

Introduction



This anthology contains short stories by forty contemporary women writers from across the Arab world. These multiple voices articulate the female experience over the past half-century in an area stretching from the Middle East to North Africa. They speak of old values, new needs, marriage, childbearing, love, sexuality, education, work, and freedom. They explore the relations between the sexes, and question traditional norms and bequeathed customs as they assert their own desires and aspirations. Invariably, they take a stand, be it romantic, rebellious, conservative, liberal, or radical. The intimate and vividly crafted portrait of the Arab woman that emerges from these narratives is not only fascinating but endlessly thought provoking.

The aim of this anthology is to introduce the English reader to Arab women's ways of life, currents of thought, and creative expression. The volume offers a rich cultural encounter in which the complex world of Arab women, as seen by these women themselves, is unveiled. One may hope that the wealth of material presented in this volume will deepen Western understanding of Arab society, illuminate the status and lifestyles of Arab women, and broaden awareness of the contribution of Arab women writers to modern Arabic literature.

The anthology is organized around the genre of the short story and its individual female practitioners. In this regard, it is the first of its kind, the traditional collection being generally centered on a single author, a particular country, or a variety of genres.

The scope of this anthology extends over several generations of women writers, beginning with the pioneers who published in the 1940s and 1950s, through the younger generation who followed in the 1960s and 1970s, to the present generation whose literary output appeared in the 1980s and especially the 1990s, thus

providing a broad spectrum of works of fiction by Arab women. While the authors are culled from diverse countries, there is an unavoidable balance in favor of Egyptian writers. For one thing, Egypt has always been the center of cultural activity in the Arab world. In addition, its population is the largest among the Arab nations.

The focus on the genre of the short story was guided by several factors, foremost among which is the fact that since the 1950s, the short story has become the most popular form of creative writing in the Arab world. The ready availability of avenues of publication for the short story, notably newspapers, journals, and magazines, and the relatively little amount of time and planning needed to produce a complete short story (as opposed to a novel or novella), have made it the favorite fictional genre among women, who often have to juggle the demands of a family with a literary career. In addition, the short story's brevity, as well as its ability to dramatize concrete issues and convey pithy messages, render it uniquely suitable for an anthology that aims to present unabridged texts, and a large number of them at that.

In selecting the stories for this anthology, the first priority was to ensure a wide range of subject matter. The stories had to reflect the current interests and concerns of Arab women, from feminist issues to social and political problems to cultural and moral dilemmas. Further, the stories had to illustrate different styles and modes of writing, with diversity of techniques and creative approaches. Aside from sociocultural content and artistic merit, the stories had to possess heuristic value, namely, show many points of view and various ways of solving problems and confronting situations in everyday life. Occasionally, the overriding factor was the "story behind the story," as in the case of "The Gallows" by Suhayr al-Tall, who was prosecuted and jailed by the authorities for publishing it. An additional feature of this anthology is the frequent inclusion of more than one story by the same author, thus affording a deeper glimpse into her creative work. While the stories had to fulfill any one of these criteria, the final decision was also influenced by personal taste—an unavoidable element in such a process.

The headings under which the stories are arranged represent some of the prevailing themes in Arab women's imaginative writings. While the stories in each section express similar concerns, their interpretive potential is rich and may well suggest or overlap other themes.

Moreover, many stories contain several themes and thus fall under more than one heading. In these instances, I have placed the story in the section where I believe its most intriguing theme is highlighted. Needless to say, there are common threads running through all the stories. On the whole, the present organization is fluid and meant to provide an easy frame of reference rather than a rigid set of categories.

Arab Women Writers: A Brief Sketch

Women in the Arab world have been producing significant fiction for the past half-century. Although the Arabic literary tradition had its narrative types, the short story and the novel were new genres adopted from the West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Introduced during the process of cultural revival known in Arabic as *al-nahda*, the new forms underwent considerable experimentation before gaining acceptance and reaching maturity. The emergence of the short story in particular is closely connected with the development of the Arabic press, which offered authors an avenue of publication and thus a readership. Since the Second World War, when most Arab countries have gained their political independence and their newly formed governments have pursued policies of social and economic reforms, there has been a gradual improvement in the condition of women. The spread of free compulsory public education not only raised the level of literacy among women but also opened the door to new employment opportunities. Women's participation in public life increased, reaching into all areas of activity. In the domain of literature, women advanced gradually from the margins to the center of literary production and their contribution to modern Arabic literature has been invaluable. Fiction, which possesses the guise of fantasy and therefore entails a lesser degree of exposure and accountability, has become the most popular and powerful vehicle of self-expression and social criticism for women. In the last half-century, Arab women writers have brought the art of storytelling to a high level of accomplishment and achieved a remarkable development in theme, form, and technique. Prominent among the pioneer authors are the Palestinian Mayy Ziyada (1886–1941), the Egyptian Suhayr al-Qalamawi (1911–97), and the Syrian Ulfat al-Idilbi (b. 1912).¹

While the presence of women on the Arabic literary scene has grown in number and influence in recent decades, there are still fewer female than male authors. In addition, they do not represent all segments of Arab society. Most of these women writers come from the middle and upper classes and have had the education and resources needed for intellectual pursuits. In a developing part of the world where illiteracy is still widespread, and where the overwhelming majority of women are preoccupied with the harsh realities of daily life, Virginia Woolf's basic assumption that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction"² is of particular relevance. As Woolf elaborates, "Fiction, imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. . . . These webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in."³ Owing to the privileged social background of most Arab women writers, their fictional works give inadequate attention to, and lack realistic solutions for, the plight of women from the poorer classes of society.⁴

Despite the increase in the number of women who are creative writers, only very few of them can devote themselves entirely to their writing. Family obligations, full-time jobs, or financial pressures are usually the factors that impede them. It should be noted that the writing of fiction in the Arab world is not a profession by which a person, male or female, can earn a living. Even the Nobel Prize laureate Naguib Mahfouz worked as a civil servant in Egypt's Ministry of Culture until his retirement. Of the women writers included in this volume, Nawal al-Saadawi, for example, has maintained a dual career as a physician and a writer. Radwa Ashour is a university professor, as were Suhayr al-Qalamawi and Latifa al-Zayyat. Aliya Mamdouh, Fawziya Rashid, Mona Ragab, Fadila al-Faruq, and Hadiya Sa'id are journalists. Ramziya Abbas al-Iryani is a career diplomat. The literary activities of these authors are conducted alongside their duties as wives, mothers, and working women.

Economic freedom, however, does not necessarily entail intellectual freedom. Arab women who have had the opportunity to embark on a writing career may still encounter opposition to their

work, and may even find it impossible to publish it or acquire a readership. Nawal al-Saadawi published her first work of nonfiction, *Women and Sex*, in Beirut in 1972. The book deals candidly with taboos surrounding female sexuality, including virginity, circumcision, and crimes of honor. It caused such an uproar that she was dismissed from her post as Egypt's director-general of health education. As with other provocative works that she has penned, the book has been banned in several Arab countries. Layla Ba'labakki of Lebanon published her collection of short stories, *A Spaceship of Tenderness to the Moon*, in Beirut in 1963. The book led to her trial on charges of obscenity and endangering public morality.⁵ The indictment was based on erotic descriptions that appeared in some of her stories. Although she was eventually acquitted, she stopped publishing works of fiction since then. Suhayr al-Tall of Jordan went through a traumatic experience following the publication of her story "The Gallows," included in this anthology, in Amman in 1987. The narrative, a surrealistic depiction of a public execution in which the hangman's noose is portrayed as a huge phallus, landed her in court on a charge of offending public sensibilities. After a long and bitter trial, she was convicted, fined, and sentenced to short imprisonment.⁶ Zabya Khamis of the United Arab Emirates suffered an even harsher ordeal. In 1987 she was arrested in Abu Dhabi and jailed for five months without trial as punishment for writing allegedly transgressive poetry.⁷

Besides problems of censorship, Arab women writers may also encounter opposition to their work within their own families. Alifa Rifaat was discouraged from writing first by her father and then by her husband, who threatened her with divorce to enforce his will. Only after his death could she write and publish freely. Nawal al-Saadawi chose to divorce two husbands who were hostile to her literary activities. In most instances, the attitudes of family members—particularly fathers and husbands—whether progressive or conservative, play a critical role in shaping a woman's writing career.

The critic and writer Yusuf al-Sharuni cites the following explanation of this state of affairs in his introduction to *The 1002nd Night*, the first anthology of short stories by Egyptian women: "Man, especially in our Middle Eastern milieu, does not object to woman's emergence into public life in order to work alongside him, especially if this work relieves him of the burden of bearing the family's living costs by himself. But beyond that he strongly

objects to her having an independent social existence, just as he totally rejects the idea of the home becoming a secondary occupation for her, subordinate to her outside, wider world. In other words, man still asserts that the home, not external society, is woman's domain."⁸

The sociologist Fatima Mernissi has another explanation. In *Doing Daily Battle*, she writes about her experiences "as a Moroccan woman who uses writing and analysis—two tools which are exclusively male in our culture. And let no one tell me that 'in our heritage there have always been women scholars.'" Mernissi states, with an engaging sense of humor, that she has learned to distinguish "the varieties of terrorist tactics that men, who monopolize the symbolic values of our society, use to stop me from expressing myself, or to denigrate what I say—which comes to the same thing." She identifies two main "terrorist tactics": "Firstly, 'What you are talking about is an imported idea' (referring to access to the cultural heritage); and secondly, 'What you are saying is not representative' (referring to access to science)." Debunking these myths, Mernissi comes to the conclusion that "the relations between the sexes are always inextricably and unconditionally linked to class relations."¹⁰

From the beginning, then, Arab women writers have had to assert themselves in a male-dominated arena, from audience to publishers to critics to literary tradition.¹¹ The Egyptian author Salwa Bakr acknowledges the formidable task facing an Arab woman writer: "It is a heavy tax on many levels, especially in a society in which most individuals are illiterate, a society which is conservative by nature, whose values are static and which does not respect women in the first place. All this makes writing seem like the task of Sisyphus, particularly if the writer stops to think for whom she is writing."¹² Yet despite the various obstacles that they encounter in the path of their careers, Arab women writers continue to give literary expression to their feelings and thoughts. Many of the authors presented in this anthology have produced a large volume of work and achieved eminence, among them Ulfat al-Idilbi (Syria), Hanan al-Shaykh (Lebanon), Layla al-Uthman (Kuwait), Nawal al-Saadawi (Egypt), and Daisy al-Amir (Iraq). Others, such as Samiya At'ut (Palestine), Nuzha Bin Sulayman (Morocco), Umayma al-Khamis (Saudi Arabia), and Sahar al-Muji (Egypt) are rising young writers. While most of the established authors have also received international recognition by being translated into European languages, for

several of the new authors, this volume marks their first appearance in English.

Two groups of women writers can be distinguished in this anthology: those from the Arab East (Mashriq), and those from the Arab West (Maghrib). Historically and culturally, these parts of the Arab world have developed differently. Domination by European colonial powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries contributed to this division. The countries of the Arab East were mostly under British colonial rule (e.g., Egypt, Palestine, Iraq), while those of the Arab West (e.g., Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco) were largely occupied by the French. French colonial rule explains the problem of biculturalism facing North African writers.¹³ Whereas British colonial policy did not impose the English language and culture on the colonized, the French embarked on an aggressive linguistic and cultural campaign that sought to replace the indigenous languages and cultures. The result has been the emergence of whole generations of intellectuals who are francophones and prefer to express themselves in French. The Algerian women writers Jamila Debeche and Assia Djebar, their male counterparts Muhammed Dib and Kateb Yacine, as well as the Moroccan novelist Driss Chraïbi and the Tunisian Albert Memmi, all illustrate this phenomenon. It is interesting to note that North African authors who choose to write in Arabic occasionally show traces of French influence in their diction. For example, the Moroccan writer Khannatha Bannuna in her story "Suqut al-intizar" (Shattered Expectations) uses the phrase *'ilab al-layl* to mean "night clubs," which is a word-for-word translation from the French *boîtes de nuit*.¹⁴ Similarly, the Algerian Fadila al-Faruq, in the story "Homecoming," uses the word *miziriyya* (French: *misère*) for "misery." On the whole, while the majority of literary works coming from the Arab East are in Arabic, those coming from North Africa are in French. In this volume, only women writers of Arabic have been included.

Thematic Aspects

This anthology is arranged in eight parts, each of which focuses on a major phase, event, or issue in the life cycle of Arab women. The diversity of the physical and social environments in which Arab women live, as well as the complexity of their situations and circumstances, are depicted in the stories. Narrated by forty women

writers from across the Arab world, these sixty stories offer testimonies, observations, reflections, visions, memories, criticisms, and commentaries about life from the female perspective. The intellectual discourse that emerges from these narratives is insightful and daring. Eloquent, outspoken, and provocative, these literary texts undermine the stereotyped images often presented by superficial journalistic reports and selective social studies. Told through the eyes of insiders, the stories reveal the rich texture of women's lives, both private and public, throughout the many cultures and countries of the Arab world. They shed light on the status and lifestyles of Arab women, the way they view the world, address the challenges of modern life, and cope with daily dilemmas. At the same time, they expose abusive situations, raise controversial issues, and criticize many aspects of Arab society, with the goal of generating a constructive dialogue by both men and women.

In part 1, the stories depict the experience of growing up female in traditional Arab society. Certain commonalities emerge: while the early years of a girl's life appear to be relatively joyous and carefree, the onset of puberty puts an end to her childhood. When a girl reaches the age of puberty, she begins to wear the veil. She loses her freedom of movement and is confined to the domain of her home until she can be married off. The overwhelming desire to safeguard her chastity—and the family honor—may lead to her withdrawal from school and the end of her education. The abrupt and painful transition from childhood to adulthood is portrayed in the stories “That Summer Holiday” by Samiya At'ut, “The Parting Gift” by Umayma al-Khamis, and “Let's Play Doctor” by Nura Amin. The practice of marrying a girl off at the first sign of her menses is featured in “In the Recesses of Memory” by Fawziya Rashid. The phenomenon of child labor is highlighted in Radwa Ashour's “In the Moonlight” and Buthayna al-Nasiri's “At the Beach.” The oppression of women by other women is dramatized in “The Slave” by Najiya Thamir. In this story, a fatherless girl is adopted by a selfish woman who enslaves her and deprives her of a life of her own, ultimately breaking her spirit. The story shows that a woman can be a worse tyrant than a man, especially in a relationship with another female who is subordinate to her and over whom she retains some power.

That mental breakdown may be caused by patriarchal oppression

and socialization is suggested by Sharifa al-Shamlan's "Fragments from a Life." In this story, the protagonist, a young girl, is a patient in a mental institution. Her life has been marked by neglect, abuse, and victimization: a father who kept her illiterate, a greedy stepmother who sold her cherished palm-tree garden, a doctor who tried to rape her, a nurse who stole her medicine, and an orderly who pilfered her food. Faced with relentless acts of injustice, the girl's personality crumbles, and she loses her sanity. Paradoxically, her madness empowers her and gives her a voice that seems to be reckoned with in her confined environment.

In part 2, the stories explore the mysteries of love and sexuality. Arab women writers denounce the strict practices surrounding female sexuality: veiling, seclusion, social segregation, virginity, circumcision, and crimes of honor. At the same time, they offer a rare glimpse into intimate relations between men and women, which reveal that the sexual code is often violated in everyday life. Despite the sexual repression that predominates in traditional Arab society, the themes of love, passion, and erotic pleasure have always been celebrated in Arabic poetry, both classical and modern.

It is interesting to note that titles of works by Arab women writers occasionally echo each other, whether consciously or unconsciously. Nawal al-Saadawi, Latifa al-Zayyat, and Layla al-Uthman have all written a story entitled "The Picture." Not only are their stories woven around the same object—a photograph—but they also deal with the same subject—female sexuality. Each story, however, focuses on a different phase in a woman's life: in al-Saadawi's "Picture" it is adolescence, in al-Zayyat's it is adulthood, and in al-Uthman's it is middle age. Thus, taken together, the stories paint a vivid portrait of female sexuality over a complete life cycle. The connecting thread between the individual depictions of these particular phases is that each narrative features a traumatic event that captures a specific moment of truth, resulting in a flash of recognition and the acquisition of an indelible awareness.

"Suffering is the sole origin of consciousness," wrote Dostoyevsky: in al-Saadawi's story the teenage girl stumbles on her much-admired father raping the maid in the kitchen; in al-Zayyat's story the loving wife is publicly confronted with her husband's infidelity; and in al-Uthman's story the insecure middle-aged woman looking for reassurance in an extramarital love affair sees her own

confused self in another woman. Each constructed around a photograph, all three stories express the idea that “true vision is always twofold: it involves emotional comprehension as well as physical perception.”¹⁵

A controversial aspect of sexuality is depicted in “My Mother’s Friend” by Nura Amin. The story recounts a lesbian relationship between the mother of a young girl and an unmarried woman. Not only is the story daring in its subject matter and explicit language, but it is also provocative in its treatment of female sexuality. In the absence of the girl’s father, who often travels on business, the mother finds comfort and intimacy in the arms of another woman. Narrated from the perspective of the girl, the story highlights her sexual awakening and personal identification with her mother. Needless to say, in a society in which public discussion of sexual matters is generally discouraged, the depiction of a lesbian love affair constitutes a strict taboo. Yet despite censorship and the risk of ostracism, the topic has been explored by other women writers, notably Alifa Rifaat in her story “My World of the Unknown,” published elsewhere.¹⁶

The miseries of unrequited love are portrayed in “A Worthless Woman” by Hayat Bin al-Shaykh. In this story, the heroine is tormented by unresolved feelings of longing, frustration, and self-doubt. In “The Smile” by Nafila Dhahab, love becomes a transforming experience for a girl who is infatuated with a young man in her neighborhood. Unable to reveal her feelings, she worships him from afar, until one day he disappears. Years later she meets him again and is shocked by his shabby appearance and incoherent speech. The military uniform that he wears suggests that he was drafted into the army and fought in a war; perhaps he suffers from psychic war trauma. She mourns the loss of her love and the fact that she will never know whether he loved her too. The intriguing perspective of this story is that it depicts the man as the primary victim of the prevailing social order and value system.

In part 3, the issue of gender relations serves as a basis for a feminist discourse. Arab women writers are deeply concerned with the inequality between the sexes, which is manifested in male domination and the oppression and marginalization of women. Their fictional works abound with female characters who are trapped in abusive situations in which their male kin—husbands, fathers, brothers, or uncles—act as the authors of their destinies. They protest their degradation at the hands of men, and rebel against the

patriarchal institutions and traditions that keep them in bondage. Voicing anger, frustration, and alienation, they challenge the status quo and call for freedom, justice, and equality. Although there are instances in which male characters are presented in a positive light, they are more commonly portrayed as egotistic, insensitive, and vain, and as driven by greed, lust, and a primitive sense of honor.

Male hypocrisy, practice of double standards, and irrational expectations of women are exposed in "A Virgin Continent" by Samira Azzam. In this story, the protagonist proudly boasts about his romantic adventures to his fiancée, but insists on her being pure, virginal, and without a past. In "The Cat" by Layla Ba'labakki and "The Woman of My Dreams" by Fadila al-Faruq, women are prey to sexual exploitation. The men in these stories display a seemingly progressive attitude, but in reality their actions are deceptive and manipulative. The stories convey the message that in Arab society liberated women are more vulnerable than traditional women because of a male tendency to view them as fallen, degraded, and unworthy of being taken seriously.

A penetrating cameo portrait that captures the essence of male-female relations is "Mozart's Fez" by Samiya At'ut. In this vignette, reminiscent of a seduction scene from the *Arabian Nights*, the harem, represented by a tent full of women who are controlled by a single male, is the symbol of women's subordination and sexual exploitation. The juxtaposition of the name of the classical European composer, Mozart, and the traditional Muslim headdress, fez, is provocative, and serves to dramatize the erotic appeal and highly romanticized view of the harem in Western popular imagination. By contrast, in "Where To?" Colette Suhayl al-Khuri paints a romantic picture of a young couple passionately in love and deeply devoted to each other. The story, which is written in a poetic style, expresses both optimism and irony.

The strict code governing the relations between the sexes is relaxed in old age. Aging brings respect, prestige, and a certain measure of freedom and independence. This situation is depicted in "An Old Couple" by Nadiya Khust. The story tells of a loving relationship between two villagers separated in their youth and reunited in old age. The woman, who was married off to an old man to pay her father's debts on his plot of land, returns to the village after she is widowed, and the man, who never married, renews his close friendship with her. The crucial difference is that at this stage in their

lives, both the man and the woman enjoy more latitude in conducting their personal affairs, which enables them to cultivate their relationship without fear or interference.

In part 4, the institution of marriage is subject to a close scrutiny. In traditional Arab society, marriage represents the transfer of a girl from the authority of her father to that of her husband. The girl has no say in choosing her prospective husband, who is selected by the parents according to the custom of arranged marriage. After the bride price is agreed on, the marriage contract signed, and the wedding celebration held, the girl moves into her husband's household, ill-prepared for the tasks awaiting her—domestic, sexual, reproductive. As a result, many women experience marriage as a state of captivity and oppression harsher than the one they endured in their own homes. In the present volume, the protagonists' reactions to the institution of marriage range from acceptance, as reflected in "My Wedding Night" by Alifa Rifaat, to rejection, as shown in "Pharaoh Is Drowning Again" by Sakina Fuad, to rebellion, as depicted in "The Beginning" by Salwa Bakr.

A great significance is attached to virginity in traditional Arab society. The chastity of a girl represents not only her honor but that of her entire family. It is therefore imperative for a girl to preserve her virginity until her first marriage. Premarital sex is regarded as a grievous offense, punishable by death. A bride who is found to be unchaste on her wedding night is the cause of a great scandal to her family. Her husband has the right to annul the marriage, and her male kin—father, brother, uncle—have the duty to avenge their honor by putting her to death. Public opinion permits honor killings and the courts treat them leniently. The issues of virginity and crimes of honor are raised in "Questioning" by Fawziya Rashid.¹⁷

Another practice affecting the institution of marriage is polygamy, which emphasizes the inequality between the sexes: a man may take four wives, but a woman is allowed only one husband at a time. The stress, insecurity, and misery that polygamy inflicts on women are portrayed in "Sun, I Am the Moon" by Hanan al-Shaykh. In this story, the teenage, third wife of an ugly old man, unable to cope with her suffering, contemplates the murder of her abusive husband as the only way out of her predicament. While men who are dissatisfied with their wives can obtain divorce by the simple act of oral repudiation, women find that their right to divorce is severely limited. Moreover,

child custody laws discriminate against them. The tribulations of getting a divorce or custody of the children are depicted in the stories “The Dreadful Sea” by Zuhur Wanisi, “Woman with a Story” by Mayy Ziyada, “The Persian Rug” by Hanan al-Shaykh, and “I Will Never Forfeit My Right” by Mona Ragab.

Despite the fact that the customs surrounding marriage place men in an advantageous position, they too suffer the consequences of the rigid social mores. In Alifa Rifaat’s story “My Wedding Night,” the groom, whose bride is as much a stranger to him as he is to her, is paralyzed with fear and confusion to the point that he is unable to consummate the marriage. In “The Dummy” by Sahar al-Muji, the husband—the authority figure in the household—is absent from the daily life of his family: he does not participate in any activity involving his wife and children. Taciturn and distant, he becomes increasingly isolated—the ultimate victim of his own position of power and privilege.

In part 5, the stories focus on the issue of childbearing. Traditionally regarded as the primary task of women in society and as the main purpose of marriage, childbearing has a great impact on a woman’s life. For one thing, children provide a woman with a legitimate means of self-fulfillment. For another, children are the key to a woman’s social standing, earning her respect in the family and the community. Across all sectors of Arab society, there is an overwhelming preference for boys. While the birth of a boy is greeted with joy and celebration, that of a girl is relatively ignored, or even met with a sense of disappointment. The desire for boys is so strong that a woman who bears only daughters is not much better off than a childless wife.¹⁸

In a culture in which a much-quoted dictum by the prophet Muhammad runs “Paradise lies at the feet of mothers,” the position of an infertile woman is highly precarious. A husband whose wife is infertile has the right to divorce her or take an additional wife. According to popular belief—and in contrast to scientific evidence—the woman is the party responsible for a childless marriage as well as for the sex of the child. Hence the birth of a long line of daughters and the absence of sons are generally blamed on the woman. These attitudes are reflected in the story “Heir Apparent” by Ramziya Abbas al-Iryani. The psychological effects of the pressure on a woman to bear children are portrayed in “The Spider’s Web” by Ihsan Kamal. “Half a Woman” by Sufi Abdallah shows that a woman’s self-image is dependent on her children. The tragedy of

infertility, which drives a woman into insanity, is depicted in shocking detail in Ghada al-Samman's story, "Another Scarecrow," published elsewhere.¹⁹

The vicious circle between large families and poverty is dramatized in "The Newcomer" by Daisy al-Amir. Told from the perspective of the eldest daughter who is burdened with the care of her siblings, the story highlights the perennial problem of overpopulation and lack of family planning in Arab society. That modern attitudes toward childbearing have begun to appear among Arab women is evident from Rafiqat al-Tabi'a's "Man and Woman," which tells of a wife who refuses to bring children into a world plagued by misery, poverty, and war.

In part 6, the stories address the issue of self-fulfillment. Arab women have traditionally occupied the private domain of the household. This domain afforded them limited roles, notably those of daughters, wives, and mothers. The opportunities for personal development and self-expression have expanded dramatically with the modernization of Arab society. The spread of free compulsory public education, as well as the economic necessity of contributing to the household income, has facilitated women's efforts to join the workforce and increased their participation in public life.

