

# Challenging the Odds

27 Women Authors from the Mediterranean Arab World

Selected and Introduced by

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[3]

*Challenging the Odds* is a selection of works by 27 women authors from issues of *Banipal* magazine. The women – 17 fiction writers and 10 poets – come from the eight Arab countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean: Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria. *Banipal* is a pan-Arab magazine and looks at literature not from national points of view but across the Arab world as a whole; producing this feature has revealed certain gaps in our presentation of fiction and poetry by women authors from these Mediterranean countries, which we will seek to remedy in future. All 27 authors are daring, original, imaginative, taboo-breaking and forthright, making significant contributions to opening up the literary scene in the globalised 21st century, and adopting topics and styles that challenge, are thought-provoking and take as a first premiss the author's right to freedom of expression; and six of them have already been selected as among the best 39 young Arab authors under the age of 40 (for the Beirut39 project). All these authors write freely, going where their subjects take them, and thereby contributing greatly to the questioning of backward attitudes, of repressive social norms and stereotypes, bringing a freshness, humour, honesty and openness to the ongoing discussion and dialogue about eternal human predicaments and individual freedoms.

## INTRODUCTION

Banipal magazine presents authors from all Arab countries; it is pan-Arab and does not look at literature from any national point of view, but from the Arab world as a whole. For this special issue of the *International Journal of Euro-Mediterranean Studies*, we present a selection of works by authors from the countries of the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea that have been published in past issues of *Banipal* magazine. When we started looking at the authors in the issues of *Banipal* to date – 42 issues over 14 years – and discovered

[4] we had published over 200 authors from the eight countries of Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, we realised that we had to have strict criteria. On what basis could we make the selection? Were they to be renowned authors? Should they be fiction writers or poets? Should they already have works fully translated and published in English, in French, in Italian, for instance? Should they be young, emerging authors? Should they be male or female?

In concentrating on the eight countries with shores on the Mediterranean Sea, we have discovered gaps in our previous presentations, both in genre and gender. For instance, there has been a severe lack of Algerian women authors in the issues, as well as a dearth of women fiction writers from Tunisia. In Lebanon, novels seem to have taken precedence over short stories and poetry with few young poets coming to prominence. In Morocco and Syria, women's fiction-writing is very strong, while in Egypt, it seems that writing poetry is more popular among young women authors (with the opposite being true for young male Egyptian authors). Concerning Palestine, however, many of the women authors grew up and live in the diaspora and write in English, such as Nathalie Handal (included in this selection), Naomi Shihab Nye, Suheir Hamad, Susan Abulhawa and Randa Jarrar, but we plan to remedy this situation in 2012 after a visit to Palestine this year when we met many new emerging authors.

The interest in translating contemporary Arab literature, and bringing it into the world literature fold, so to speak, has been transformed over the last fifteen years, both within the Arab world and on a wider scale. In 1998 the establishment of Banipal magazine as a window on that literary scene was unprecedented. Our direct contacts with Arab authors and knowledge of the scene made it 'the best current encyclopaedia of this literature,' according the Lebanese poet Abbas Beydoun. Then came 9/11, with the upsurge in western interest in Arabic literature bringing more interest in translation. Another important factor has been the establishment in 2007 of the annual International Prize for Arabic Fiction, known in the Arab world as the Arabic Booker. As the first-ever, independently judged Arabic literary prize, all works submitted by the publishers have a chance to be long-listed, short-listed or become the winner, since the judges as-



sess the individual novels, not the authors. The list of translated titles from these works grows ever year. Finally, we must include our guest editing of this special issue of the *Journal* as another important step in opening the window of the world ever wider onto the rich tapestry of contemporary Arab literature.

