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Pinched Lives and Stolen Dreams in Arab Feminist Short Stories

By Rula Quawas¹

And no one will listen to us until we listen to ourselves.
Marianne Williamson

Abstract

The short fiction of Arab women writers epitomizes their penetrating feminist voices and contributes to our understanding of the diversity of Arab women short-story writing in the second half of the twentieth century. This fiction, which should be read with an open mind and with a nod to the culture and social context in which it is born, cradled and bred, deals with family relations in the Arab world and the ways in which the members of these families show each other love, or perhaps neglect to do so, with social and cultural dominion that emphasizes the collective and downplays the individual, with identity crises, with sexual objectification and with the politics and social/cultural/economic dynamics of gender relations and gendering in the vast Arab world. As evidenced in the selected short stories examined in this paper, Arab women exist in societies which present them with impenetrable boundaries around asserting control over themselves and achieving self-actualization. This dilemma of stifled self-control trumpets a series of dichotomies between which these women are forced to live, straddling inner passions and imposed social obligations, desire and duty as a female. As a result, a population of halved women is produced, women who are neither satisfied nor fulfilled and who are unable to define what satisfaction and fulfillment mean in their own terms. Through reading the lives of Arab women, we come to see the role history and society have given us and a more passionate and meaningful self-fulfilling existence. We come to refuse the silence ingrained in our soul and to reject our fate as discarded women. We come to validate our own deeply-held values and to forge a new future for ourselves, thus creating ourselves anew, a true act of love.

Key Words: Arab Women, Penetrating Voices and Impenetrable Boundaries, Tales of Sorrow and Pain, The Individual and the Collective, Identity Crises

Introduction

Women in the vast Arab world have been writing fiction for the past half century. Since the second half of the twentieth century, the short story and the novel have flourished and reached maturity during the cultural renaissance known in Arabic as *al-nahda*. The development of the Arabic press offered many women authors an avenue of publication and a powerful vehicle of self-expression and of social criticism for women. Prominent among the authors are Nawal al-Saadawi, Layla Ba'labakki, Radwa Ashour, Latifa al-Zayyat, Mona Ragab and many more. All in all, the fiction of Arab women reflects the interests and concerns of Arab women,

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from feminist issues to social and political challenges to cultural and moral dilemmas. The authors' multiple voices articulate the female experience and speak of the relations between the sexes, the pull of traditional values and the lure of new needs, love and sexuality, education and work, marriage and raising children, and restrictions and freedoms. The mosaic portraits of women bespeak the realities of Arab women who live in the Middle East and North Africa, realities which are not only fascinating but also intriguingly thought provoking.

Arab women writers have published numerous pieces of short fiction in newspapers, prominent magazines, and book forms between 1950 and 2010, yet they still remain virtually unknown among scholars and students of Arabic literature. Their literary heritage is more often than not ignored, misinterpreted, marginalized or trivialized by critics who have controlled the Arabic literary canon and its interpretation. Although Arab women short-story writers have addressed many important topics and feminist/gender issues in their short stories, their voices have been silenced or underrated simply because they are women. It should be noted that some of their stories have been anthologized in five books so far, but critiques of these stories are scanty, if non-existent. This essay attempts to claim the voices of some Arab women short story writers and to create awareness of the quality of their multifarious contributions to the field of the Arabic feminist short story.

The short fiction of Arab women writers not only epitomizes their point of view, their intellectual complexity, their ambition, their penetrating feminist voices and their resourcefulness, but it also contributes to our understanding of the diversity of Arab women short-story writing in the second half of the twentieth century and to our need to reclaim it from the depths of obscurity. The best and most interesting stories are infused with vivid portraits of Arab women's lives, with conflict-ridden and ever-questioning women, with chronicles of encumbered marriages and marital relationships, with oppressed or silent(ed) women whose lives are stunted or truncated and with tributes to self-assertive women who come to understand themselves and the world around them. These stories are all handled with stylistic clarity and subtle wit and are all elaborately suggestive, radiating numerous meanings, psychological and cultural. Every written word carries a specific context, certain implications that may never be removed from its meaning, no matter how softly these allusions may be whispered. It is essential to read these stories with both an open mind as well as a nod to the culture and context in which they were born and cradled. In her book *Women and Gender in Islam*, Leila Ahmed writes that "adopting another culture as a general remedy for a heritage of misogyny...is not only absurd, it is impossible" (129). Indeed, adopting the customs of a colonizing culture seems counterproductive to aims of empowerment. In more than one sense, the stories call for readers as construers of meaning, interpreters of value systems, and suppliers of bridges over gaps in signification.

