

**Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies:
Shahrazad Tells Her Story**

Nawar Al-Hassan Golley

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In writing *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies: Shahrazad Tells Her Story*, Nawar Al-Hassan Golley's goal is to fill a critical gap. Recent books like Marilyn Booth's *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) analyze women's relation to biography from Zainab Fawwaz's *Scattered Pearls*

(1894) onward. However, any critical analysis of Arab women's autobiography is scarce, if not non-existent. In its efforts to fill this critical gap, *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies* carves out a dual readership. Delineating past and present meanings both within and without Islam of "Arab," "Arab world," "hijab," and "harem" with an eye to the non-Arab reader, Golley's analysis of five autobiographical texts and three anthologies of women's collected stories simultaneously participates in a conversation with other Arab women scholars about modes of text production, distribution, and the overall place of women's autobiography within Arab feminism.

Part 1, "Political Theory: Colonial Discourse, Feminist Theory, and Arab Feminism," contains three chapters: "Why Colonial Discourse?"; "Feminism, Nationalism, and Colonialism in the Arab World"; and "Huda Shaarawi's *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*." In the first two, the author argues for the inclusion of gender-related issues within colonial discourse analysis and for the necessity of adopting Spivak's "strategic essentialism" when speaking of "Arab women." In outlining a brief history of Arab feminism, Golley strives to both demystify the "aura of exoticism" that has surrounded Arab women and to demonstrate that Arab feminism "is not alien to Arab culture."

The final chapter provides a textual example of how colonialism, nationalism, and feminism converged in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century life of an upper-class Egyptian Arab woman. The memoirs of Huda Shaarawi, founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923, are presented as portraying early feminist struggles "embedded" in reformist and later nationalist movements. Golley also broaches differences between Shaarawi's text originally dictated in Arabic in the 1940s to the recent 1986 English version by Margot Badran, illustrating how the title, accompanying photos, and editorial selections of this latter make it marketable to western consumers and contribute to a loss of aspects of Shaarawi's life significant for Arab feminism.

Part 2, "Narrative Theory: Autobiography," is divided into two chapters: "Autobiography and Sexual Difference" and "Arab Autobiography: A Historical Survey." Chapter 1 traces the theoretical debates within a western literary context, showing how definitions of this genre have changed over the last forty years to accommodate both a deconstructionist approach to language and subjectivity as well as a concern for analyzing gender issues. The author rejects a deconstructionist view, as articulated by Paul de Man, but finds recent scholarship by such well-known figures in the field as Sidonie Smith and Estelle Jelinek equally unsatisfactory.

Despite the emphasis that they and others place on women's writing as an act of construction of the self, Golley states that the concept of "uniqueness" underlying it is problematic for non-westerners, who have very different "conceptions of self, self-creation, and self-consciousness" (p. 66). At the same time that she argues that western autobiography must expand its notion of the self, she affirms that a sense of individualism is to be found in both pre-Islamic and Islamic Arab culture. After briefly outlining the history of autobiographical writings and "scarce" criticism in the Arab literary tradition, she turns her attention to the absence of theorizing about Arab women's autobiographical writing, and proceeds to lay out her own project to understand how each woman's writing is informed by her own cultural, educational, and economic context.

Part 3, "Analysis of Texts," comprises three chapters: "Anthologies"; Fadwa Tuqan's "Mountainous Journey, Difficult Journey"; and "Nawal el-Saadawi." The author arranges her analysis according to the amount of editorial presence. The 1980s anthologies of *Khul-Khal*, *Doing Daily Battle*, and *Both Right and Left Handed* exemplify problems of the "textualization" of oral dialects into Arabic and then into English (*Khul-Khal*) and of production, whereby interviewers solicit, edit, and translate responses immediately into English or French (*Doing Daily Battle*). None of the anthologies appear in Arabic. Such processes risk, Golley asserts, turning the stories of individual women into that of a homogenized ethnographical subject.

If Fadwa Tuqan and Nawal el-Saadawi can be seen as more privileged women, insofar as they have more control over their writing and presentation of texts than many of the women represented in the anthologies, the author works, at a thematic level, to bring the stories of all the women together as "testimonies to gender oppression in Arab societies" (p. 74). Accounts of the traumatic experiences of hand deflowering, female circumcision, and unwanted marriages and pregnancies come up at various points in these women's stories, alongside a sense of the isolation of women whose physical movement, friendships, and interaction with the world have not been self-determined but controlled by men. The dilemma present in many of the texts – and the question at the center of Golley's investigation – is how to renegotiate the relationship with the family, which is often simultaneously a source of love and oppression.

While the books' dissertation-style format of many headings, short subsections, and what, at times, comes across as "smatterings" of psychoanalytic and Marxist theory can leave the reader wanting a more integrative analysis, Golley's concern for the public voicing of Arab women's stories

is evident. The selection of a wide variety of texts, ranging from interviews with illiterate women to autobiographies written by women with economic class privileges, is demonstrative of the author's desire to bring both the diversity and complexity of Arab women's lives to light. The theme of oppression and liberation through the story-telling that accompanies the self-representation of Arab women's diverse identities is woven throughout the text via reference to the figure of Shahrazad. The Shahrazad of the 1990s, she contends, is not a poor girl telling stories to save her life; rather, she is a woman taking control of her life through the writing and defining of the self.

Lisa Pike Fiorindi
Ph.D. Candidate, Centre for Comparative Literature
Women's Studies and Gender Studies Institute
University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada