The Rising Tides of 21st-Century Middle Eastern and Arabic Literary Voices

By Daphne Muse

Growing up in a home where my father passionately followed the politics of the Middle East and Arab worlds, I became intrigued by the cultures and peoples whose lives pointed towards Mecca, Mount Arafat, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Gulf of Aden. But it wasn't until I began my studies at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee in 1962, that I read any literature written by a Middle Eastern author. At Fisk, out of my adoration and respect for a circle of intellectually dynamic poets, including Barbara Mahone, Ebon Dooley, and Nikki Giovanni, I was introduced to *The Prophet*, a book of poetic essays by Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran. In the late 1960s, I gifted my mother with a copy of *The Prophet*. It remains a point of spiritual and emotional reference for various rites of passage in both our lives.

In 1970, my literary horizons were expanded exponentially, when, in an act of solidarity, Drum and Spear Press, Inc. published *Enemy of the Sun: Poetry of Palestinian Resistance*, edited by Naseer Aruri and Edmund Ghareeb. Included were the piercing, magnificent, and emerging voices of twelve Palestinian poets living in the diaspora and Israel. Mostly written during and after the 1967 Six Day War, the poems reflect the angst and awe of Palestinian life and culture that were emerging at the time. One of the poets featured in the anthology, Naomi Shihab Nye, went on to become an award-winning voice resonating powerfully across the landscapes of Middle Eastern, US, and global poetry.

As waves wash ashore from the Gulf of Aden to the Mediterranean Sea, the landscape of Middle Eastern and Arabic literature is filled with a growing number of lush, clarifying, and insistent voices, including Moroccan/North African novelist Mohammed Achaari, Kuwaiti short-story writer Mai Al-Nakib, and Saudi Arabian novelist Abdo Khal.

Although their works are not seminal treatises on Middle Eastern and Arab life and culture, they provide compelling lenses through which readers can learn how people press forward to normalize lives that are all too often torn asunder by the strife of repression, shifts in cultural rites of passage, and the evolution of practices and behaviors around gender. Winner of the 2011 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, Achaari's *The Arch and The Butterfly* is set just outside the magic and mysticism of the legendary and seemingly timeless Moroccan city of Marrakech. But none of that magic or mysticism prevails in Achaari's novel. Instead the complexities and intersections of 21st-century identity, culture, extremism, and generational change turn the novel on the axis of a life shattered by abandonment, crime, and the death of a secularly raised son thought to be studying architecture in Paris, but killed in Afghanistan as he was fighting with the Islamist resistance.

Right out of today's headlines, Al-Nakib's *The Hidden Light of Objects* is a collection of short stories that reflects the dissonance and wretched earth policies created by all too many contemporary politics. A young girl named Amerika becomes a barometer of hostility towards the West; a Palestinian teenager is entrapped in a botched suicide bombing by two belligerent classmates; the abiding forgiveness of a wife for her dying husband's "dickly dalliances"; and the return of a Kuwaiti woman to her family after being held captive in Iraq for a decade. These stories reflect dimensions of the all too often overlooked lives about which we here in the West remain bunkered in our stereotypes, Islamophobia, and the overall dire dearth of knowledge about Middle Eastern and Arabic life and culture. I long for the astute and political insights of my dear friend and former senior White House reporter Helen Thomas. Her Lebanese heritage combined with her expansive knowledge of the Middle Eastern and Arab world helped me explore their political dynamics and cultural complexities through a much more clarifying lens.

In Khal's *Throwing Sparks*, Tariq dreams his way out of a life of petty crime and poverty into the reality of becoming a slave to a master from whom he finds it nearly impossible to liberate himself. In

the thick of torment, palace politics, and the moody, powerful, and capricious men by whom he is surrounded, he finds himself in love with the master's mistress. Every word, especially the most brutal, ferociously embeds itself like smoldering embers in a burned out forest, on your spirit. Khal's narrative harnesses the embers and casts them back out into the Universe as the energy of eternal stars.

"Those with a particularly sensitive disposition suffer a life-time of torment because a star continues to burn brightly despite the ashes and smoke of its dying embers. Stars are like that: they continue to burn even after they collapse.

Tahani would be my eternal star.

The night I stole her virginity, the ogre stole my life. It wrenched her life away, and mine with hers."

Publications like the always compelling *World Literature Today* (http://www.worldliteraturetoday.org) and the offerings by Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing are creating greater access to works by Middle Eastern and Arabic writers.

I'm eager to read more from Achaari, Al-Nakib, Khal, and the ever-growing list of Middle Eastern and Arabic authors. Upon reading each of their works, I realize that I need a deeper historical grasp and much more insight into the complexities of contemporary Middle Eastern cultures and politics. Beyond the haze of the seemingly endless embers, their works are turning me towards the Sun.

Daphne Muse is a writer, social commentator, and poet. Her work appears in This Week in Palestine *and* The Atlantic*, and has aired on NPR. Visit www.daphnemuse.blogspot.com to read her blog.*

Our Readers Say ...

Cultural identity is tough on people in my situation. I was born in Israel, had days off on Jewish holidays, and was taught Hebrew in elementary school. And in this sea of culture that I can't identify with, the words of Mahmoud Darwish are my life-raft. I need to grasp onto the obtrusive noise made as a byproduct of dabke; and the interplaying smells of summac and onion when msakhan is cooking in the kitchen. I am an Arab-Israeli. But more so, and because of these customs, I am a Palestinian.

Anonymous, Haifa

Our cultural identity has shifted dramatically during the past few decades, and the rift in Palestinian society has grown larger than ever. Call me an optimist, but I think our culture is as strong as it has ever been. There's been so much discourse about the decline of Palestinian culture that people are waking up and reviving it.

Sima Tull, Jerusalem