[5]

After much discussion we decided to select women authors who have made, and are making, a significant contribution to opening up the literary scene for all authors, and are adopting subject matter and styles that are original and daring, that challenge taboos, that take as a first premiss the author's right to freedom of expression. These authors write freely and fearlessly, going where their subjects take them, and thereby contributing to the questioning of attitudes, social 'norms' and stereotypes, bringing a freshness, humour, honesty and openness to the ongoing discussion and dialogue of eternal human predicaments and opportunities. Until relatively recently, and even up to today, authors writing fiction – and particularly women authors and those who write in the first person, as many do – were accused of writing autobiographically, it was assumed that they must have lived what they were writing about. All these women authors have struggled against and ignored that prejudice, and stood firm, to be free to write what they want, whether or not there is any relation to their own lives. It is a sign of their influence that this prejudice is being consigned more and more to history.

Arranged alphabetically by family name, the 27 authors comprise ten poets and seventeen fiction writers, the fiction including both short stories and excerpts from novels. The poets comprise one Algerian and one Palestinian, two each Lebanese, Egyptian, Syrian and Tunisian. And there are four fiction writers from Morocco, three from Egypt, two each from Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia. The selection reflects the fact that over the last five to ten years fiction-writing has been gaining ground as a chosen genre of expression in many Arab countries. We hope to return to this subject at another time and place.

After selecting the authors from past issues of *Banipal* we realized that six had already been independently selected by a panel of judges to join the group of Beirut39 authors, that is, the 39 best young Arab authors under the age of 40. They comprise all the authors under 40

from our selection of 27 – Najwa Binshatwan, Mansoura Ez-Eldin, Joumana Haddad, Adania Shibli, Dima Wannous, and Samar Yazbek.

Now we present the authors and their works: beginning with the poets, and going on to the fiction writers.

[6]

#### THE POETS

Some of the poets below, though different and individual in their treatments, take up similar subject matters as well as personal, first-person voices: their main subject is the male counterpart, the lover, or ex-lover, his absence or his presence, woman's relation to man. For Joumana Haddad, Maram al-Massri and Inaya Jaber, the male counterpart is very present, with the roles of woman and man set out as per tradition, but usually inverted. Their works are timeless and universal. In Joumana's poem 'I don't Remember' the I-woman poet 'conquered a man like a storm,' 'I knew men's bodies as travel/ and my body as arrival and easy farewell.' In 'Then I Lost Him,' the I-poet 'drew him, carved him, made him in my imagination' – Eve becomes Adam. For Inaya Jaber the male counterpart in her love poem 'My Body Moves like the Sea' is present only as steps to follow from a distance – the man and woman have their 'respective solitudes,' and her main subject becomes the woman's body. In her other poems featured below the woman who is loved is strong, forthright, demanding and confident. Maram al-Massri brings a witty, comedic humour to the perennial battle of the sexes and the traditional position of woman as the weaker, fairer sex, in her short, direct poems that are often erotic in their simplicity even as the woman dreams . . . of freedom.

On the other hand, Nacera Mohammadi, Rasha Omran, Amel Moussa and Rana al-Tonsi, while also concerned at times with the presence or absence of the male counterpart, write poems that reach into the imagination and across real life, questioning relentlessly and seeking to understand an individual's place on earth in relation to others, poems that make a proposition or a suggestion, and are more rooted in day to day life experiences.

Nacera Mohammadi's protagonist in 'Diving into a Woman's Sor-row' refuses to 'perish by drowning or force' though surrounded by images of the ocean and waves, the 'sands of exile,' 'love that straddles



death' and 'the wind's fury,' while the 'Desert Widow' sings a sad song 'exhaling into the flute of pain/her long sigh.' Amel Moussa's poems are stories of imagination fused with Tunisian reality, glimpses into another world we might call home.

Rasha Omran is a well-known Syrian poet, and her poems, 'the flood of my soul,' are powerful declarations of humanity and individual freedom, such as in the poem 'A Place for Me, Perhaps' – 'there is a place in the world for an eternal woman like me,' not to be questioned. She is a philosophical poet of quiet determination and writes almost prose poetry. Rana al-Tonsi is a young Egyptian poet, already with four collections. She writes in the first person, as many other poets do, but unlike others she writes about her life and power as an individual, not love poems. In a recent interview she spoke of the good fortune of being born into a family that gave her the gift of 'complete freedom to experience life and write as I see.'