The new reality of women's presence in the workplace within the urban environment has created internal and external conflicts. On the personal level, women are torn between the desire to raise a family and the ambition to develop a career. On the interpersonal level, women find themselves at odds with authority figures within the family, usually husbands, who adhere to the traditions of the past, asserting that a woman's place is in the home. The tragic consequences of a failure to reconcile such differing expectations are depicted in "I Will Never Forfeit My Right" by Mona Ragab. In this story, a wife who chooses to work outside the home is divorced by her husband, who gets custody of their child. The woman's desperate efforts to appeal for justice in a court of law fall on deaf ears. In Layla Ba'labakki's story "The Filly Became a Mouse," the wife insists on her right to fulfill herself in her dancing profession. Her husband's lack of sympathy and cooperation drives her to take her little daughter and run away.

The search for self-fulfillment yields various results and solutions. In "The Closely Guarded Secret" by Sahar al-Muji, the

heroine's thirst for knowledge is irrepressible. Despite oppressive conditions, she finds spiritual nourishment in reading a book, which she guards with her life. In Salwa Bakr's "International Women's Day," the protagonist juggles the demands of her family with a career as a school headmistress. Her life, though hectic, is full and rich in content. By contrast, in Umayma al-Khamis's "Waiting for Hayla," the boredom and emptiness of a life of leisure of women from the upper classes lead to apathy and depression. The characters' narrow existence centers around social gatherings, dinners, and gossip, all of which dulls their minds and personalities. That the external trappings of success do not necessarily bring emotional satisfaction and psychological equilibrium is depicted in Umayma al-Khamis's "Restoration." In this ultrashort text, the heroine's loss of her sense of self brings her to the verge of a mental breakdown.

In certain instances, particularly a francophone environment, women attempt to achieve self-fulfillment outside their culture. In Fadila al-Faruq's "Homecoming," the protagonist escapes the social limitations imposed on her gender in Algeria by emigrating to France. After a long stay, she is overcome by nostalgia for the haven of her childhood, and embarks on a journey back home. As soon as she arrives in her country, she is disillusioned by the gloomy reality of poverty, overcrowding, and discontent. The story shows her increasing isolation and alienation: she does not feel at home in France, and she is rejected by her own family members, who believe that she has acquired a different mentality and thus is unlikely to fit in.

The culture shock awaiting an Arab woman who returns to her homeland after a stay in the West figures prominently in Zabya Khamis's "Bittersweet Memories." In this story, the protagonist travels to Europe to pursue higher education. The forms of freedom that she enjoys there enable her to engage in adventurous and revolutionary activities unthinkable in her own country. Her journey of self-fulfillment ends abruptly when she returns to her country and is confronted by the authoritarian customs officers at the airport. At that moment, she realizes that the assets she has gained in the West are a liability in her conservative Arab state.

In part 7, the stories highlight the impact of custom and tradition on the lives of women. Arab culture abounds with time-honored customs and traditions, which serve as a source of communal attitudes and as criteria of individual and group conduct. While all

members of society are bound by the rules of custom and tradition, it is the women who are affected the most. Veiling, seclusion, social segregation, circumcision, and crimes of honor are determined by local custom. Patterns of marriage, divorce, childbearing, and child rearing are rooted in custom. Popular attitudes toward women's education and work outside the home are based on custom. Custom dictates a woman's behavior at every phase of her life, from the cradle to the grave. Hence the forces of custom and tradition constitute the most difficult barriers for women to overcome.

The issues of virginity and crimes of honor are raised in the story "Questioning" by Fawziya Rashid. The sharp contrast between the sexual mores of the East and those of the West, especially as they relate to women, is depicted in the stories "The Dinosaur" by Emily Nasrallah and "Moonstruck" by Hadiya Sa'id. "Misfortune in the Alley" by Ramziya Abbas al-Iryani tells of the disappearance of a young village girl from her father's home, highlighting the grave threat that this incident poses both to his honor and to her life. The patriarchal values of Arab society, which underlie the moral and sexual codes, are denounced in Suhayr al-Tall's surrealist story "The Gallows." In Khayriya al-Saqqaf's symbolic story, "A Moment of Truth," time, represented by a clock on the wall, and history, represented by a book in the hands of a rigid old man, are frozen in the oppressive presence of this authority figure, who, speechless and motionless, signifies the static values of traditional Arab society. The scene, which is marked by stagnation and death, illustrates the fundamental principle that life cannot be preserved without movement and change.

Civil war destroys the fabric of society, plunging it into chaos and anarchy, with tragic loss of innocent lives and great human suffering. Daisy al-Amir's story, "The Future," is set in the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1990. The narrative depicts a woman's daily confrontation with the horror of explosions, shootings, killings, looting, and arbitrary death in a senseless, and seemingly endless, war fought by men. In an effort to transcend the devastation around her, the heroine buys a new spring dress. The dress symbolizes the future and her yearning for peace and normality.

The role of women in preserving traditional rites is dramatized in "Tears for Sale" by Samira Azzam. In this story, a village woman functions both as a mourner for the dead and as a beautician for brides. That the same woman performs both—opposite—rites,

serves to highlight the pivotal position of women in the cycle of birth, life, and death.

In part 8, the stories focus on the improvement in the status and lifestyle of Arab women. The rapid social transformation taking place throughout the Arab world is reflected in the background of almost every story in this volume. Many of the female characters in these narratives drive cars, wear modern clothes, walk unaccompanied in the streets, travel by themselves to foreign countries, and live abroad for prolonged periods of time; they also raise families, study, work, run businesses, and engage in diverse activities no different from those of women in the West. Admittedly, the level of modernity varies from one Arab country to another. Saudi Arabia, for example, is a stronghold of conservative Arab-Muslim values, whereas Egypt is more liberal and affords women a greater degree of freedom and more access to means of personal advancement. The situation further varies within the same Arab country from region to region—urban, rural, nomadic. Nevertheless, the winds of change are blowing across the Arab lands. The impact of television, of the technological and communication revolution, and of the process of globalization, transcends linguistic and geographic boundaries, making inroads into all areas of life in Arab society.

That traditional norms and attitudes are giving way to modern ideas and values is evident from the stories “The Breeze of Youth” by Ulfat al-Idilbi and “In Need of Reassurance” by Radwa Ashour. Both stories depict a conflict between the old and young generations: in al-Idilbi’s story, a grandmother clashes with her granddaughter in a middle-class urban family; in Ashour’s story, a grandfather clashes with his granddaughter in a lower-class rural family. The changes emerging in the patterns of women’s lives over three generations are dramatic: the granddaughters are neither cloistered nor illiterate; rather, they are free and educated; they study at the university, and map out their own futures. It is interesting to note that both the grandmother and the grandfather have a hard time adjusting themselves to the new realities, even though they recognize the benefits of these advances for their granddaughters.