In most of the short stories of Arab women writers, a multitude of themes appear prominently. Among these are the notion of family relations in the Arab world and the ways in which the members of these families show each other love, or perhaps neglect to do so, social and cultural dominion that emphasizes the collective and downplays the individual, the socio-cultural construction of femininity and masculinity, identity crises, the meanings and practices of hegemonic masculinity, sexual objectification and commodification, and the politics and social / economic dynamics of gender relations and gendering in the vast Arab world. Writers such as Alifa Rifaat (Egyptian), Ahdaf Soueif (Arab European), Samira Azzam (Palestinian), Hanan al-Shaikh (Lebanese), Daisy al-Amir (Iraqi), Zabya Khamis (United Arab Emirates), Khairiya Saqqaf (Saudi Arabia), Shirley Saad (Lebanese) and Andree Chedid (born in Cairo) are

storytellers who come to explore the lives of Arab women and to identify their struggles against the crushing odds hurled against them at every turn. Their stories bespeak tales of sorrow and tears, of fear and shame, of entrapment and closures, of silence and lies, of triumphs and defeats and of empowerment and disempowerment.

The Collective and the Individual

Short stories by Samira Azzam, Daisy al-Amir, Alifa Rifaat, Andree Chedid and Ahdaf Soueif come from different places and focus on a variety of topics, and yet they are tied together by a similarity of culture that emphasizes the collective and downplays the individual. This emphasis on the collective seems to blur the lines between public and private, simultaneously blurring the distinction from person-to-person and individual-to-world. These stories represent individuals undergoing specific and personal struggles, and yet these struggles are transmuted and tied to the collective, projected onto others. Privacy and individualism become extinct as these women claw and cry, run and sit through their troubles while they are bound indelibly to others around them.

In Andree Chedid's "House of Arrest" (1965), the primary focus of the story is upon a nameless woman both trapped in an unhappy marriage and determined to fix her situation, and yet for all that the story appears to focus on this one woman, it simultaneously binds her to the man who oppresses her. It would be all too easy to read this tale and come to the conclusion that this woman despairs because she has married a nasty man, an unhelpful man. Her husband is surely unhelpful and not kind, but the words themselves point to a second perpetrator of her unhappiness: herself. The words lead the reader indirectly to this conclusion; "Bending always made her cry out in pain because of a pinched muscle, yet it had never occurred to her to put the box within easy reach" (Chedid 176). This line, so small in terms of her daily unhappiness, nevertheless relates her directly to her husband, who similarly always kicks his slippers off under the bed, out of easy reach for her, making her bend and strain her back.

Even while her husband subjects her to such unnecessary pain, she does the same to herself. On the same note, "She had given up trying to make herself understood" (Chedid 177). The careful phrasing here is key. The woman does not give up on trying to make her husband understand, but gives up on herself, on her ability to express herself. Thus the woman is doubly constrained, both by a husband who barks orders at her and smothers her and by herself. The internal and the external appear to become one. We are told that "they responded with the same smile..." (Chedid 178), so husband and wife are essentially the same. What appears on the surface to be one woman's feelings of oppression and depression, of being trapped, something deeply personal and individual, becomes shared, part of the collective. The woman's feelings are not unique; she is simply a thread in the fabric of the collective, one woven to her husband and to her culture.

The private becomes public in a myriad of ways other than equating the protagonist and the antagonist, however, and the result is a combination of both sweet and sour. In Alifa Rifaat's "Honour" (1981), Sophia is an 'impure' bride who must appear virginal for the sake of her family's name and reputation. Throughout the tale, Sophia never carries her burden alone. Her sister, Bahiyya, the narrator, takes this problem into herself as well. "In the morning, her face was pale and her eyelids sore from crying all night. I spoke out in pain" (Rifaat 80). Clearly, Sophia and Bahiyya share the same pain, the same cry of muted anguish. It is true that Bahiyya's reputation would be sullied by her sister's dishonor, but it is not this that pains Bahiyya, but

rather the fact that Sophia's lover, the flame that burned so steadfastly in her heart alone, silently and secretly, has spurned her. Two become one; the sisters both carry the same burden. Sophia's private pain, the pain as she hemorrhages from the glass shards within her, also becomes public. Her blood is waved and celebrated joyously by the family, and "smiling victoriously, despite her terrible pain," Sophia feels their glory even as she bleeds the last of her dishonor away (Rifaat 83). Her blood upon the kerchief is echoed by the wedding crowd, as "the blood throbbed in everyone's veins until the door opened and the face of Hajja Warad tensed with joy, appeared as she handed my father . . . the bloodstained silk handkerchief" (Rifaat 83). The pain that is torn from Sophia becomes joy as her family uplifts her blood and praises her suffering. Just as honor is collective, pain is collective, and, in this instance, that is a sort of beautiful thing.

In Ahdaf Soueif's "The Wedding of Zeina" (1983), the bride's most private pain similarly becomes celebrated by the collective, as her family dances around the bloody cloth that has been forced inside her, the cloth that has made her cry and tremble. Asked by her young charge if she hates this man, "Zeina laughed again, easily. 'No, of course not. He was a strong man, bless him'" (Soueif 92). Like Sophia, Zeina howls with pain as a man whom she does not love pulls the blood from her, and just like Sophia, this act of violence becomes something that Zeina accepts and smiles at. This act of personal violence is a collective honor. The tale sheds interesting light on this act, however, by correlating the young Aisha to her nurse, again blurring the lines of the private and individual. Aisha herself has witnessed a similar scene on a smaller scale. "She remembered playing with the rabbits one day when her nurse casually caught one of them...he hung and quivered...When she slit his throat the blood spurted and he kicked and danced around before finally going limp, defeated. She had hated Dada Zeina then" (Soueif 90). Aisha and her rabbits here are the bride, collectively, playing until caught and the innocence is torn from them. The rabbit thrashes and falls limp, and Aisha watches with hatred yet submits, just as Zeina struggles initially but finally gives up. When Aisha remembers her hatred then and asks Zeina if she felt this same hatred toward her husband, Zeina laughs. Yet the situation is the same, for Aisha hated Zeina in that moment and yet loves her after it, just as Zeina fights her husband and comes to love him, or at least esteem him, eventually.

Following this correlation, we see Zeina in Aisha. We see how Aisha recalls the way in which Zeina praises her closed mouth, her ability to listen and not divulge, to carry Zeina's public privacy within her. "And although in some deep corner inside she was uneasy, feeling the bribe in the words, she still felt proud, and anxious to keep those privileged story-telling hours" (Soueif 87). Here, this eight-year-old child has brushed on something crucial. Aisha's feeling of unease extends beyond her, encompassing Zeina, encompassing Sophia and even the woman in "The House of Arrest." Aisha's unease is that of giving over the individual to the collective. As she listens to her Nanny's tales, she takes a little bit of the culture within herself, absorbs some of the collective and loses some of her individuality. When she listens to Zeina laugh about the forcible consummation of her marriage, it becomes acceptable and normal to her. Even as Sophia smiles on her bed of pain, as she accepts her honor in the eyes of the collective, has not a piece of her individuality died? For that part of her—that woman in her who has loved before, who has made love—that woman has been extinguished, erased as though she has never existed. And the nameless wife in "House of Arrest," too, has spent countless years stifling the individual inside her, allowing herself to be soothed and numbed by the bittersweet crooning of cultural norms which have told her to bend over to pick up her husband's slippers and sit beside him with a smile that is not hers and not his either. Little Aisha, without even the impending threat of a wedding, encapsulates this great submission, this push-and-pull between the independent, private

one and the vast and public collective. By listening, Aisha is bringing some of Zeina's story into herself, trading a piece of her tiny uniqueness for a slice of that collective which soothes and numbs, celebrates and inflicts every pain.²

Thus far, the stories discussed have involved women whose lives have been intertwined with others—what, then, about women who are represented as entirely alone? In Daisy al-Amir's "The Eyes in the Mirror" (1981), the narrator follows a strong-willed Arab woman as she navigates a "sea of eyes" (al-Amir 116) in a restaurant full of men. Throughout the story, the character combats several conflicting demands: her own famine, which compels her to eat; the hotel's restriction against eating in hotel rooms, which obliges her to eat in the restaurant; and the discomfort she feels from sitting alone, which ultimately forces her to leave the restaurant hungry. More forceful than her hunger is the relentless shame the narrator experiences: although she can suppress her hunger, she is unable to repel the discomfort she feels as a woman sitting alone. As the "herds of eyes" continue to probe and question her presence, the narrator becomes exasperated, exclaiming, "My clothes are modest...I am not beautiful...I am not lost...I am not a refugee. Remove your accusing glances. What is my sin?" (al-Amir 117).