[7]

Palestinian poet Nathalie Handal writes poems that speak of displacement, diaspora and exile but are physically rooted in the divided global world, often featuring words in different languages such as Arabic, English, Spanish and French. In the three poems below she travels from Washington DC, to Palestine/Israel and to Tehran, each poem called into being by its own English, Arabic and Farsi song.

Iman Mersal, from Egypt, started writing poetry when still a high school student, publishing in local magazines. Later at University studying Arabic literature she was also co-editing an independent magazine *Bint al-Ard* (Daughter of the Earth) that published the works of young women authors. Since 1990 she has published four poetry collections, her second (1995) bringing her much critical acclaim and many reviews in the Arab press. In this collection she turned to prose poetry, and after polls conducted in Egyptian magazines such as the weekly *Akbbar al-Adab* the collection was voted 1995's Best Book of Poetry. Since then she has experimented with style and subject matter but always with the prose form. Below we reproduce four poems which show her variety of subject and style as well as her meticulous thought and detail.

Amina Saïd writes in French. Her poems reflect her Tunisian heritage, its different landscape and culture, the sea, the sun and the

light. She transports the reader into a world far away from European metropolitan chaos, into a quiet calmness and ‘inconsequential weight of memory’ – even though her poem ‘The Mothers’ embraces death and solitude as ‘mothers wander/among the graves of the departed.’

[8]

THE FICTION WRITERS

Latifa Baqa’s story ‘Bad Soup!’ attracts attention from the start with its unusual title. The protagonist’s day goes from bad to worse after her sister-in-law’s awful soup the previous evening. And in the end she does not tell her sister-in-law what the problem is! The rapid-fire descriptions and sudden changes of perspective give a vivid picture of a character twisting and turning, seething with inner dissatisfaction and frustration at her lot in life – with no happy ending in sight.

Najwa Binshatwan has published three collections of short stories and a novel since 2004. The story below, ‘His Excellency the Eminence of the Void,’ satirises the corruption within the regime as a retired officer gets his well-educated niece to write his complaint to the Supreme Leader so that he may be better rewarded for his past services. The niece’s visit to the family to celebrate Eid and to check on her aunt’s health is turned on its head in a manner quite out of her control.

Wafa al-Bueissa, also from Libya, was forced to leave her country in the face of mounting hate campaigns in mosques calling for her to be declared an apostate, following the publication of her first novel *Hunger has Other Faces*, excerpted below. In this chapter the main character is a well-brought up girl of 15, who is thoroughly bored staying at home in Alexandria, Egypt, watching television, so she goes for a walk by the sea. Al-Bueissa captures well the girl’s discontent and her readiness to try anything to relieve her emptiness. When a handsome young man, who turns out to be Turkish not Egyptian or Libyan, says ‘Good morning,’ the girl begins an adventure into another way of life . . . .

Rachida el-Charni is from Tunisia. She is a serious and outspoken author, whose central characters are strong women – mothers, daughters and working women – who have no power in society, who are looked down on and who still find a way to struggle for justice and their rights. In the story below, ‘The Way to Poppy Street,’ a young woman is mugged in broad daylight, and according to the onlookers



who stand and watch, she should keep her place and be content with being a victim. Instead, the young woman runs after her assailant, but after seizing hold of him, she is punched to the ground and threatened with a knife. For Rachida, the crux of the story is not the mugging and the assault but the pitiful and cowardly reactions of the onlookers – it is a moving story of social mores and the struggle for dignity and respect. Her first novel (*Hymns for her Pain*), completed in 2007 but only published this year, 2011, after the fall of the Ben Ali regime, narrates the plight of the families of Tunisia’s political prisoners, in particular the role of the mothers, through the tragic experiences of one family.

