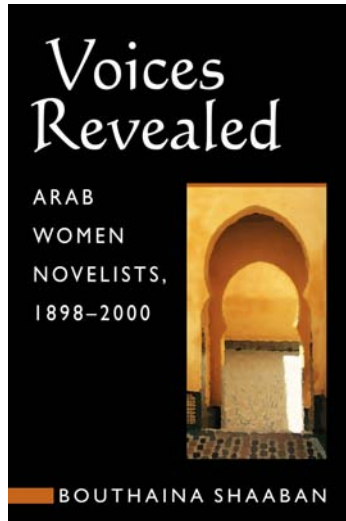


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Voices Revealed:
Arab Women Novelists,
1898–2000

Bouthaina Shaaban

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>A Note on Transliteration</i>	xi
1 The Marginalization of Women's Writings	1
2 The Beginnings	19
3 The Quest for Parity	37
4 The Emergence of the New Woman	59
5 Women and Nation	75
6 Women's War Novels	95
7 Revelations	117
8 Masters of the Art	137
9 Recent Novels by Arab Women	159
<i>Appendix: List of Novelists</i>	181
<i>Notes</i>	191
<i>Bibliography</i>	197
<i>Index</i>	207
<i>About the Book</i>	227

The Marginalization of Women's Writings

IT IS IN LITERATURE more than in any other domain that Arab women have an identity, a recognizable voice, and a long history, albeit intermittently recorded, of excellence. Yet, even though feminist movements, women's studies departments, and women's presses in the West have unearthed an impressive heritage of women's writings, such an undertaking has barely begun in the Arab world. Most Arab literary critics are men, and they have ignored, misinterpreted, or marginalized women authors. Like Western critics, they have for the most part dominated the "scholarly tradition that controls both the canon of . . . literature and the critical perspective that interprets the canon for society."¹ Thus, Arab women writers can either enter this field as "honorary men" or are criticized for writing "specifically for their own sex and within the tradition of their woman's culture rather than within the Great Tradition."²

The trivialization of Arab women's writings, therefore, has been undertaken largely under the pretext that their scope and imagination are limited. Arab literary critics often repeat and reinforce each other's judgments about Arab women's writings, which, they claim, fail to extend beyond the boundaries of home, children, marriage, and love and thus do not explore the social and political paradigms of their countries. The limited scope of that criticism reflects critics' misperception of the value of the topics that these women writers have addressed.

Alongside this argument, which informs the bulk of the criticism of Arab women's writings, the phrase *women's literature* remains a largely pejorative term. This negative, narrow view may serve to explain why many Arab women writers continue to resist classification of their literary work as women's literature. Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt, a pioneering Egyptian writer, critic, and educator, states that she has always rejected the term *women's literature*, because in both Arab and Western literary criticism

the term suggests “a lack of creativity and a depreciation of women’s perceived narrow concerns.”³ Al-Zayyāt stresses, however, that this popular understanding of the term cannot be based on a thorough examination of Arab women’s writings; rather it is simply “a prejudgment made on the basis of the gender of the author and not of the written text.”⁴ Candid about her role as an innovator, al-Zayyāt reveals, “I have always refused to distinguish between men’s and women’s writings despite my deep sense that men and women write quite differently. My stance was dictated by my fear that such a terminology would only help to keep women in a second place in literature as they had been kept in a second place in life.”⁵ Until I learned about al-Zayyāt’s position, I had constantly been surprised by Arab women writers who seemed to disparage their literary contributions, and perhaps even their own existence, by insisting that they were not “women writers” but simply “writers.”

A second argument against the use of the term *women’s literature* contends that a separate literary category would create a platform for women writers who, because of the inferior quality of their writing, would not otherwise be heard. I argue, however, on the contrary, that many excellent women writers have not been allowed a proper literary platform simply because they are women, literary quality aside. Studying women’s literature as a separate literary genre allows not only the critique of women’s writing through the application of recognized literary standards but also the discovery of many texts that have previously been ignored. The aim of such an undertaking is not to provide a venue for women writers who, based on the quality of their work, would not have gained much of an audience. Rather, it is to focus on the voices of prominent women writers who have been marginalized, underrated, or wholly silenced because they were women.

Male literary critics have long decided what constitutes quality writing. It may be argued that male literary criticism stems from critics’ individual and collective experiences as men. The particular male experience, therefore, even with its nuances, inherently constricts any judgment of women’s experiences and, in turn, women’s writings. Projected further, it may be argued that women’s and men’s perceptions of quality writing may differ, as do their historical experiences and life concerns. Understanding that women’s and men’s experiences vary and that they may write differently about their experiences does not support the contention that one sex’s *quality* of writing is superior to the other. As al-Zayyāt states, “With equality between men and women becoming a likelihood, we could acknowledge the different ways in which men and women had always written without signifying whatsoever that the one is superior and the other is inferior.”⁶

This book attempts to integrate women's and men's writings into a whole rather than to separate them or to prove that women's writings are superior. To do otherwise would be to fall into the male literary mold—whether it exists consciously or merely as a result of practice and tradition—that has existed for centuries. This study of the works of Arab women novelists seeks to create awareness of both the quantity and quality of Arab women's contributions to the field of the Arabic novel.

