



ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WOMEN AND ISLAMIC CULTURES

Dr. Suad Joseph
General Editor

Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and Women and Gender Studies, University of
California, Davis

<http://sjoseph.ucdavis.edu/ewic>

Arts: Fiction and Fiction Writers

2007 EWIC Volume V

“Practices, Interpretations and Representations”

By Samia Serageldin

As a genre, fiction, particularly full-length fiction, is a signifier of a fully fledged literature coming into its own; until recently, poetry and memoir were the predominant forms of literary expression by Muslim women in North America, but a critical mass is beginning to form with a flowering of short stories and a few novels by immigrant or second-generation writers.

The novel creates a uniquely expansive, accessible space for empathy on the part of the reader in a way that less expansive genres cannot. At the same time, the reflective, self-analytical nature of fiction privileges the complexities of the personal over the concerns of the communal, transcending the limitations of the literature of representation. This promising beginning by Muslim women authors augurs development along the lines of Latino and Indian fiction, already widely published in the United States and Canada.

Suggesting a growing trend toward self-awareness, there is an ongoing proliferation of anthologies that include Muslim women writers: from *Post Gibrán* (Akash 2000), published before 11 September 2001, and reflecting in the title the predominance of second- or third-generation, mostly Levantine Christian contributors, to the multiplicity of anthologies published since, some devoted to Muslim women, such as *Shattering the Stereotype: Muslim Women Speak Out* (Afzal-Khan 2005). This indicates, as noted, self-awareness, but also the perception on the part of publishers and academics of Muslim women's literature as a distinct sub-genre overlapping with more than one sub-genre after 11 September 2001.

It remains the case, however, that memoir is the genre privileged by publishers when it comes to Muslim women writers, relying on the immediacy of its appeal to the Western reader's curiosity about an exotic culture rather than the more mediated and subjective perspective of fiction. Recent memoirs, by Iranian and Afghan women in particular, have been successful with the publishing industry, the media, and feminist academics in North America to the extent that the writer maintains a critical distance from her Muslim heritage and subscribes to a narrative of witness or survival. The best-known example is Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003).

Blurring the line between memoir and novel, fiction by Muslim women tends to be heavily if not explicitly autobiographical. As is typically the profile with emerging literature of immigrant minorities, it reflects the politics of alienation and the need to interpret a triply marginalized identity: Muslim/woman/immigrant or ethnic minority. But beyond motivation and autobiographical tendency, the vast diversity in cultures, backgrounds, and experiences makes generalizing problematical.

Mapping the field of Muslim fiction writers in North America is complicated by issues of self-identification and by overlapping spheres of heritage. Some authors who embrace the designation of Arab American decline to acknowledge any religious affiliation, regardless of ancestry, while among writers of Middle Eastern or South Asian heritage there is no consensus on adopting the appellation “women of color,” a posture that many see as politically valid and others reject. On the other hand, the experiences of American converts to Islam, particularly African Americans, barely represented in the literature at present, can be expected eventually to bring a significantly different perspective and history to the field. *Azizah Magazine* carries occasional short fiction in that vein.

The focus of this entry is women writers of Muslim heritage writing in English and living in North America, whether foreign-born or second-generation. For immigrants, the choice of English as the language of literary expression rather than their mother tongue is in itself a marker of self-identification and of the choice of the Western reader as privileged interlocutor, but both groups share the markers of a transitional identity that straddles more than one culture and mediates alternative realities of remembered worlds and American actualities.

Second-generation writers of Muslim heritage writing about their communities in North America tend to depict them in the tropes of immigrant subcultures, with an emphasis on clannishness, sociability, food-centeredness, loudness, and cultural inappropriateness in the American context. They are, in other words, ethnic, in the now familiar ethnographic idiom of writers from Asian, South Asian, and Latino cultures, but also in the time-honored American tradition of exoticizing one's community, as earlier generations of Jewish and Southern novelists did so successfully.