Most striking in this story is the criminalization of femininity. While the narrator and the reader both understand that she has not committed a crime, her feeling of transgression pervades. Despite the narrator's comment that only "criminals want to vanish," her decision to leave the restaurant by the end of the story suggests that her identity as a woman is, in fact, her crime. The dehumanization of the narrator, "this strange bird," (al-Amir 116), contrasted with the personification of the eyes of the men in the restaurant, "the eyes...asked a thousand questions" (al-Amir 117), further supports the notion of female inferiority within the story. Lastly, the repetition of the word "obey" throughout the story presents a stark contrast between the narrator's independence and her inability to defy the rules of the hotel and her own feelings of discomfort. She is trapped: despite her opinion of herself as a self-dependent "model woman," the narrator is unable to solve her "problem of eating dinner in a hotel restaurant whose walls are filled with eyes" (al-Amir 118).

The real character who both perplexes and intrigues is Khazna in Samira Azzam's "Tears for Sale" (1954). Khazna from the start appears to be almost an instigator of the collective. She is the one to drive all others to tears when they should be sad and to bring laughter to brides who should be joyful. This is her duty, her job rather. She is paid to attend funerals and weddings and ensure that every guest and participant embodies that which their role entails. Yet this leader of the pack "gave a tired smile" (Azzam 223) and looks forward only to her daughter Masouda's wedding, distant but bright. Did Khazna once have a past, a love or a husband or a dream for herself? Did she ever shed a tear for herself before surrendering to the greater picture? Has Khazna given all of herself to the collective, used up every scrap of her individuality until it is

² Many western feminists are under the impression that the concept of individuality itself is alien to many Arab women who are socialized into a communal life way. Even though there was no space for the recognition of individuality in most, if not in all, Arab societies, where people belonged to the "mare magnum" of the Umma, the universal community of the Muslim world, the concept of individuality could not but appear in periods of dramatic change and transition and in periods of great cultural change and secularism. Many women who once did not have any identity and who were marginalized by the restrictive Arab patriarchal societies are now assuming their own subjective identities and their own independent voices in new historical contexts. It has not been an easy path for Arab women to express multiple and even unexpected aspects of the self, to play with their identity and to try new ones, but, with great pain, they have created a space for themselves to dissect and alter the trajectories of their old self. In their own writings, which is a site for self-expression, for critical consciousness and self-awareness, and for politicization, they are unlearning the communal life way and validating their subjecthood.

only bracelets and her daydream of her daughter's wedding floating inside her body? It seems so, until Masouda dies prematurely. Now, the collective flees her, as if she has used it all up on everyone else. She will not cry or howl or protest when they remove her daughter's body. She will not beat her breast nor allow anyone else to give into the comforting rituals of mourning, the half-real tears and half-fake shrieks of grief. Instead, "All she did there was lay her head on the earth to which the little body had been entrusted, and let it rest there for hours" (Azzam 226). Her grief has consumed her, eaten away the collective until only some shell of a woman remains. Will Khazna ever cry again, for money or for love? Khazna has given all of her individuality to be the epitome of the entire group, anonymous in her loud conformity, but when Masouda dies—her last tie to something other than her career in cultural norms—even the group mentality flees her until she is only a broken remainder of a woman. Perhaps she regretted the unflinching sacrifice of her "self" to the world around her; maybe the scraps of her soul were pulled too far between those two poles and snapped apart, glimmering in shards around the edges of her face and the soles of her worn feet.

Identity Crises

Clearly, Arab women short-story writers allow us to enter their worlds and become engaged in their fears, joys, heartaches, and triumphs. The stories they weave have many parallel strands that bind them together as women, but each tale is woven to express a voice, a telling life. Another constant thread that appears in each tale is the identity crisis experienced by Arab women throughout the world. The immense pressure placed on them to conform to and fulfill societal expectations, roles and identity constructions becomes a suffocating and defining characteristic of many of their lives, through which all sense of self-worth and humanity is derived. This pressure is not only the foundation for how the rest of society views these women, but also, and most crucially, a defining formative characteristic in their understandings of themselves. Further, a crushing dichotomy of emotions is experienced by each of these women as she struggles to reconcile her desperation to form a unique and free identity with her strong connections and feelings of responsibility to her home, her family and her culture. Ultimately, the "identity crisis" that each of the Arab women experiences is their personal, engulfing battle and the source of potentially devastating consequences in each of their lives.