[9]

Alexandra Chreiteh, born in Lebanon to a Russian mother and a Lebanese father, came to prominence in 2009 with her first novel *Always Coca Cola*. She started writing it while studying English literature and creative writing at the Lebanese American University in Beirut, and received encouragement from her tutor, the well-known Lebanese author Rachid al-Daif. Excerpted below, the novel is about three young women, all from different backgrounds and cultures: Yana is Romanian, living and working in Lebanon, Abeer is from a traditional Lebanese family, and Yasmine is half German, half Lebanese. As the characters face difficult social dilemmas Alexandra mingles cultures, traditions and daily life with a feisty and often droll humour that is thoroughly modern and possibly shocking for her readers.

Mansoura Ez-Eldin is an award-winning author from the new generation of young Egyptian writers whose works over the last 10 years have signalled a major change in both Egyptian and wider Arab fiction-writing towards a focus on the individual in society. Her works include short stories and two novels. The two stories below are narrated by a daughter and son respectively, and in each there is a troubled relationship with the father. After the death of her father, the daughter in ‘Conspiracy of Shadows’ relives, everywhere she goes, a ghoulisn scenario about her father that hovers between dream, nightmare and reality. In ‘Headache’ the narrator, who is the son, talks to himself, admonishes and argues with himself after waking up, sprawled on a wooden bench, with a gigantic hangover. He had not dared go home and face his father, but trying to find his way, he recalls other goings-on at home, and how a unmarried neighbour, Aunt Amal, had enticed

him into her bedroom. In each story Mansoura seeks to uncover the narrator's personal dilemmas and examine the relation of the individual to himself or herself.

[10] Huzamah Habayeb is an award-winning Palestinian short story writer whose stories often begin with an apparently normal scenario, such as friends meeting at a local coffeehouse. In 'One Afternoon,' the story below, Abdul Karim Abdullah Mustafa Abdul Ilah is sitting on his sofa 'just like every afternoon.' A man of habit, married with three sons and a daughter, his thoughts wander to problems with his brother when his attention is distracted by the local crazy woman Zuhur wailing loudly. Has somebody died? What has happened... Huzamah leads the reader into a ghostly scene where the reader is not sure what is real and what is imagined.

An author who spans cultures is the award-winning Rachida Lamrabet. Although coming from Morocco, Rachida writes in Flemish, having moved to Belgium with her family when she was a child. Her first novel (*Womanland*), excerpted below, was received with great acclaim by Flemish and Dutch readers and critics. In a very modern style and language (including a smattering of Arabic and Tamazight words), it describes a woman's struggle to make peace with her multi-cultural character, that is, her western identity and her Moroccan origins. Rachida is a keen observer of small details and moves the story deftly forward with bursts of sharp humour and pithy comments by some of the many colourful characters.

Also from Morocco is Wafa Malih, five years younger than Rachida. Her short story is unusual in that its main character is a disabled girl whom the father treats in a traditionally dismissive way – all she is good for is to serve him. The girl, who is beautiful and has a mischievous sense of humour, refuses to give in to despair or be cowed and bullied, and persuades her mother to tell her what happened before her birth.

Rabia Raihane is a short story writer from Morocco. Her protagonists are generally daughters who come into conflict with social conventions through actions of the mother or older family members. The daughter characters want independence and freedom and are determined to change convention; they move the stories to their denoue-





ment through questioning and insistence on being right. In 'A Red Spot,' below, Rabia Raihane movingly describes the reaction of the 14-year-old daughter to learning that her beaming mother wants to 'marry her off as tradition demands.' The girl visualises in terrible detail what happened to the local policeman's daughter Mariam, who turned out not to be a virgin when she was married off. She is determined not to end up 'anybody's slave.'

