

"Veil of Shame: Role of Women in the Contemporary Fiction of North Africa and the Arab World"*

by Evelyne Accad

This recent study (1976) attempts to analyse, by means of exposition and comparison, the image of woman in modern Arabic fiction. It is an ambitious project, because the author tries to cover in her study the Arabic and non-Arabic (French and English) fiction of North African countries which she calls "The Maghreb" as well as that of the other Arab countries: Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, which she calls "The Mashreq." The task, however, is made easier by the fact that the author makes use of choice. She does not include in her study all the authors and their works but concentrates on a number of representative authors whose works she studies entirely or in part, emphasizing those which have received more recognition than others from critics and readers.

The introduction gives a dark image of women's condition in North Africa and the other Arab countries. Thus it prepares the way for the dramatic events which take the form of tragic or pathetic novels and stories. More rarely these works take the form of farces or tragic-comic stories. In this latter category, we may rank Najib Mahfouz's novel, "Zuqaq ul-Midaqq" which "selects a group of viragos or amazons, representing the over-development of one aspect of woman's condition and combines them into a comic-absurd structure."

Most of the stories and novels have a realistic tendency because they draw their material from the present, from real life, and disclose problems and complaints with little or no comment. Many of them are more akin to biography than to modern fiction. A comparison between the fiction of North Africa (Al-Maghreb) and that of other Arab countries reveals a good deal of similarity and also the following differences: 1) Most of the North African stories are written in French while those of the other Arab countries are written in Arabic. 2) Most of the North African novelists are women (five out of seven), and their works tend to be auto-biographical. 3) The dilemma of a woman caught between two cultures is more evident in North African works than in those of other Arab countries.

It seems impossible to give in a short article the contents of a 240 page study in which the writer analyzes each of the selected stories, draws comparisons and gives conclusions from the various analyses. Therefore, we have chosen to limit ourselves to the author's analysis of two novelists whose works aroused a good many comments and achieved a relatively large popularity in Lebanon and Syria: Laila Baalbaki and Colette Khuri.

The heroine of *I live*, a novel written by Laila Baalbaki and translated into French two years later (1960), is a modern young girl whose culture aroused her consciousness of the problems she had to face and the forms of injustice she had to meet because of her feminine condition. She felt different from her parents and sisters, free to scorn them and criticize their traditional conduct. By taking a secretarial job in an office, she tried to go against her parents' will and also to forget her dissatisfaction. But she was disappointed because society did not seem to take woman's work seriously. It is just a pastime, they say, a temporary interest which ceases as soon as an opportunity for marriage shows up. When Lina entered the university to take a few courses, she met with the same deception because she noticed the discrepancy between bookish knowledge and real life. While yet at the university, she met in a near-by restaurant a young, enthusiastic, Communist, whose ardent, vehement talk greatly impressed her and seemed to fill the void in her soul; but she soon discovered that his attitude toward woman was no different from that of other young men and no less domineering. Finally, after a confrontation with her boy friend, inflamed with rage and disappointment, she tried to commit suicide but was saved at the last minute.

Evelyne Accad comments this story by saying that Lina's revolt is of the negative type, involving no positive action. Her upbringing had shaped her into a selfish, stubborn, spoiled girl, unable to comprehend the realities of life or to grow emotionally and intellectually, unable to sympathize with others and to firmly confront her problems. The sight of wounds and blood filled her with terror; failure led her to despair and to attempt suicide.

We may assume that Baalbaki's novel enjoyed great popularity in the sixties because it was written in an original, feverish, direct style, free from traditional reserve. Moreover, it carried the influence of certain socio-political ideologies which were popular at the time: Freudianism and struggle against Communism and Zionism.

Her other story, *Monstrous Gods*, represents a vehement protest against the tradition which makes a woman's life revolve around her "honor" or chastity. The heroine is a young girl who married a university professor, whose wide culture did not free him from adhering to the above tradition. Having discovered that the girl he married was not a virgin, he refused to treat her as a wife, though he

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permitted himself sexual freedom. The story does not lead to a solution nor does it end in violence and crime to which many of our men resort in real life in order "to wash their shame away."

In Colette Khuri's novels, the characters are also rebels against their environment but, in a general way, more balanced and less desperate than those of Laila Baallaki's. Her first novel, **Days with Him**, tells about a young girl who refused the "arranged marriage" prepared for her by her parents. Like the heroine of **I Live**, she accepted a secretarial job to occupy her time. Meanwhile she met a young musician with whom she readily fell in love and strove to maintain the romantic character of her attachment. But her charming artist was fickle, more attached to his art than to his love. Moreover, he tried to impose on her his ideas on such questions as free love, freedom of western women, national freedom. Accepting some of his opinions, rejecting other ones, she finally discovered that he was starting an affair with another woman. Then she realized that she had made a mistake when she thought that she could reform that man and live in harmony with him. When

he asked her to marry him, she refused and left for a trip to Europe with her uncle. This story, says Evelyne Accad, reflects an attitude of rational optimism. The heroine practices self-judgement; her unsuccessful adventure leads her to acquire and develop a certain degree of independence.

In Colette Khuri's other novel, **A Single Night**, the tone is less optimistic. The heroine, Rasha, had been forced to marry a man whom she did not love. But then one thing preoccupied her: her sterility. In search of a cure, she took a trip to Paris, accompanied by her husband. There she met a young man of Syrian origin, with whom she had a conversation that changed her outlook on life. From the very start, she felt a strong attraction to him. A complete mutual understanding between them made them believe that they had been born for each other. When Rasha visited the doctor, he told her that her sterility had psychological, not physical, causes. Then a change occurred in her. She realized her error in following the tradition which obliged her to be a tool for bearing children. She was a human being with a personal identity, and it would be impossible for her to return to her husband and follow the same

traditional path. What would she do? Unable to start a new life because she had not been taught to stand on her own feet and make her own decision, she decided to commit suicide.

This story is modeled on western romantic novels which flourished in the 19th century. Love as described by the author is of the romantic type. The heroine is romantic in the sense that she is weak and unable to achieve her independence. The idea that life without romantic love is void and meaningless, has now become obsolete.

Modern Arabic fiction is still in the infant stage. A few other novelists have appeared since Laila Baalbaki, Colette Khuri and others wrote their novels. Yet the number of men and women novelists remains small. In comparing the two, Evelyne Accad says that men writers are sometimes bolder and more ready than women to point out the evils of the double standard, but they both have common defects which may be summarized as follows:

1. Many of these novels, except a few with a conservative tendency, seem to propound Western theories in a way which diminishes their realistic quality. Colette Khuri's novel, **A Single Night**, serves to glorify romantic love. Laila

Baalbaki's novels, particularly one short story entitled **A Spaceship to the Moon**, overemphasizes, in the manner of Freud, the role of sex in people's lives.

2. Though these stories reflect an awareness of the injustice imposed on woman, they give no solution to her problems except escape or suicide. This may be due to the fact that they have been influenced by similar Western models or that they represent the well-to-do or privileged classes in which women are not used to struggle. The toiling woman of the common people is rarely analyzed. Psychological novels which may compare with those written by Jane Austen and the Bronte Sisters are very few, even inexistent.

3. In some novels and stories, the style occupies an exaggerated dimension which nearly eclipses the ideas. On the other hand, these stories, by concentrating on emotional and matrimonial problems, neglect other equally important ones, like those which the working woman has to encounter within her family and outside.

Finally, the new fiction we expect from the new generation should manifest more realism and wider horizons.