Beyond the categorization of women writers' novels as "women's literature" or arguments as to the purported quality of women's writings, the issue of access to and knowledge of women's written works has also plagued the genre. Contrary to potential readers' contentions, women's creative writings have always been available or preserved. Dale Spender's assertion that "[w]omen have made just as much history as men"⁷ can be substantiated across cultures, as may her argument that the reason for any perceived lack of women's creative literary initiatives is that

it has not been codified and transmitted; women have probably done just as much writing as men but it has not been preserved; and women, no doubt, have generated as many meanings as men, but these have not survived. Where the meanings of women have been discontinuous with the male version of reality they have not been retained. Whereas we have inherited the accumulated meanings of male experience, the meanings of our female ancestors have frequently disappeared.⁸

To an inquiry as to why no continuous writing was undertaken by women before the eighteenth century, Virginia Woolf replies:

The answer lies at present locked in old diaries, stuffed away in old drawers, half-obliterated in the memories of the ages. It is to be found in the lives of the obscure in those almost unlit corridors of history where the figures of generations of women are so dimly, so fitfully perceived. For very little is known about women.⁹

This explanation applies equally to the experiences of Arab women.¹⁰

One has to be both creative and determined to reconstruct Arab women's literary heritage, however, as there is a strong indication that Arab women's poetry was either not recorded or lost, even if it had been transcribed. In *Ādāb al-Nisā' fī al-Jāhiliyya wa al-Islām (Women's Literature in the Pre-Islamic and Islamic Periods)*, Muḥammad bin Badr al-Ma'badī stresses that the women writers appearing in the book represent very few of the women who recited poetry and composed prose in pre-Islamic and Islamic times. He explains that there are two major reasons for the dearth of women's writings from these periods. First, he argues that when Arabs started to record their literature, they concentrat-

ed their efforts in preserving “men’s poetry” because of its “literary value” and paid little attention to women’s prose because it was deemed to be “soft and weak” (p. 190). Second, even the little that was recorded of women’s literature was largely lost during the Tatar invasions in which “most of this literary heritage was destroyed” (p. 193).

Similarly, Sāmī al-‘Ānī and Hilāl Nājī, editors of *Ash‘ār al-Nisā’* (*The Poetry of Women*), explain that their collection including thirty-eight women poets is only a small fragment of a 600-page manuscript edited by al-Marzubānī that they were unable to locate. In fact, they could only find the last fifty-nine pages of the third volume, entitled *Al-Kitāb al-Thālith min Ash‘ār al-Nisā’* (vol. 3 of *Women’s Poetry*). *Ash‘ār al-Nisā’*, therefore, “records only one-tenth of eleventh-century writings; the rest is confirmed lost.”¹¹

During their search for earlier poetry by Arab women, al-‘Ānī and Nājī located reliable references to four works of poetry by women, only one of which can be traced today. The works include *Ash‘ār al-Jawārī* (*The Poetry of Maids*), edited by the poet Muḥammad bin Aḥmad bin ‘Abd Allah al-Mufjī in the first half of the tenth century, and *Al-Imā’ al-Shawā’ir* (*Slave Women Poets*) in the tenth century, edited by Abī al-Faraj al-Aṣfahānī. The third and most important work is *Al-Shā’irāt al-Nisā’* (*Women Poets*), edited by al-Ḥasan bin Muḥammad bin Ja‘far bin Tāra, which must have appeared very early in the fourteenth century because its editor died in 1320. All sources agree that this work comprises five to seven volumes.

Al-Qifī, a respected scholar of Arabic literature,¹² is reported to have seen volume 6 of the work and to have known that this volume was not the last, but the whole work is now lost.¹³ *Nuzhat al-Julasā’ fī Ash‘ār al-Nisā’* (*A Journey of Companionship in Women’s Poetry*), edited by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān bin Abī Bakr Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, seems to be the only book of poetry by women to have survived.

The editors of the aforementioned texts explain that other books by and about women existed, but those texts failed to be included in the collections because they did not relate directly to the editors’ topics.¹⁴ This scholarship emphasizes the fact that what we know about Arab women’s literature today is only a fraction of that which once existed. Even the small fraction of women’s poetry that is available, however, repudiates the notion that women’s poetry only comprises elegies and the outpourings of bereaved mothers and sisters.