In *Arabian Jazz*, Diana Abu Jaber's transplanted Palestinians in small-town upstate New York speak hilariously tortured English, none more so than the father, who can hardly hope to impose respect on his daughters when he mangles the only language in which he can communicate with them. The stereotype of the traditional Muslim patriarch is subverted in favor of a loving, lovable, but bungling father figure familiar to American sitcom sensibilities. Interestingly, father figures are generally portrayed in positive terms as loving and supportive influences on their daughters' lives, perhaps reflecting a self-selective paradigm: women who grow up to express themselves as writers are more likely to have had an empowering relationship with their father figure rather than an oppressive one.

It seems to be the literary fate of transplanted immigrants in general to sacrifice some essential human dignity in the uprooting process, and indeed the quest to rediscover that lost dignity appears recurrently as a theme in novels of return to the country of origin. In Kathryn Abdul-Baki's *Tower of Dreams*, and in Naomi Shihab Nye's *Habibi*, a young American girl returns with her Arab father and American mother to the “old country” and tries to adapt to the unaccustomed expectations and restrictions of Muslim culture, particularly when it comes to interactions with the opposite sex. A related trope is the crystallization of cultural conflict around marriage, particularly when the American-raised girl is brought to the Middle East to find a suitable mate.

If assimilation is a collective concern for the American-born members of settled communities, integration is an individual, isolated experience for the immigrant writers in this discussion, who often come from different backgrounds. They are more likely to have come to North America as college students or academics, and less likely to live surrounded by an immigrant community. The consciousness of being a chameleon, the imperative of blending into one's environment in order to survive, is more urgent for the expatriate intellectual marooned in an American white bread world than for the member of an established immigrant community. This sense of dislocation is experienced by the narrator in Samia Serageldin's *The Cairo House* as she tries to reconcile the present in a New England college town to the politically-charged past in the Cairo milieu of a prominent family. The fiction of immigrant writers, regardless of heritage, tends to revisit the past, adding the dimension of

geography to the dislocation of time common to most first novels, and often comes full cycle, from past to present and back to the revisited past.

But several Muslim women novelists living in North America opt to orient their stories entirely in the past, in this case a place rather than a time: the country of origin. Pakistani-born Kamila Shamsie sets the family saga *Salt and Saffron* overwhelmingly in Karachi, as does another Pakistani, Maniza Naqvi, in *Mass Transit*. Moroccan-born Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Pursuits* follows this trajectory in examining the lives of Moroccan illegal immigrants to Spain.

Although immigrant authors are more likely to identify spontaneously with their Islamic heritage, the realities of the post-11 September 2001 world are such that the issue of religion has become inescapable for Muslim writers, just as gender factors explicitly or implicitly. Most novelists would like to put the complexities of the personal above the concerns of the communal, and to transcend the limitations of literature of representation. Arguably, however, Muslims writing for a mainstream American readership are subject to inhibiting considerations of potentially negative reactions on the part of their “own” community, whether in North America or in the country of origin, as well as reinforcing negative stereotypes, advertently or inadvertently. This is particularly true regarding representations of gender politics or religious practice. *Arabian Jazz*, for instance, received some criticism for depictions of female infanticide in contemporary Palestine. *The Cairo House* evoked objections to its descriptions of Islamic practice, particularly the Feast of the Sacrifice, and to translations of verses from the Qur’ān.

A theme that rarely escapes the politics of representation is sexuality, given that gender and sexual stereotypes contribute so significantly to the construct of the Muslim “Other.” Some writers chose to subvert these stereotypes, others to play to them, whether ironically or not, as evidenced by some of the short stories on the website “Sex and the Umma,” to which Mohja Kahf is a prominent contributor.

To sum up, the field of fiction by Muslim women in North America is beginning to develop along promising lines, but lags behind – and is somewhat diluted by cross-referencing with – the fields of Arab American literature or Asian literature in university courses and anthologies. Muslim women writers are more likely to be found affiliated with RAWI (Radius of Arab American Writers Inc.), the Arab American writers' association, or published in *Mizna*, the Arab American literary journal, and reviewed in *Al-Jadid*, even if their heritage is South Asian.

Samia Serageldin