Male-female relations are also changing. In Salwa Bakr’s story “The Beginning,” the protagonist, a married woman who works outside the home, is outraged by her husband’s selfish attitude and tyrannical conduct. She gives him a piece of her mind—and a taste of her fist—and walks out on him fearlessly and resolutely. “A Successful

Woman” by Suhayr al-Qalamawi demonstrates that a woman does not need the protection of a husband or a male relative to survive—she can make it on her own. In Samiya At’ut’s story “The Collapse of Barriers,” the heroine is trapped in an elevator with a male operator, a situation that temporarily removes the barriers between them. As soon as the elevator begins to move again, she regains her composure and reasserts her position of master, rather than servant, vis-à-vis the elevator operator. In “A Moment of Contemplation” by Nuzha Bin Sulayman, a marital dispute between the protagonist, who suffers from the strain of juggling a job and a family, and her husband ends on a note of conciliation, friendship, and affection.

The burst of literary activity by women in contemporary Arab society is mirrored in “I Will Try Tomorrow” by Mona Ragab. In this story, the protagonist is a writer and the mother of two small children. She knows how precious the moments of inspiration are and how delicate the creative process is, yet she dutifully attends to all her tasks and tries to balance the various demands on her time with patience and a sense of humor.

While there is a marked increase in Arab women’s participation in public life, and a growing level of awareness on their part, both collective and individual, the process of liberation is not complete. In their struggle for freedom and equality, Arab women writers at times encounter hostility and resistance and at other times solidarity and support. The depth of their vision is reflected in the fact that they perceive the liberation of their gender as inseparable from the re-birth of Arab society in general and the Arab man in particular.

Modes of Writing

The question of whether Arab women authors write differently from their male counterparts has stimulated a great deal of critical discourse. Some critics argue that the elements of imaginative literature do not differ from gender to gender. What differs is the concerns of each gender, resulting from their specific experiences and impressions of life and society. Hence one should not look for a distinct type of literature with particular qualities in women’s writings, although one should acknowledge that women have different interests owing to their different social and psychological circumstances.²⁰

A rather opposing view is expressed by Yusuf Idris (1927–91), one of the most influential modern writers in Egypt and throughout

the Arab world. In an article on women writers in the Arabian Peninsula, he offers the following impressions:

Over the last few years, collections of short stories have started reaching me from Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf States. It is true that most of them are by male writers, but a good number are by female writers. This is really amazing: the Arab woman in Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf States is almost secluded from public life. Many women there work as physicians, teachers, and bank employees (there are special banks for women), but their existence as an independent entity, and as a political or social force, is almost completely on the periphery of public life.

Yet the Arab woman there is a live being, educated, well-informed, and moved by all the desires and aspirations of the human soul. However, her desires and aspirations have a very low ceiling which she is not allowed to break through. Because of this, she channels her energies into writing. She finds an outlet in it, and speaks through it. Her writing may take the form of either poetry or prose, but the short story takes up the largest share.

One day not very long ago I applied myself to reading these collections of women's stories, poring over them not like a casual reader but like an expert who knows, or claims to know, the oppressive force which brings the word out from the depths of the soul and onto the page.

And after I had finished reading a number of collections, I discovered that I was not reading short stories in the accepted sense of the word *story*, or even in the modern sense; I was reading something different, or a different kind of writing, which is not a story and not a poem, not a tale and not scattered thoughts. It is a new and strange kind of writing that the Arab woman who remains distant from the course of events has invented in order to do with it something that will affirm to her that she is a live being, indeed a person who possesses the power of action and reaction. It is a literary action arising under an overpowering feverish pressure that interferes with the creative process to the extent that the writing appears like a puzzle to the reader. She wants to say something and yet she does not want to say it. She wants to express something, and at the same time she does not want anyone to grasp her expression—I might almost say her secret.

And thus I found myself giving a name to this kind of writing by female writers from Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf States: *the short story from behind a veil*.²¹

Idris illustrates his conclusion with the story “Scheherazade’s Nights” by the Saudi writer Ruqayya al-Shabeeb. Written in a symbolic style, this enigmatic narrative is heavily laced with images from Arab heritage and plays on multiple associations and connotations in the reader’s mind.²²

It is interesting to note that the ever watchful eye of the censor does not prevent Arab women writers from expressing their thoughts, but rather affects the clarity and simplicity of their literary works. In fact, the need to escape the censor and still make sure that their voices are heard stimulates them to explore new forms of expression and presentation.

In many of the stories in this volume, the narrative voice is a woman’s voice, often using the first-person form of narration. While this technique lends the stories a quality of eyewitness accounting, it also presents a peculiar problem to Arab women writers: critics, as well as readers, assume that the first-person pronoun refers not to the character in the story but to the author. Hence they tend to regard women’s fictional works as self-revelations.²³ The assumption that the narrator and the author are one and the same and that she is necessarily talking about some personal experience can have serious consequences for the author’s social standing, especially when the narrative deals with sensitive matters. A case in point is the Egyptian Nura Amin, who is included in this anthology. Her stories about lesbian love affairs damaged her standing in her family and her community.

One of the ways in which Arab women writers avoid the problem associated with the first-person narrator is the use of gender ambiguity in the narrative voice.²⁴ “The Gallows,” by Suhayr al-Tall, illustrates this strategy. In this text, a first-person narrator tells his/her story to a silent protagonist. The first-person pronoun is used sparingly—only three times—and the protagonist is continually addressed as “you.” While several adjectives and verb endings clearly indicate that the protagonist is a man, the gender of the narrator remains ambiguous. Throughout the story, the narrator’s comments and observations continue to tease the reader concerning the narrative voice, but provide no clue as to its identity. In view of the daring social criticism that the story conveys, it is quite plausible that the writer deliberately set out to mask the identity of the narrative voice. Nevertheless, the writer did not escape the wrath of the authorities, who prosecuted her for offending public sensibilities.

The fact that a legal case was brought against al-Tall merits a brief analysis of the story. The narrative depicts a city in which a dark, gelatinous mass flows rapidly through the streets, causing fear and confusion. The protagonist is carried away by the flow, which takes him to the city square: a place where the city is divided into two feuding parts, and where an elaborate ceremony is in progress. There the protagonist's feet are shackled with a steel chain, and blood-red saliva begins to gush out of his mouth and cover his face, blurring his sight. Slowly, he is led toward a big gallows in the middle of the square, to which he surrenders his body. The noose that tightens around his neck is a gigantic phallus.