Although the quantity is limited, the existing Arab women’s poetry clearly demonstrates that women poets engaged the issues of war and peace among tribes, justice, human rights, and the distribution of wealth. Moreover, the love poetry written by women in the eleventh and twelfth

centuries is so frank and daring that no Arab woman poet would dare write its equivalent today. Laylā al-Akhyaliyya, a woman poet of the early Umayyad period, once recited a poem to al-Ḥajjāj (the governor of Iraq) and a group of men that she had composed to her lover, Tawba, in which she bestows upon him extremely desirable traits. One man in the audience says to Laylā: “I am sure he is not worthy of one-tenth of your endearing description.” She asks the man if he has ever seen Tawba, and when he replies in the negative, she retorts that “you would have wanted all the virgins at your home to be made pregnant by him.”¹⁵

Arab women seemed to have had an extraordinary amount of freedom to express their feelings toward their lovers between the seventh and ninth centuries. It is regrettable that despite this apparent freedom of expression and the abundance of love poetry written by men at that time, there remain only a few, scattered, and incomplete poems by women. In the second volume of Jamīl Buthayna’s poetry, the editor (name unknown) comments that Buthayna never recited poetry, except on the occasion of Jamīl’s death. Jamīl Buthayna is named after his beloved; when he died, Buthayna recited two lines of poetry (in Arabic) to him:

My separation from Jamīl, even for a moment
Is unwelcome and untimely.
After your departure, Jamīl, it’s all the same
Whether life is hard or lovely.

Until the tenth century, poetry was the prevailing genre in Arabic literature. Women also wrote prose, however marginal that may have been. In fact, many women practiced the then-existing genres of prose, family letters, *maqāmāt*, stories, proverbs, descriptions, dialogues, and Islamic interpretations (*tafsīr*).¹⁶ Al-Ma’badī, the editor of *Ādāb al-Nisā’ fī al-Jāhiliyya wa al-Islām* (*Women’s Literature in the Pre-Islamic and Islamic Periods*), regrets that his collection includes only fragments of women’s prose writings that once must have existed. Nevertheless, even the few names of women prose writers he successfully traced, and the still fewer samples of their writings he collected, bear witness to women’s deep involvement with the political, social, and religious issues of the time.

In many of these prose collections, women’s writing is poignant and dignified and their reasoning logical, informed, and embedded in an understanding of the Qur’ān and literature that reflects a clear sense of culture. Because women had a reputation for loyalty and resilience, many tribal leaders would delegate women to negotiate with their adversaries. In fact, there is an underlying notion in Arab culture—one that is rarely highlighted, though often acknowledged in times of crisis—that

women are courageous, strong, and patient, qualities that are often not shared by men. There is said to be a *ḥadīth* (a saying of the prophet Muḥammad) that describes a battle in which Muslims emerged victorious, after which the Prophet Muḥammad said, “Men had the hearts of women in bravery, and women had men’s muscles in strength.”

Female Literary Critics and Literary Salons

In addition to writing poetry and prose, Arab women have set a precedent as literary critics and hosts of literary salons since pre-Islamic and early Islamic days. Indeed, some of the earliest and most striking recorded critical comments on poetry in Arabic are attributed to women.

Tumaḍur bint ‘Amru bin al-Ḥārith bin al-Sharīd, known as al-Khansā’, is one of the earliest figures in Arabic literature to play the role of critic and judge of poetic talent and superiority. Although the exact date of her birth is unknown, she was born before Islam and lived well into the Islamic era, possibly dying in 646 CE (i.e., in the middle of the first century of Islam). The scattered pieces of information available about al-Khansā’ suggest that she was a pretty, confident woman with strong personal views. She participated as a critic in Sūq ‘Ukāz (the Ukāz market) in the Ḥijāz (now part of Saudi Arabia), where poets would converge at a set time of year from all parts of Arabia to recite their latest compositions and to share news of their respective tribes with the rest of Arabia. Al-Khansā’ scrupulously examined the poetry recited, revealing a sensitivity to the language and a grasp of the poetic idiom. She herself was also a highly esteemed poet. The poet Jarīr, the most prominent poet of the Umayyad period, is said to have been asked who the best poet in Arabia was. “I am,” he replied, “except for that wicked woman,” referring to al-Khansā’.¹⁷

Um Jundub presents another example of an accomplished woman poet, a critic from the *Jāhiliyya* (pre-Islamic) period, who was better known for her critical observations than for her poetry. This recognition was never to be bestowed again on any other Arab woman poetry critic until Nāzik al-Malā’ika, the Iraqi woman poet and critic, began to publish her works and became one of the most influential twentieth-century poetry critics in the Arab world. Um Jundub’s literary career was marked by a decisive juncture that had a lasting impact on her personal life. Her husband, the renowned *Jāhiliyya* poet Imru’ al-Qays, had a poetry contest with the poet ‘Alqama bin ‘Abda al-Faḥl, which they failed to resolve. ‘Alqama said to Imru’ al-Qays, “I accept the judgment of your wife, Um Jundub.” Both poets recited their poems to her, and

she judged in favor of 'Alqama's poem, providing an elaborate analysis of the poems that eloquently justified her decision. Her husband was so vexed by his wife's decision, however, that he divorced her.¹⁸