A key component of the desperate identity crisis facing many of the Arab women presented is a direct result of the pressure to conform to the identity prescribed by their society and culture. If they do not fulfill this role, they have no perceived worth, no use to the society, and ultimately no identity. In his book, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, the contemporary theorist Michael Foucault proposes the concept of "biopower" as an explanation for this phenomenon, which I feel is aptly applied to the identity crisis facing some Arab women. Biopower is essentially the driving force behind objectifying all people and regulating them according to prescribed roles and duties that benefit the system as a whole. People are told who they are, and they are assigned an identity; society proves that an identity is essential by referencing a "soul," and so people are made to be social delinquents and unacceptable should they fail to fulfill the roles prescribed to them. Many Arab Women, as in "Amina" (1985) by Shirley Saad, are identified as the mother of so-and-so, thus given legitimacy only in relation to her male son; such a phenomenon makes clear that her humanity is contingent upon her fulfilling her "duty" to society as a childbearing mother, specifically of male children. Should she fail to fulfill this role, whether by not having children or, in Amina's case, having yet to bear a male,

she is rejected and shamed because she has put herself (purposely or biologically) in opposition to the societal system of roles and duties. She is seen not only as a failure but as a threat to society. Further, she has been formed through this understanding of herself, as having worth only through her connection to a husband, male child or family, so the judgment she feels when she does not meet her roles is not only external, but internal as well.

As stated, a chief element of the identity crisis suffered by Arab women is found in the desperate attempt to fulfill the roles and live up to the identity prescribed by society. In "A Girl Called Apple" (1981) by Hanan al-Shaikh, Apple is expected to wed because it is the obvious next step in the progression of her life as a woman, an affirmation of the identity she has been assigned, and brings security financially and through securing her position in society. To marry and have children will cement her status as a full human with an appropriate identity. Shockingly, however, despite her constant affirmation that she does in fact want to marry and bear children, she rejects the very tradition that would lead her down this path. She struggles with the motive for her actions throughout the story, never quite certain why she is so vehemently opposed to raising the marriage flag, but she ultimately realizes that this refusal is a self-preservation technique—an attempt to protect herself from being rejected and undesirable. This fear of rejection is indeed a manifestation of the aforementioned identity crisis of Arab women because to be rejected would be a failure to fulfill the role society expects her to play and an affront to biopower. While it is true that in refusing the flag she is also stepping outside the bounds of expected actions, she does so on her own terms, and this fear of rejection reflects that despite her refusal she has been formed through the normative techniques of biopower such that she intensely fears not meeting society's expectations.

"Bahiyya's Eyes" (1981) by Alifa Rifaat illustrates the secondary destructive effects of regulating women's identity construction. In being forced to conform to societal expectations of what it means to be "woman," Arab women come to define themselves explicitly through and in relation to their families and the men in their lives. As such, Bahiyya laments that, "a woman without a man was like a fish out of water among people" (Rifaat 11). Amidst this tragic sentiment, the phrase "among people" strikes me in particular, and I see two potential readings of it. In one reading, I view her addition of the phrase "among people" as an assertion that this is not her view, but rather the opinion of those around her. That is to say, a woman without a man is not necessarily a fish out of water, but is viewed as such by others. Such a reading of this passage is, to my mind, a more positive, self-affirming, and hopeful Bahiyya than is presented elsewhere in the story. The second potential reading of this quotation, however, is quite the opposite. If "fish among people" is decidedly the key phrase (as opposed to just "among people"), then this sentiment is in fact Bahiyya's personal opinion of the situation and can be assessed further. In this reading, Bahiyya asserts that not only is a woman without a man like a fish out of water, awkward and struggling, but is quite literally a "fish among people"—an animal amongst humans. In this reading, I now see Bahiyya as viewing her own humanity as contingent upon a man and her family and therefore capable of being stripped from her should she cease to be attached to them. This concept epitomizes the crisis of being defined through others and having to continue fulfilling this role in relation to them if she wishes to remain human and retain any identity at all.

Given the oppressive and restrictive nature of the roles assigned to women and the pressure inflicted upon them to fulfill these alleged essential duties, desperation to escape this life and develop a new identity pervades many stories written by Arab women writers. In some women, this desperation to establish an identity outside of their husbands and fathers takes the

shape of an urgent and overwhelming onslaught of emotions, but in many of the women the desperation becomes a mental, physical and emotional barrier to change, suffocating them under the weight of societal expectations and an entrapping life. Many of the women are quite literally prisoners of their identities precisely because they have not been allowed to form the identity themselves. The desperation to escape one's identity is seen through the short stories, even becoming homicidal in "House of Arrest" by Andree Chedid. In this story, as foregrounded previously, both the husband and the wife feel entombed in their own lives, by each other and by the roles they are expected to fulfill by displaying unquestioning loyalty towards each other. Ultimately, each decides that the only escape is murder, because even this seems more fathomable than divorce, which would be the ultimate social rejection of their prescribed identities as married man and woman. Ultimately, it becomes clear that the makeup of these identities, and the customs, traditions and code of conduct that accompany them, virtually necessitate unhappiness. It is not to say that marriage and family cannot be wonderful things and the central component of one's life, but when forced upon people in ways that stifle individual aspirations and confine people to small boxes of society, this system is rigged for rampant discontent and desperation.