On the surface, the story appears to be a surrealistic depiction of the evil nature of human society. While the particular reference to the male sex organ may well be regarded as offensive by conservative readers, it cannot explain the extreme reaction of the authorities to the story. A closer look at the text suggests that it is a feminist account of the patriarchal system. The protagonist represents the male gender, which is unfavorably portrayed as a monstrous creature engaged in bloodshed and destruction. The gallows, an instrument of oppression, is also a phallic symbol. The male gender, whose control over society is achieved through the gallows, is both a victimizer and a victim. The dark mass that flows through the streets and pours into the city square signifies a large and excited crowd. The city square serves as the setting for the action because it is the place where all individual desires merge into one unanimous will; namely, it is the arena of custom and convention. The public execution resembles a sexual rite that culminates in self-annihilation. The absence of women and children from the narrative suggests that their existence is obliterated by the patriarchal system. It is not surprising that a story that attacks the core values of Arab society should lead to the prosecution of the writer by the authorities.

An innovative narrative strategy is also employed by Fawziya Rashid in "Questioning." In this instance, the story unfolds through the consciousness of the protagonist, who recalls a crime of honor committed against his sister when he was still a little boy. Throughout the text, it is the inner self or an inner voice that speaks to the protagonist in the second-person pronoun. The reader is privy to the protagonist's self-reflections, childhood memories, and nagging questions about his sister's tragic fate. The poignant story expresses strong criticism of the patriarchal values of Arab society, especially

its preoccupation with virginity, its practice of double standards of morality, and its blind adherence to brutal, ancient customs, all of which are denounced through a male narrative voice.

Other techniques of narrative voice include the use of a first-person *male* narrator/protagonist, as in “The Collapse of Barriers” by Samiya At’ut, or an omniscient third-person narrator and a male protagonist, as in “The Dream” by Aliya Mamdouh. Yet another technique consists of a combination of a third-person narrator and a form of interior monologue, especially when the inner self or individual consciousness is depicted, as in “An Old Couple” by Nadiya Khust and “A Moment of Truth” by Khayriya al-Saqqaf. Despite such creative alternatives, a *female* narrator/protagonist remains the most common narrative voice.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the stories in this volume is the predominance of female characters who also figure as the heroines. By contrast, there are few heroes, and most of the male characters are either marginalized or presented in a negative light. This tendency is most conspicuous in “The Dummy” by Sahar al-Muji and “The Beginning” by Salwa Bakr. Herein lies a dramatic reversal of roles: in the fictional worlds of the stories, it is the women who occupy center stage, whereas the men are relegated to the periphery.

There are various types of stories in this volume. Some stories are mainly about situations and states of being; others are distinguished by an adherence to action and events; and still others display a more static form wherein atmosphere is the author’s primary focus. While many of the stories exhibit a traditional narrative approach, a significant number are innovative and experimental. The authors’ modes of presentation vary according to their visions and attitudes, as well as the theme and degree of censorship. Frequently, they use direct, concrete language and rely on detail to enhance the realism of their work. They also combine evocative language with symbolism to get their message across. Surrealism and the absurd are employed particularly in stories of biting social and political criticism. Occasionally, classical Arabic blends with the colloquial variety, creating the effect of spontaneity and liveliness, but usually the vernacular is limited to dialogue. On the whole, the stories reveal keen powers of observation and extraordinary boldness and outspokenness.

Arab women writers continue to hone their craft and experiment with new modes of expression and narration. That their creative efforts yield works of literary excellence is illustrated by

Salwa Bakr's "International Women's Day," which is one of the most accomplished stories in this volume. Among the various devices that Bakr skillfully employs in this story is intertextuality: there are allusions to great Arab women of the past (e.g., the poet al-Khansa and the scout Zarqa al-Yamama), a quotation of a well-known verse by the modern Egyptian poet Hafiz Ibrahim, and a recitation of a famous tradition attributed to the prophet Muhammad. In addition, the narrative is laced with colloquial phrases that dramatize the characters' thought patterns. Bakr's style is rich in irony, which draws attention to the discrepancy between the appearance of a situation and the reality that underlies it, or between what is said and what is thought. Her tone, though humorous, is serious, and both the man (i.e., the teacher) and the woman (i.e., the headmistress) are the butts of her criticism.

Several other stories merit brief mention. "A Virgin Continent," by Samira Azzam, is notable for its dialogue form, which produces the effect of directness and immediacy. Sharifa al-Shamlan's "Fragments from a Life" makes use of a sequence of subtitles to capture the fragmented reality and disintegrating personality of the heroine. Colette Suhayl al-Khuri's poetic prose "Where To?" dramatizes the theme of love through parallel dialogues between two stars in the sky and a young couple on the seashore. Insofar as ending devices are concerned, the more traditional stories provide a closure to the narratives of their protagonists, whereas the more innovative stories tend to remain open-ended. In some instances, such as Umayma al-Khamis's "Restoration" and Samiya At'ut's "Mozart's Fez," the story ends with a return to the beginning, thus assuming a circular pattern.

In isolating certain thematic aspects and modes of writing, I have neither discussed all the stories in this volume nor exhausted these topics. Rather, I have merely considered some fascinating facets in the fiction of Arab women writers. Needless to say, the contribution of these writers to modern Arabic literature continues to grow in volume, content, and form.

Arab Women: Old Images, New Profiles

In his provocative books, *The Liberation of Women* (1899) and *The New Woman* (1900), the Egyptian lawyer Qasim Amin (1863–1908) laid the foundation of feminism in Egypt by connecting the issue of

national progress with the emancipation of women. In discussing the rapid development of the Western woman following the radical changes in her status, he writes:

[The Western woman] was replaced by a new woman who was a sister to man, a companion to her husband, a tutor to her children—a refined individual.

This transformation is all we intend. We hope the Egyptian woman achieves this high status through the appropriate avenues open to her, and that she will acquire her share of intellectual and moral development, happiness, and authority in her household. We are convinced that if this goal were achieved, it would prove to be the most significant development in Egypt's history.²⁵

A century later, Amin's aspiration, boldly articulated and defended, is no longer a fanciful idea. Arab women have made great strides in freeing themselves from the bondage of illiteracy and seclusion, and have entered more productively into national life. While the liberation of women has not yet been fully attained, and many issues remain unresolved, major advances are clearly evident.