During the early Islamic period, Arab women poetry critics started the tradition of hosting literary salons at their homes, where poets would meet, recite poetry, and await the judgment of their hostess.¹⁹ The first literary salon of this kind was hosted by Sukayna bint al-Husayn, herself a poet and an acknowledged critic of poetry, who lived in the Ḥijāz and died in 735 CE. Her critical accounts of the best poets of the *Jāhiliyya* and early Islamic periods, such as Jarīr, al-Farazdaq, Kuthayyir, and Jamīl Buthayna, continue to provide contemporary students of literature with important insights.²⁰ She is also known for her originality, her candor, and the idea that poetry should reflect genuine feelings, experiences, and sentiments. Unlike most of her peers, al-Ḥusayn refused to write poetic eulogies, because she reckoned that particular genre of poetry was rampant with hypocrisy and opportunism.²¹

Wallāda bint al-Mustakfī, who died in 1087, is believed to have nurtured the talent of the Andalusian poet Ibn Zaydūn, who used to frequent her salon and later became her lover. Wallāda's poems to Ibn Zaydūn reveal that, contrary to prevailing assumptions, she was an active rather than a passive partner in their relationship. In one of her letters to him she writes:

Expect me when darkness falls,
I find darkness more discreet,
In order to be with you
I wish there were no sun, stars or moon.²²

Literary salons continue to be held in different parts of the Arab world today, with certain time lapses that reflect more of the "law and customs of the times" than they do women's literary activity.²³ Occasionally, the name of a new and important woman surfaces, and at once a wealth of previously unknown literary outpourings are discovered.

In the 1990s, Claude Sāba published a few articles in *Al-Nahār*, a Beirut newspaper, about a Syrian woman named Maryāna Marrāsh (1848–1919), who ran a literary salon in Aleppo in the early twentieth century. Marrāsh's salon was a meeting place for intellectuals and politicians, including Quṣṭākī al-Ḥimṣī, 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī, and Kāmil al-Ghazzī, who played an important role in modern Arabic history. There they discussed their latest literary productions and talked about literary, social, and political matters. Marrāsh participated and also read her poems and articles. She was published in important journals such as *Al-Jinān* and *Lisān al-Ḥāl*.

Another literary salon, barely remembered today, belonged to Thurayya al-Ḥafīz in Damascus, Syria. From 1943 to 1953, it was called Muntadā al-Zahrā' al-Adabī (al-Zahrā' Literary Circle), named after the daughter of al-Ḥusayn and frequented by educated men and women from all parts of the Arab world. In 1953, the salon's name changed to Muntadā Sukayna al-Adabī (Sukayna's Literary Circle). The salons of Jūlyā Tūmā Dimashqiyya (1883–1954) in Lebanon and Mayy Ziyāda (1886–1941) in Egypt, particularly the latter, are better known and more frequently mentioned in literary references. Those that are mentioned here are only a few in a long and rich literary tradition that awaits careful study and documentation, so that it can become known not just to a few diligent scholars but to all students of Arabic literature.

Historical and Current Criticisms of Arab Women's Novels

In my endeavor to outline literary criticism of Arab women novelists, I eventually accepted Virginia Woolf's conclusions about her search for such criticism of women's fiction in the West. At first amazed by the number of books written by men about women writers, Woolf quickly determined that she "might as well leave their books unopened" because "whatever the reason, all these books . . . are worthless for my purposes."²⁴

Existing literary criticism of women's novels in the Arab world in many ways reflects the social status of Arab women. Many male critics seem to consider the study of novels written by women as optional in their endeavors to assess the Arabic novel in general. Others consider women's novels to be merely biographical accounts of women's lives. In short, novels written by women are not yet considered part of mainstream Arabic literature.

With the exception of Ghāda al-Sammān, about whom seven books of criticism, many articles, and a number of comparative studies have been written, Arab women novelists have not been given much attention in studies of literary criticism. It is perhaps just as well, for it is easier to approach novels by Arab women about which no criticism is available than to disprove criticism that is diametrically opposed to one's own view of a text.

One Syrian critic, Samar Rūhī al-Fayṣal, wrote *Tajribat al-Riwāya al-Sūriyya* (*The Experience of the Syrian Novel*) without managing to mention a single Syrian woman novelist. His conclusions, however, were meant to apply to Syrian novels written by both men and women. In his study, *Al-Riwāya al-'Arabiyya: Muqaddima*

Tārikhiyya wa Naqdiyya (The Arabic Novel: A Historical and Critical Introduction), Roger Allen devotes less than 4 out of 172 pages to novels written by women. Of all the Arab women novelists he could have mentioned, Allen in fact cites only Colette Khūrī, Laylā Ba'albakī, and Emily Naşrallah. In *Silences*, Tillie Olsen makes a similar comment about critical studies of American fiction. "In Tony Tanner's *City of Words: American Fiction 1950–1970*, there are 445 pages. Plath is allowed two pages, and otherwise mentioned three times; Sontag is allowed four pages and three mentions. No other women are discussed" (p. 210).

