounded men and women quashed in rubble, boodied rescuers and more bombing and shelling. His recitation complete, Darwish's rapt listeners force a sorrowful smile. Adunis is our next reciter. A side-view of him, eerily lit, immediately occupies the screen. He reads from his 1958 poem *al-Nuh al-jadid* (The New Noah), his words spoken in English by Musallam, once again to scenes of carnage and burning in war-torn Beirut. The film closes with Adunis' words:

We go on and we do not listen to that God  
We long for a new god, another."<sup>11</sup>

*The Power of the Word* is a powerful film. It is well directed and edited, intelligently narrated, carefully researched, and is accompanied by a quiet but melodious soundtrack composed and performed on Arabic instru-

ments by Ali Jihad Racy. As noted, however, it excludes other areas of the Arab world that have produced the likes of the Sudanese novelist al-Tayyib Salih, the Egyptian short story master Yusuf Idris and the Tunisian poet al-Shabbi. This selectivity, although justified in terms of the wider project of which the film is a part, is unfortunate because it interferes with the viewer's comprehension of the state of Arab letters in general.

This criticism aside, the film is cogent, eye-opening and a pleasure to watch: a credit to its makers. The foreign audience is treated to examples of some of the very best poetry Arabic literature has to offer, to scenes of some of the Arab world's timeless monuments and, most crucially, to a guided tour by a "real live" Arab. And not just any Arab, but an educated one, a respected critic, spouse of a stirring poet, and what is all the more remarkable, a woman. If this alone does not destroy the misconceptions rampant in the West and create some very different and positive images about the Arabs, their accomplishments and their milieu, then no battle can be won. Musallam and Sa'ïd have done an admirable and a commendable job.

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#### NOTES

1. *The Making of the Arabs* introduces the region and its struggles; *Between Two Worlds*, set in Fez, highlights the difficulties of instilling traditional values in a modern world; *The City Victorious?* shows the struggle of a journey from village to city (Cairo); *The Power of the Word; New Knowledge for Old* features Kuwait, grown from fishing/trading community to oil-rich city-state; *Ways of Faith* looks at religious values in the context of the Sudan; *The Shadow of the West* treats the history of Western encounters with the Arabs and the plight of the Palestinians; *Building a Nation* focuses on Algeria's efforts to do just that; *Family Ties* exposes the views of various women, Jordanians, Tunisians and others, about their role in society; *The Arabs Now* deals with the major issues facing the modern Arab world: education, labor migration, communications. Each video costs \$495 by itself, while the collection of all ten costs \$4,450. They are distributed by Landmark Films, Inc., at 3450 Slade Run Drive, Falls Church, Virginia, 22042. Landmark Films can be contacted at (703) 241-2030, Toll Free (800) 342-4336.
2. Basim Musallam, *The Arabs: a Living History* (London: Harvill Press, Ltd., 1983.) See Chapter Two, pp. 25-48.
3. "The Middle East," a catalogue produced by Landmark Films, Inc.
4. From the dust-jacket of Musallam, *The Arabs*.
5. Musallam, *The Arabs*, p. 4.
6. "O you who believe! What is amiss with you, that when it is said to you . . . [Go forth in the way of God, you sink heavily to the ground . . . ]" Qur'an 9 (*al-Tawba*): 38.

7. "Wa ana nashuf annu 'zmitna mu 'zmit naqd wa la ashal faqat; azmitna hiya al-hayat il-'ammi, hayat il-'arabiyya yati...."
8. Al-Qabbani (*For*, 1871-1900), the first Syrian dramatist, who sought inspiration in the classical tradition, fled to Egypt when his efforts met with resistance from the religious establishment in Damascus.
9. Unfortunately, the title of this play is not even mentioned. It is an appropriate choice because it is a play that deals with the roots of its own tradition. Wannus al-Qabbani, doing the same, drawing inspiration from *A Thousand and One Nights*. Wannus' idea of drama as spectacle and of his perceived need for methods of engaging the audience in the performance, of making each show a social and political event, are discussed. The aim of his theater, which is a synthesis of traditional and Western forms, is to find authenticity. "To make it authentic is to make it effective." Mention of his revolutionary term *masrahiyyat al-tasyis* (the theater of politicization) also goes unmentioned.
10. Musallam, *The Arabs*, p. 33.
11. This is my translation of

*namdi wa la nusghi li-daki al-ihahi*  
*tuqna ita rabbin jaddin siwahu.*

## BOOK REVIEWS

JUDITH TUCKER, *Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Pp. 264. \$39.50.

Despite important developments in women's studies in recent years, the subject of women has hardly been touched upon in the writing of Middle East history. Judith Tucker's *Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt* begins to fill this gap. To my knowledge it is the first exploration into the history of Egyptian (or Arab) women that is based upon research in the still underexploited archives of the Arab countries and is also the first such study that is informed by feminist theory.

Tucker's aim is to document and analyze the situation of peasant and urban lower-class women during the transformations that occurred in Egypt between 1800 and 1914. As with the history of other marginalized groups, this history, having been neglected, must be brought to light in order to be assessed. To this end, Tucker has generated much of her own data from the Egyptian archives by sampling the records of selected Shari'a courts in Cairo (1800-1860) and the court of the provincial town of al-Mansura (1800-1807.) An additional source upon which she relied heavily is a collection of the published fatwas of the Hanafi mufti of Egypt. The latter are of limited use for the last third of the nineteenth century, however, due to the erosion of the religious courts' jurisdiction. Fatwas treating *miri* land, for example, cease with the issuance of the land law of 1858. The primary Arabic sources Tucker used are thus limited for the most part to the period before the "cotton boom" of the 1860s—especially for following changes in landholding. Her account of later decades relies primarily upon European sources and printed books. The relatively backward state of modern Middle East historiography, especially social history, is another constraint affecting this work.

Documentation—the basic task of establishing what happened—cannot be accomplished adequately for this subject in a single monograph, given the constraints mentioned. Nonetheless, Tucker's informed documentation immediately debunks some popular, essentialist views of women "in Islam." The frequency with which women appeared in court to defend their rights (against men) eloquently contradicts any notion of female passivity in this culture. Their often successful recourse to the principles of