

Middle Eastern Women Writing Past Western Stereotypes

By Saskia Wright

As a middle school student in Bogota, Colombia, Saudi writer Rajaa al-Sanea's *Girls of Riyadh* gave me my first glimpse of Middle Eastern literature. Structured as a series of emails from an unidentified narrator, the novel tells the story of four women in their twenties as they fall in and out of love in the Saudi capital.

The story is both witty and poignant, and I was immediately hooked by the characters' vibrant personalities. While I was intrigued by the differences between their lives and mine, it was easy for my teenage self to empathize with them through their highs and lows.

Literature is important to weaken the barriers we build around each other. Whenever we engage with somebody else's story, we develop our capacity for empathy. It becomes easier to understand and appreciate those who are different from us.

Reading al-Sanea's novel brought me closer to the women in Saudi Arabia, just like it brought me closer to the women in my immediate surroundings. However, what I read as a story about human relationships has become a political statement in the eyes of many others.

Within Saudi Arabia, *Girls of Riyadh* was deemed inflammatory and controversial, and the government immediately banned the book after its release. At the same time, Western critics such as *The Guardian's* Rachel Aspden have criticized *Girls of Riyadh* for being "more a love letter to America than a poison pen to the Saudi establishment," implying that the novel wasn't critical enough of life in the Kingdom.¹ In both contexts, al-Sanea's story has been politicized based on others' preconceived notions of women authors from the Middle East.

In the west, it is often assumed that Middle Eastern women authors always write about male oppression. This prejudice affects the way their work is read, reviewed, and critiqued. Woman writers who stray from stereotypes are often at a disadvantage and are less likely to be acknowledged for their literary talent.

Turkish author Elif Shafak spoke about this experience in a TED talk.

"As a Muslim woman from the Middle East, you are expected to write the stories of Muslim women, preferably the unhappy stories," she said. "Leave the experimental and Avant Garde to our Western colleagues."²

Non-Western writers are perceived as representatives of their respective cultures rather than creative individuals, Shafak says. This inhibits their imagination and silences their voices.²

On a mission to demonstrate that Middle Eastern women are incredibly diverse, Lebanese journalist and writer Zahra Hankir consolidated 19 nonfiction essays on a range of topics by Arab and Arab-American journalists in *Our Women on the Ground: Essays by Arab Women Reporting from the Arab World*.³

In an interview with *The Atlantic*, Hankir said, "None of them were striving to dispel stereotypes about who they are. Instead, they were focused on the task at hand, their jobs, and oftentimes survival."⁴

"There is no one Arab woman; there is no one way to be an Arab woman; and there is no one Arab [woman] experience," she continued. "By telling their stories, these women, without intending to do so, and without a Western audi-

ence in mind, have punctured prevalent narratives rooted in flawed post-colonial discourse."⁴

The essays are powerful because they reveal the individuality of their authors. Each woman has chosen to write about a topic she deems important. None of the works focus directly on the issues of Arab women; yet through their writing, these journalists are sharing the experiences of Arab women in their own way.

Hankir selected the work of Lebanese journalist Nada Bakri, who said that Middle Eastern people, specifically Arabs, have been unfairly represented in the media for decades.⁴

"I wanted through my work—the reporting, the stories, the people that I interviewed—to change these misconceptions about us as much as possible," Bakri said. "People will try to put you in a mold when and if they can, especially [considering] that there is already this widespread narrative about what an Arab woman is like, and people believe it and they find it hard to reject. What I could do instead of letting them tell me who I am, and what I did, is let the work itself poke holes in that narrative."⁴

In an interview with Penguin Ran-

dom House, Rajaa al-Sanea explained that she never intended for *Girls of Riyadh* to be published for Western audiences. She believes this makes the novel more authentic.⁵

"My Western readers will look at Saudi through a keyhole and they will be able to connect with those who live in a totally different society and yet have the same dreams, emotions, and goals."⁵

When I first read *Girls of Riyadh*, I held no preexisting views or judgments about the Middle East. Thus, reading the novel felt exactly as al-Sanea had intended: as if I were looking through a keyhole and discovering a new society.

One of my English professors taught me that there are three steps I should follow when reading any text. First, read it to the end and stop myself from formulating any premature opinions. Second, fully consider and absorb the argument laid out by the text. Only after completing these two steps should I challenge the author's argument.

Like I read *Girls of Riyadh*, this approach can help us leave our preconceived notions and stereotypes behind and appreciate an author's work for what it is, not what we think it should be.