In "The Cat, the Maid, and the Wife" (1982) by Daisy al-Amir, it becomes abundantly clear to the reader that the conception of what a wife does and does not deserve from her husband is chronically debauched. The second maid in the story walks out of her job because the man of the house has severely mistreated her, and she knows she does not have to tolerate that; she knows she deserves better. However, when ending her tirade to the man's wife, she exclaims, "He shouldn't be taking it out on me like that. I'm not his wife" (al-Amir 132). For me, this is it. This is the epitome of how horribly absurd the standards of treatment are for the Arab women in these stories and displays perfectly how this understanding has formed the women's conceptions of themselves. The woman feels that as an employee she may have the right to leave, but were she his wife, naturally she would stay! Although most people may not see this as a crucial detail in the story, for me, it was the definitive example of how identities are both forced on Arab women and crucial in forming their conceptions of themselves, which ultimately coalesce to breed a desperation to escape, recreate one's identity, and demand respect, whilst often continuing to conceive of oneself as less than worthy of these freedoms.

The most vital aspect of the identity crisis faced by the Arab women in these stories is this conflict of connection to and rejection of their societies, cultures, families, and expected roles. While each of the women feels the desperation to create her own identity and life, each also struggles to define herself through and against the family she loves, yet wants to reject. In "I Saw her and that is Enough" (1981) by Khairiya Saqqaf, the story illustrates the overwhelming desire of a young woman to remain connected to her parents despite the deep emotional pain and physical upheaval they have caused her. In my reading, the dual role of the spiders in the story, both protective and silencing, illustrates the dichotomy of seeking refuge in one's parents instinctively while rejecting their oppression of freedom and identity. Further, Raha acknowledges the immensity of her parents' sins, yet she wishes she could carry them herself, wash them away and mend her family; "...I wish I could have been a sponge to erase the depths to gather the remains of bitterness that had spilled on the earth and with which you had nurtured my heart..." (Saqqaf 89). Raha simultaneously demands to know why her parents were not there for her in the caring way that every child deserves and assumes an apologetic position of guilt and warped loyalty. I think this distorted amalgam of emotion and identity formation is characteristic of many Arab women and speaks to how the identity is not merely forced upon

them but also shapes their understandings of themselves, such that they are formed by and through the expectations of their culture, society and families.

This crippling and all-consuming desperate struggle to form and define a fulfilling identity is characteristic of the Arab women depicted in the short stories and is an overarching theme in each of their lives. Though manifested in different ways, the grave responsibility to fulfill their societal roles and execute their assigned duties perfectly is a burden that both enrages them and shapes their own understanding of themselves. Should they fail to meet the identity prescribed them by society, they cease to have any identity at all; essentially, they forfeit social recognition of their own inherent humanity. Because many of the women are not permitted the freedom of self-discovery, whether physically, intellectually or emotionally, they are suffocated by the lives that entrap them and are consumed by desperation to escape. This desperation is coupled with a persistent and often inexplicable tie to their homes and families, a major identity basis that they struggle with, through and against. Throughout the stories, the “identity crisis” I perceive is not merely a matter of freedom and identity, but freedom *of* identity. It is in the closing words of her lament to her daughter in “Bahiyya’s Eyes” that Bahiyya neatly expresses the sorrow of her life, a sorrow that applies to the female characters as depicted in stories. She is not crying, Bahiyya explains, because of “regret that the Lord created me a woman,” but rather because “it’s just that I’m sad about my life and my youth that have come and gone without my knowing how to live them really and truly as a woman” (Rifaat 11).

Naming and Labeling

Bahiyya, like the other women in the stories, was never given the opportunity to define an identity for herself as a woman but was instead always defined by men, in relation to them. This common lack of self-identification is represented by and perpetuated by the theme of naming and labeling; a name is not merely a name in these stories, but a symbol of identity, and more often than not the names and labels that these women are given robs them of any positive identity. The power and importance of names is explicitly highlighted by Samira Azzam’s story “The Protected One” (1967) in particular. The father in this story understands and is consumed by the idea that his future child’s name will shape that child’s life, that the properties of that name will be transmitted to the child himself and mold his personality. For him, it is the child’s name that will encapsulate and represent everything about that child; it will determine whether he is “common or hollow” or “original” and “intelligent” (Azzam 55). Choosing the right name is a matter of more concern than even his wife’s well-being during childbirth. Despite the backwardness of these priorities, it is not only for this father that names come to constitute a powerful force. Almost all of the women in the stories feel this power too, as the names they are given—or, too often, not given—serve both to represent and to enhance their positions of feminine inferiority.