In *Ṭaṭawwur al-Riwāya al-Ḥadītha fī Bilād al-Shām, 1870–1967 (The Development of the Modern Novel in Greater Syria, 1870–1967)*, Ibrāhīm al-Sa'āfīn offers a more balanced account of women's novels, although the number of novels he includes remains limited relative to women's literary contributions during the period he covers. His study includes a thorough bibliography of novels written by Arab women, but he focuses on only four of them in the text. His second chapter, on historical and sociological novels, lacks any reference to works by women, though many novels written by Arab women during the first half of the twentieth century fall precisely within these two categories. Moreover, after an examination of only one work by Ba'albakī, al-Sa'āfīn arrives at a startling conclusion about women's novels in general: "female novels, in particular, are characterized by sexual frankness that is expressed in screams and hysteria" (p. 496). This statement is untrue, even of the work supposedly under discussion.

In *Al-Riwāya al-Sūriyya, 1967–1977 (The Syrian Novel: 1967–1977)*, Nabīl Sulaymān allows rather more space (34 out of 414 pages) to five novels written by women, and he focuses on two additional novels by women in *Wa'ī al-Dhāt wa al-'Ālam: Dirāsāt fī al-Riwāya al-'Arabiyya (Consciousness of the Self and the World: Studies in the Arabic Novel)*. Women's novels are also mentioned in a study entitled *Al-Riwāya al-Sūriyya: Dirāsa Nafsiyya (The Syrian Novel: A Psychological Study)*, by 'Adnān bin Dhurayl. Dhurayl focuses on two novels each by Colette Khūrī and Georgette Ḥannūsh, and one each by Widād Sakākīnī, In'ām Musālīma, and Qamar Kaylānī.

The literary critic who has written more than anyone else about women novelists in the Arab world is George Ṭarābīshī, who studied the works of Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī. The culmination of his writings was the book *Unthā Ḍidda al-Unūtha (Woman Against Her Sex)*, which is full of accusations against al-Sa'dāwī for not writing about women in the way he thought she should. In one of his Arabic articles, "The Female of Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī and the Myth of Singularity," Ṭarābīshī argues that

[i]t is not enough to say that women novelists were always a few in comparison with men novelists, but we have to add that even in the few cases in which women addressed the art of the novel their artistic treatment of it differed from that of the men. Man in the novel reconstructs the world, whereas as far as woman is concerned the novel is a concentration of feelings . . . Man writes the novel with his mind while woman writes the novel with her heart. The world is the center for what we might call the male novel, while in the female novel the center is the self.²⁵

Ṭarābīshī's argument can easily be disputed. There is, of course, nothing wrong with women writing differently from men or with women approaching the art of the novel from a different frame of reference. Moreover, it is questionable how "man" can write the novel without including the self and how "woman" can isolate herself from the world. In this example it is easy, as Dale Spender suggests, "to substantiate the thesis that when women do not speak in terms that are acceptable to men, they do not get a proper hearing; in fact, it would sometimes be easy to substantiate that they get no hearing at all."²⁶

There are studies that address one particular theme in the writings of Arab women novelists, such as 'Afīf Farrāj's *Al-Ḥurriyya fī Adab al-Mar'a* (*Freedom in Woman's Literature*). Before even reading the work, a glance at its table of contents indicates its author's attitude toward the works discussed: "Fleeing Freedom After Fleeing to It" (Colette Khūrī's writing); "Loss of Aim Equals Loss of Freedom" (Umayya Ḥamdān's works); "A Topic Without a Shape" (Laylā 'Usayrān's fiction); "The Bird Migrating to and From the Village" (Emily Naṣrallah's writing); "The Phenomena of Narcissism" (Nūr Salmān's works); "The Search for Salvation in the Wrong Place" (Ghāda al-Sammān's writing); and "The Danger of Putting the Cart of Thoughts Before the Horse of Character and Event" (Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī's works). In the text, Farrāj argues that through their writings Arab women move in the world of men: man is their fate, the blessing and the curse, the adversary and the judge. Woman rebels against man only in order to return to him to fill her psychological emptiness. For her, a man represents the much-desired marital home.

Farrāj holds Arab women novelists responsible for wanting their heroines to achieve sexual freedom, regardless of social reality, which, he argues, should be taken into account. He also contends that every Arab woman novelist has written one good novel derived from her personal experience, but after doing so has had nothing else to say. This sexist argument has remained unchallenged by most critics of Arab women novelists, particularly as Farrāj's book has become one of the

most widely circulated works of criticism of novels by women in the Arab world. In *Al-Ḥurriyya fī Adab al-Mar'a*, Farrāj prejudges future Arab women novelists, saying they will write about the “wrong” themes and the “wrong” concepts of freedom and, more importantly, that Arab women will be feminists at the “wrong” time.