The stories presented in this volume reveal that the Arab woman is changing both in her role and in her self-perception. Allowed to study, work, and travel, the Arab woman has gained more access to power and more control over her life. No longer valid is the image of the Arab woman as silent, passive, and submissive. The contemporary Arab woman is outspoken, active, and assertive. She may be a salesclerk, as in "Homecoming" by Fadila al-Faruq; a hairdresser, as in "A Successful Woman" by Suhayr al-Qalamawi; a teacher, as in "The Woman of My Dreams" by Fadila al-Faruq; a headmistress, as in "International Women's Day" by Salwa Bakr; a professional woman, as in "The Dinosaur" by Emily Nasrallah; a ballet dancer, as in "The Filly Became a Mouse" by Layla Ba'labakki; or a creative writer, as in "I Will Try Tomorrow" by Mona Ragab. Whatever job she holds, the Arab woman has developed a new image for herself and conspicuous individuality. Admittedly, the traditional roles assigned to women still persist in great measure in Arab society, but at the same time, old barriers have been removed and social frontiers expanded.

The new status of Arab women is varied and complex. Some

areas of their lives, notably education and employment, show a marked improvement; others, especially the laws regulating marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance, still await reform. Moreover, certain segments of Arab society, such as peasant, village, and bedouin women, have not benefited equally from the process of modernization, which has mainly affected the urban population. Nevertheless, even in rural and remote areas women's self-awareness has increased, as illustrated by "The Closely Guarded Secret" of Sahar al-Muji. In this ultrashort text, the heroine's thirst for knowledge leads her to risk her safety by hiding a book from her family and reading it in secret. A heightened level of consciousness is also depicted in "The Dreadful Sea" by Zuhur Wanisi. The story recounts the tragedy of a young village woman who is abandoned by her husband after he travels overseas to work and marries a foreign woman. Despite her apparent compliance, there is constant questioning in the heroine's mind that someday might be translated into concrete actions. Significantly, women, especially educated ones who have succeeded in shaping their own futures, serve as role models for other women, and thus become instruments of social change.

As more Arab women pursue higher education and join the workforce, they inevitably have to grapple with new problems, social, moral, and emotional. Throughout the stories, the reader can sense concern, fear, hope, anxiety, optimism, disappointment, and criticism. The heroines try to combine the old with the new, adopt and adapt, and draw on their own resources to improve their lives. In some instances, they choose to break up their dysfunctional marriages, as happens in "The Beginning" by Salwa Bakr; in other instances, they reconcile with their husbands, as in "A Moment of Contemplation" by Nuzha Bin Sulayman. Whatever the solution, the myth of the Arab woman as totally dependent on—and subservient to—the Arab man is shattered.

The changing profiles of women in Arab society are portrayed in many different ways. In "A Successful Woman" by Suhayr al-Qalamawi, the heroine is a simple village girl who migrates to the city of Cairo, where she earns her living as a hairdresser. Twice disappointed in finding a husband—her employer, with whom she fell in love, marries a wealthy customer, and her cousin in the village marries another woman—she decides to be mistress of herself and

her destiny. She works hard and opens her own hairdressing salon, which develops into a thriving business. As the years pass, she transforms from a gentle, sentimental girl into a tough, hard-nosed businesswoman. Planning ahead, she saves money for her retirement, having remained unmarried and childless, and thus without the prospect of family support. While showing the sacrifices that the heroine had to make, the story demonstrates that a single woman can take care of herself and achieve a sense of well-being. The heroine sets her goal, pursues it with great determination, and shapes her own future. Her success is a triumph for the Arab woman, who emerges as an independent, competitive, and enterprising individual.

In Salwa Bakr's "International Women's Day," the heroine is the headmistress of a public school at which she supervises the work of a male teacher. This situation entails a dramatic reversal of roles: the boss is a woman, and the subordinate a man. In this story, the issue of gender relations figures on several levels: the personal, the social, and the professional. Does the woman rise to the challenge? Judging by Bakr's critical tone, she has serious reservations about the measure of her success. For one thing, instead of paying attention to the lesson that the teacher gives his class, the headmistress is preoccupied with private matters, specifically a request for transfer to a school closer to her home so that she can spare herself the difficulties of public transportation. For another, when the teacher slaps a female student for using vulgar expressions—after letting a male student get away with the same offense—the headmistress does not rebuke the teacher or remind him that hitting is prohibited by law. As for the teacher, outwardly he shows respect and courtesy toward his female superior, but inwardly he is furious and resentful. In addition, he is obsessed with the thought of disciplining his wife and bending her to his will. He teaches his class about the equality of women, and then proceeds to discriminate against a female student openly and harshly. The fact that the story is set against the background of International Women's Day adds to the irony of the situation. What happens in the classroom—instances of displaced aggression, hypocrisy, and double standards of morality—mocks the idea of International Women's Day and contradicts the very spirit of it. Bakr's message seems to be that despite some improvement in the condition of women, basic attitudes

have remained the same. There is no significant departure from traditional thought and behavioral patterns, which emphasize conformity, respect for authority, and adherence to custom and convention. As noted earlier, both the man and the woman are targets for the author's criticism.

Ulfat al-Idilbi's story "The Breeze of Youth" dramatizes the emergence of the modern Arab woman by contrasting the lives of two women in one family: the grandmother and her granddaughter. The progress depicted over three generations is remarkable. While the grandmother grew up veiled and cloistered, deprived of personal freedom and of the pleasures of reading and writing, the granddaughter is a university student, free to come and go as she pleases, mingle with boys, smoke, apply makeup, and wear fashionable clothes. The grandmother received her upbringing in a traditional household headed by a strict and conservative father who married her off at a young age to an old man. By contrast, the granddaughter receives her upbringing in a modern household headed by a lenient and progressive father—her grandmother's son from her short-lived marriage. In this story, the grandmother represents the past and the oppression of women, whereas the granddaughter represents the future and the liberation of women. It is significant that for both women, the father—the male—plays the key role in obstructing, or alternatively facilitating, their development.

The preceding examples illustrate that Arab women are shaping their destinies and redefining their relationships with family members and traditional social institutions. Most often, they seek solutions in their own culture and traditions rather than in Western ones. In the quest for authentic selfhood, they attempt to balance the major elements comprising their identities: gender, family, nation, religion. They see themselves as women, daughters, wives, mothers, Arabs, and Muslims (or Christians), but also as individuals—beings in their own right, with vital needs for self-expression and self-fulfillment.

In conclusion, the short stories of Arab women writers presented in this volume display a variety of themes, styles, and techniques. Whatever the approach, these women writers demonstrate that they are responding creatively and vigorously to existential dilemmas related to their gender and to challenges arising from

rapid social change. They interpret their personal experiences insightfully and offer authentic accounts of the realities of their lives. The resonance of their literary voices transcends the dominant male fabric of their culture and conveys an aspiration to achieve recognition as valuable members of society, endowed with their own distinctive talents.