Like “The Protected One,” the story “A Girl Called Apple” is also explicit in drawing attention to its character’s name. While such a title creates expectations of a story centered around the effects of such a name on a girl’s life, the very first paragraph does its best to dispel such illusions. A name, the reader is told, “is the least important matter in marriage” and thus cannot be blamed for Apple’s lack of marital success (al-Shaikh 156). On the contrary, the story continues, “oasis girls are sometimes called by the names of fruit: her girl friend Banana had married last year” (al-Shaikh 156). But despite its being quickly written off, the narrative of Apple’s life is not complete without considering the invisible implications of her name. By

giving girls the names of fruit, her oasis culture subtly equates these girls to goods sold at the market for consumption. The extent to which they exist only to be advertised and given away in marriage is such that even their names are emblematic of this role as a commodity.

Despite all this, Apple is still set apart from and above the other women in these stories because she at least is given the privilege of a name. While the identity it gives her is that of an object, a tradable commodity, it is still an identity; woman after woman in the stories are not given even this but remain unnamed, unidentified. Against the background of “The Protected One” and the reverence it ascribes to names and their power, this absence is all the more striking. In “The Cat, the Maid, and the Wife,” for example, the content of the title is all the identification these characters are given. The message is clear; their individual importance extends only as far as these labels. Their names are not mentioned because they are irrelevant. In their world, all that matters is that they are the wife or the maid.

One story in which this lack of names is particularly striking and unsettling is again “House of Arrest,” as here, not only is the wife left unnamed, but her husband is as well. Neither is identified beyond “man” and “woman”, and these labels thus become the sum of their identities. The effect is that both characters appear lifeless, nothing more than archetypal, faceless representations of an unhappily married wife and husband. This impression of absent personalities is further amplified by the fact that the narrative repeatedly gives the impression that the two are merely reflections of each other rather than distinct beings. They are described as one entity, “seated side by side, their black clothes blended together”, and we are told that, “one could have scarcely slipped a pin between their shoulders” (Chedid 177). The hostility and disconnect of their stilted relationship is made evident throughout this story.

The effect of these exaggerated similarities is to even further rob them of individuality so that they are not merely nameless but still separate antagonists. But they are nameless mirrors of each other. Even when, at the end, the wife attempts to extricate herself from her situation through murder, she cannot because it turns out that she is only continuing to mirror her equally unhappy husband’s actions, with identical weapons and sentiments. And once he has taken her life, even her previous identity as “woman” and “wife” is immediately stripped from her as, still faceless, she is instead labeled as “victim” and “the inert woman” (Chedid 178).

Similarly, “Distant View of a Minaret” (1983) by Alifa Rifaat also presents a namelessly unhappy couple; interestingly, only the couple’s son, Mahmoud, is named. In particular, the wife’s lack of a name cements and exemplifies her “passive role” in the relationship. Without a name, she becomes merely a conduit for her husband’s desires and needs, with none of her own. While she is not the victim of an outright abusive relationship, the abuse that she is subject to is much more insidious and just as damaging, for it is the abuse of being denied any identity of her own. She is not allowed any agency or choices separate from her husband, and this pertains to everything from her sexuality to her unfulfilled dreams of a house with a garden.

The nameless status of these women creates the further issue that, in the absence of their own names, and thus their own identities, all of these women are identified only by roles assigned to them by others. They are reduced to their roles as daughters, wives and mothers, and often referred to only as such. While not equivalent, a similar theme persists throughout western literature, in which female characters are, for the most part, all forced into roles of virgins or Madonnas with no other possible identities. The nameless females in these stories have all of their individuality and self-agency stripped from them by being labeled with these predefined roles and are just reduced to one purpose in life. This is evidently quite true of African women—and many women around the world whose social roles are their identifiers. Alice Walker, Toni

Morrison and Audre Lorde, to name only a few, have evidenced this pivotal point in their diverse writings.