Other critical works about Arab women's novels have concentrated on one particular author, such as Ghāda al-Sammān and Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī. Although Ghāda al-Sammān is a very important Arab writer, critiques that purport to favor her work on the whole do not do her justice. In fact, the elevation of writers such as Ghāda al-Sammān and Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī to celebrity status, to the exclusion of all other women writers, indicates a sexist attitude that aims to prioritize the few in order to exclude the many.

Many articles on Arab women novelists have acquired importance in the field and have played a part in formulating the opinions of generations of students. Among these are three articles by Ḥusām al-Khaṭīb, collectively entitled “Ḥawl al-Riwāya al-Nisā'iyya fī Sūriyya” (About Women's Novels in Syria). Like other critics, al-Khaṭīb assumes that “the heroine does not differ much from her author and that this biographical element is responsible for many of the intellectual as well as artistic defects of the work” (March 1976, p. 87). In one of his comments on Widād Sakākīnī's novel, *Arwā bint al-Khuṭūb* (*Arwā, the Daughter of Upheavals*), al-Khaṭīb writes: “Widād Sakākīnī makes men kiss a woman's feet; is this a compensation for her heroine's sexual frustration or an escalation to it from below?” (1975, p. 94). He finds the heroine, Arwā, to be fierce, antimale, and Freudian, adding dismissively, “this Freudian bent should be pursued in the life of the author, in her childhood and her experience with men” (1975, p. 86). The problem with this kind of criticism, aside from how it encourages contempt for the work itself, is that it perpetuates a certain attitude among students who are prepared to trust whatever interpretation their professor offers.

Recent scholarship in the Arab world by women on women's writings includes a three-volume anthology by Laylā M. Ṣāliḥ entitled *Adab al-Mar'a fī al-Kuwait* (*Women's Literature in Kuwait*), and a two-volume anthology, also by Ṣāliḥ, entitled *Adab al-Mar'a fī al-Khalīj* (*Women's Literature in Arabia and the Arabian Gulf*). Although the latter is neither an evaluative nor a critical study of women's works in the Arabian Gulf and Saudi Arabia, it is an important work that documents the names of women authors and the titles of their works and provides extracts that give an impression of the works it mentions. This anthology paves the way for literary critics to study these works and assess them in the hope of integrating them into the literary mainstream of these coun-

tries. In her introduction of volume 1 of *Adab al-Mar'a fī al-Khalīj*, Ṣāliḥ supports the view I expressed earlier regarding the treatment of women's literature by male critics. She posits that

the study of women's literature might well be considered new in modern literary experience in Arabia and the Arabian Gulf, which lack such studies. Many studies of poetry, story and the essay have been published in this area, some of which have scattered remarks of women's work and others have dropped the writings of women altogether as if they were unrelated to the literature of the area as a whole. (vol. 1, p. 9)

In *Al-Mar'a fī al-Mir'āt: Dirāsa Naqdiyya li al-Riwāya al-Nisā'iyya fī Miṣr, 1888–1985 (Woman in the Mirror: A Critical Study of Women's Novels in Egypt, 1888–1985)*, Suzān Nājī from Egypt begins her study of women's novels in Egypt with this very quotation from Ṣāliḥ's introduction, which suggests that Ṣāliḥ's statement applies as much to the writings of women in Egypt as it does to the writings of women in Arabia and the Arabian Gulf. Nājī offers a tentative explanation: "the reason for this neglect of women's writings perhaps lies in the fact that critics and specialists in the field still consider women's writings an immature art that has not taken its proper place in our literature, and therefore it is difficult to assess its development" (p. 5).

When Nājī herself decided to study women's novels in Egypt, she encountered strong objections to focusing on such "immature literature," and was accused of being biased in women's favor (p. 5). Unfortunately, Nājī's study does not fulfill its promise of being a critical assessment of women's novels in Egypt, although it may prove very useful because of the thorough bibliography she provides. Regarding her study of the novels themselves, she seems torn between challenging mainstream criticism, which, she says, does not take women's works seriously, and wanting to be considered part of it so that she may gain the respect every young scholar yearns for. On balance, Nājī does not break away from established modes of criticism; neither does she offer a new reading of women's works. Although her work remains a welcome introduction to beginners in the field and an appreciable effort in recording women's works, it can hardly be considered a perceptive critical study that induces the reader to reexamine the works.

Like Nājī's work, Īmān al-Qāḍī's book *Al-Riwāya al-Nisā'iyya fī Bilād al-Shām, 1885–1950 (Women's Novels in Greater Syria, 1885–1950)* attempts to cover all the works that have been published about women's novels at the expense of offering a fresh assessment of

these works. She focuses on what other critics have said about the subject instead of her own opinion. Even so, after comparing al-Qāḍī's book with al-Sa'āfīn's, which deals with women's novels of the same period, I am grateful to al-Qāḍī for devoting such a large amount of space to novels that were largely ignored by al-Sa'āfīn.

Both Nājī and al-Qāḍī appear to be intimidated by accusations that the mere choice of their topic signifies they are feminists or biased in favor of women. Hence they seem to be trying to prove their objectivity to male critics, an attempt that undermines any possibility of a fresh perspective on the works under consideration. In their unannounced, yet diligent, effort to present male-sanctioned "objectivity," both Nājī and al-Qāḍī refrain from making any reference to studies by women critics in the Arab world. In so doing, they have measured the mainstream criticism as "male" and have tried their best to stay within its parameters. Nājī and al-Qāḍī thus prove Dale Spender's statement that "being evaluated by a woman is not of itself necessarily an advantage precisely because women have been required to take on male definitions of the world and themselves."²⁷ One can see how the trend of male criticism perpetuates itself in women's literary history, even when women are writing that history.

It has to be stressed that, apart from a few studies, literary criticism in the Arab world of both men's and women's works is sparse. Literary criticism in the Arab world presents itself mostly as journalistic criticism in daily newspapers for the consumption of unspecialized readers.

In 1978–1979, Evelyne Accad, Kamal Boullata, and Mona Mikhail each published a book in English on Arab women's writing. Accad's book, *Veil of Shame*, deals with novels written in French rather than Arabic. Boullata's work, *Women of the Fertile Crescent*, is an anthology of poetry by women, and Mikhail's *Images of Arab Women* offers monographs about Arab women writers. Fātima Mūsā Maḥmūd, in her study *Al-Riwāya al-'Arabiyya fī Miṣr, 1914–1970 (The Arabic Novel in Egypt, 1914–1970)*, devotes six pages to women novelists, and even in these pages she merely reproduces men's opinions of women's works. In his study *Modern Arabic Literature, 1800–1970*, John A. Haywood does not find it necessary to deal with Arab women authors; neither does Issa Balata, editor of *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature*. Not a single essay in that collection considers works by women.

miriam cooke's *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* was the first book on Arab women's literature to examine the writings of Arab women independently of men's paradigms. *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, edited

by Margot Badran and miriam cooke, is an anthology of Arab feminist writings, the first anthology in any language that attempts to encompass the variety of Arab women's writings. In 1995, Joseph T. Zeidan published his book *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond*. In this study, Zeidan offers interesting readings of a few novels written by women within the literary, social, and political contexts of Arab society and also presents an excellent bibliography and references to source material in both women's presses and novels. The problem, however, is that the book presents, perhaps inadvertently, the most common readings of Arab women's novels instead of focusing on new insights and unraveling new facts. Also, Zeidan's study is limited only to the best-known Arabic novels written by women. Despite these shortcomings, his book is a welcome addition to the sparse English scholarship on Arab women novelists.

It is time that novels written by women be read as texts rather than as biographies, and as literature rather than as social commentaries. It is also time to stop blaming women novelists for writing the "wrong" kind of novel or for addressing the "wrong" topic. Novels by women should be read and discovered for what they actually offer, rather than for what male literary critics think the novels should offer, and critical evaluations of texts should not be based on stereotypes.

Feminist Consciousness

Arab women's writings have been recorded for fourteen centuries, but these writings have not become a popular subject for literary criticism by either men or women. Zaynab Fawwāz (1846–1914), a woman writer and feminist of the nineteenth century from Greater Syria (see discussion in Chapter 2), made the first attempt to describe this female heritage in *Al-Durr al-Manthūr fī Ṭabaqāt Rabāt al-Khudūr* (*Scattered Pearls in Women's Quarters*), which documents the literary achievements of 459 women from both the Middle East and the West. Fawwāz's second book, *Al-Rasā'il al-Zaynabiyya* (*Zaynab's Letters*), focuses on the rights of women to both education and professional involvement. She also wrote a play entitled *Al-Hawā wa al-Wafā* (*Love and Loyalty*) and four novels, two of which have been published and two of which are in manuscript form.²⁸ Fawwāz was the first Arab to attempt the genre of the novel, yet schools across the Arab world still teach that Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal of Egypt wrote the first Arabic novel, *Zaynab*, in 1914. In fact, Fawwāz's novel, *Ḥusn al-'Awāqib: Ghāda al-Zahra* (*Good Consequences: Ghāda the Radiant*) was written fifteen years before Haykal's novel.

Fawwāz was also the first Arab woman who, both in her personal life and writings, expressed a feminism that accepts nothing less than full social and political equality between men and women. Significantly, she was also the first Arab woman to identify her struggle as that of a woman in a man's world, a subject relevant not only to Arab women but to women all over the world. She objected to male interpretations of Islam with regard to feminist issues, and in support of her claims she cited examples of many women who "ha[ve] ruled over men, conducted the business of state, determined status of law and behavior, recruited soldiers, gone forth into battle, and carried out wars."²⁹

Because Fawwāz wanted to increase women's participation in the public sphere, she was alarmed to learn that the International Women's Union convention, held in Chicago in 1893, had called upon women members to limit their activities to "feminine" concerns, that is, home and family. She immediately dispatched a letter to the convention in which she strongly objected to such a call, stressing her conviction that both men's and women's lives were impoverished by women's confinement to the private sphere. She also sent Berta Onori Palmer, the head of the women's section in the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, a copy of her work *Al-Durr al-Manthūr fi Ṭabaqāt Rabāt al-Khudūr* (*Scattered Pearls in Women's Quarters*), albeit in Arabic, and in her letter called upon women everywhere actively to resist the injustices inflicted upon them.³⁰

Mayy Ziyāda's (1886–1941) biographies of her fellow writers Warda al-Yāzījī (1838–1924) and 'Ā'isha al-Taymūriyya (1840–1902), may be considered the next most important works in Arab women's literary heritage. They assessed Arab women's contributions and also contributed to a vision for future generations of women. In *Warda al-Yāzījī*, Ziyāda writes: "I have only time to indicate in passing my esteem for what women from earlier generations have done to open up the way for us" (p. 10). Like Virginia Woolf, Ziyāda situates herself within the literary heritage she attempts to construct:

I, the daughter of two continents [referring to her Lebanese and Egyptian ancestry], consider myself happy to have been able to draw the portrait, however pale, of an Eastern woman for Eastern sisters whose nationalism I admire. Like them I cry out enthusiastically and, following their model, I call for progress, understanding and the good of nations. (p. 61)

Ziyāda was sent by family and friends to a rest house, where, like Woolf, she committed suicide in 1941. Like Woolf, too, Ziyāda became the martyr of Arab feminist consciousness, just as Woolf was considered by some Western feminists to be the martyr of Western feminist consciousness.

In addition to writing innumerable articles, Ziyāda is the subject of at least four biographical studies by Arab women writers. Ṛos Ghurayyib from Lebanon and Widād Sakākīnī from Syria wrote enlightening biographies of Ziyāda in 1978 and 1969, respectively. Syrian writer Salmā al-Ḥaffār al-Kuzbarī dedicated many years of her life to compiling and publishing *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila li Mayy Ziyāda* (*The Complete Works of Mayy Ziyāda*) in 1982. Lebanese novelist Emily Naṣrallah also devotes significant space to Mayy Ziyāda in her work *Nisā’ Rā’idāt* (*Women Pioneers*). In her work, Ziyāda made a significant contribution to the historical links between Arab women writers. Subsequent Arab women writers are drawn to her, paying respect to the first Arab woman who made a serious attempt to construct the literary heritage of Arab women that we continue to reclaim today.

Arab Women’s Journals

An assessment of Arab women’s literature is incomplete without evaluating Arab women’s journals. For the first half of the twentieth century, they were a major platform for Arab women writers at a time when women usually published short pieces in journals and magazines rather than writing entire books.

The dividing line between journalists and writers that exists in the West has always been blurred in the Arab world. Many Arab journals and newspapers were launched by writers and educators who considered journalism an extension of other forms of writing. Between 1892 and 1940, the period that marked the rise of political consciousness, first against the Ottoman Empire and then against Western mandates, Arab women writers concentrated their efforts on publishing journals that featured poetry, fiction, and critical pieces, as well as essays relating to different academic disciplines, all written by women.

In 1892, a Syrian woman named Hind Nawfal started the first Arab women’s journal, *Al-Fatāt* (*Young Girl*), in Alexandria, Egypt, ushering in a flourishing phase of Arab women’s journals that brought Arab women writings into the limelight. Before World War II there were over twenty-five journals in the Arab world that were owned, edited, and published by women.³¹ The editors of these journals made clear that their most important concern was women: women’s literature, women’s rights, and women’s future.

In her editorial in the first issue of *Al-Fatāt*, Nawfal wrote: “*Al-Fatāt* is the only journal for women in the East; it expresses their thoughts, discloses their inner minds, fights for their rights, searches for

their literature and science, and takes pride in publishing the products of their pens.”³² Also in the same issue, editors of other journals published by women urged women “attentive to the future and betterment of their sex to write so that their works may be read and become in the meantime a part of the literary heritage.”³³ These journals, which appeared in Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, and, to a lesser extent, Baghdad, published poetry, fiction, critical essays, feminist articles, and biographies of both Arab and Western women.

Although the journals as a whole regularly covered the experiences and particularly the achievements of Western women, and although they all stressed the need to learn from women’s movements in the West, they also focused on positive elements in Arab culture. The journals made the point that women’s emancipation should go hand in hand with national independence rather than be deferred to a later stage. This argument was based on the premise that no country can be truly free or independent as long as its women remain shackled.

To paraphrase Louise Bernikow, the problem remains that the importance—and even the survival—of women’s literary heritage depends on who notices it and, then, whether such notice is actually recorded.³⁴