One situation in which this is particularly evident is the occasion of marriage for many of these characters, an event which represents their transition from daughter to wife and, it is expected, to mother as well. Throughout this process, these women have no internal agency, but are instead entirely defined by a series of male figures in their lives—their parents, their husbands and their children. Clearly, in “Honour” by Alifa Rifaat, Sophia undergoes this transition. But although the events of the story are entirely focused around her as the bride, they could just as easily be in celebration of a lifeless doll. As the festivities of the wedding are described, Sophia is said merely to be “like a clay statue, not moving her red arms nor her velvet shawl. She looked like an idol smeared with colours” (Rifaat 82). The word idol, in particular, immediately brings to mind the image of a passive object of worship, meant to be idolized, but only that, with no other reason for existence. Sophia’s identity is further reduced on this occasion to the real focus of the entire story, as evidenced in the title: her Honour. She is no longer an individual with thoughts and desires and characteristics but is instead nothing more than a few drops of blood. Zeina, on her wedding day, faces the same situation; neither woman is of any independent importance outside of a piece of bloody cloth. In Zeina’s case, this cloth does not even represent a consummation of her marriage because even that pales in importance next to the crude physical act of her husband drawing blood from her body.

Alifa Rifaat’s “Who Will be the Man” (1981) similarly features girls, one of whom is Sophia, before her wedding, who, even as young children, are seen by others only as future wives. The narrative describes “that dreadful morning” (Rifaat 74) when Bahiya and her sister Sophia are forced to undergo female genital mutilation. This entire process, this “sacrifice,” as Bahiya terms it—is solely in preparation for the day, years in the future, when they will become wives and is solely for the sake of their future husbands. As the title suggests, these husbands exist at this point only as vague creatures, and yet, even in this unidentified state, they are still the force that defines and ruins these girls’ childhoods.

Because all of these women are valued and identified only as fulfilling certain roles—daughter, wife, mother—those rare women who fit none of these labels are seen as anomalies, with no place in the world for them. The woman, unnamed yet again, at the center of “The Eyes in the Mirror,” experiences this when she attempts to dine alone at a hotel and is confronted with a room full of staring men. Their hostility arises out of confusion because she is a woman by herself, there for her own reasons, in this case business reasons. But in the absence of any male accompaniment, the men around her are at a loss as to how to view her and what role they can assign her. They thus channel this confusion into hostility and make it clear that there is no place for her in the dining room and that she should not be there because she, an independent woman, should not exist at all.

This attitude is exactly the same as the one that al-Jawhara, in Zabya Khamis’s “Bitter Sweet Memories” (1989), finds herself confronted with as she travels, alone, back to her home country. While in transit on the airplane, she is vibrant, laughing and chatting and drinking beers; as soon as she arrives, all of this personality is stripped away. Instead, the very first thing she is asked at customs is not about herself but about her family—who her father is and why she is not traveling with her husband. Without a father or a husband, she ceases to be an individual and becomes instead “a piece of luggage subject to search” (Khamis 219), as dehumanized as the women around her who are nothing more than “black tents in which nothing moved except a pair of lizard eyes”(Khamis 218).

This lack of humanity, of identity, is, at the close of these stories, beautifully and directly explained by Bahiyya in “Bahiyya’s Eyes.” She describes how “all my life I’d been ruled by a man, first my father and then my husband” (Rifaat 11), and, even when no longer married, she gains not independence but merely a feeling that she “was like a branch that has been lopped off a tree” (Rifaat 11). More often than not, Arab women’s birth names and any vestiges of individual identity that they might carry are not used, abandoned in favor of labels like “woman” or “mother.” These labels confer roles upon these women that eclipse any individuality so that they are all forced to live only in these predefined roles and not, as Bahiyya expresses it, “really and truly as a woman.”

As evidenced in the short stories, Arab women exist in societies that present them with impenetrable boundaries around asserting control over themselves and achieving self-actualization. This dilemma of stifled self-control trumpets a series of dichotomies between which these women are forced to live, straddling inner passions and imposed social obligations, desire and duty as a female. As a result, a population of halved women is produced, women who are neither satisfied nor fulfilled and who are unable to define what satisfaction and fulfillment mean in their own terms.

No matter what, by unfolding the lives of Arab women in a plethora of short stories, Arab women short-story writers take us on a journey of self-discovery and self-knowledge. Through reading the lives of Arab women, we come to see the role history and society have given us and a more passionate and meaningful self-fulfilling existence. We come to refuse the silence ingrained in our soul and to reject our fate as discarded women. We come to validate our own deeply-held values and to forge a new future for ourselves, thus creating ourselves anew, a true act of love. But the question that we need to address is clear-cut. How will any of the women across the world get up from their living-room chairs, leave the dirty cup behind, unwashed, and engage in and reclaim the world and the future that are theirs and theirs alone? Before we can all get up, we must first understand and hate with a passion the place we are sitting. But, even if Arab women become empowered and decide to swim against the current, ultimately Arab societies and culture will need to change, to step into the future and break away from the past, in order for all Arab women to have access to personal fulfillment. To actualize the power within us, we have, as Aisha Taimuriya said in 1909, “to go beyond what age and place allow.”

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