[11]

Azza Rashad, from Egypt, encourages readers to reflect and ponder on the possibilities and certainties in life. Below are two stories from her first collection, which uncover the feelings and emotions within a family, the love and longing of a daughter for her father. In the first, the narrator daughter recounts how her beloved and hugely missed father seemed to be having an affair with a woman neighbour, and then abandoned her and her mother and grandmother. All the while the daughter addresses her father, blaming him and calling him to account. In the second, a daughter experiences awkward alternating feelings of love and hate after she marries as she revels in the smell of honeycomb, a smell that had forever filled her father's room in the family household. Azza's second collection, (*Half Light*) is a compelling mix of fantasy, myth and reality with elements of humour and tragedy about rural communities, the relation between man and woman, the status of women in society, and school girls with differing ambitions.

Adania Shibli is a Palestinian author with two award-winning novels. The excerpt below is from her second novel *We Are All Equally Far From Love* (due out in an English edition). A narrative meditation on the romantic expectations of falling in love and the emotional pain and sadness of falling out of love, the main character of this excerpt is a young woman who examines every tiny detail of what happens to her and the husband she once loved, and the friendly male doctor who treats her, unwittingly, for wounds left by her husband's beatings.

Alawiya Sobh is an original and inspiring novelist who, while not a feminist, explores and uncovers the major relationships in a woman's life. Her debut novel (*The Slumber of Days*), 1986, was acclaimed by critics for its innovative 'open text.' Her second novel (*Dunya*) was also a success, and in 2002 her novel (*Maryam of the Stories*), excerpted in *Banipal* 17, was hailed as an epic narrative that dealt with Lebanon's struggle

[12] during the 20th century with civil war, colonialism and its own patriarchal society. Narrated by three generations of women, weaving stories within stories in which the author herself was present, Sobh introduces a new way for an author to interact with characters, events and memories. Women's memory is central for Sobh and in a recent interview she explained how she tries in her work 'to uncover it and its hidden languages, without replicating literature's dominant patriarchal values . . . . Uncovering female memories is perhaps an interrogation of patriarchal memory, and an undermining of its discourse.'

(*It's Called Love*) is her fourth novel, highly acclaimed and reprinted a number of times. In her sensitive treatment of the intricate complexities of the 'triangle' of a married middle-aged woman with a lover, Sobh tackles the past, present and future lives of a mature Beirut woman, Nahla, who relishes life and freedom and who, in the excerpt below, meets up with her former non-Muslim lover. In the West this might not raise an eyebrow, nor probably in the more open Lebanon but in many Arab countries the non-Muslim lover would be a greater taboo than the triangle. Sobh continues to shatter taboos with intimate scenes of love and lovemaking, although taboo-breaking is not her goal, and she explains that what motivates her is 'the freedom and artistry of writing.' 'My technique of narrating a story makes me narrate an event candidly, without any censorship or reactionary force or claims of courage,' she wrote in an interview in *Banipal* 40.

Miral al-Tahawy's novels are filled with characters whose backgrounds are among the Bedouin tribes of Egypt from where she herself hails. *Gazelle Tracks* is her third novel, and in the excerpt below, the heroine Muhra uncovers the story of her family and her mother from an old family photograph. From the two-dimensional figures the reader is drawn swiftly into their lives – their habits, superstitions and anxieties of their hard, often unhappy, lives, and into atmospheric and gripping tales of affection, love and fear that combine dreams, myths and legends. This excerpt describes Inshirah, whose mother had been bought as a slave by Grandfather Munazi, and who stayed with the family all her life and became indispensable through taking responsibility for the disabled daughter, Hind. Miral al-Tahawy started writing while studying Arabic literature at Cairo University, her first short stories



being based on memories of her childhood in a traditional, conservative Bedouin family, and her grandmother's story-telling. In 2000 she became the first woman author to be awarded Egypt's National Award for Excellence in Literature for her second novel *Blue Aubergine*, which now has English, French, German, Spanish and Italian editions.

[13]

Dima Wannous, from Syria, grew up in a literary household, her father being the late Saadallah Wannous, the pioneering playwright. Her story 'Sahar,' looks at how a woman can find her own space within the everyday details of home life that her senses uncover. It is a glimpse into a private world and private space, whose fulcrum is the conundrum that occurs every Thursday evening – Sahar dressing up and dancing in front of her husband – is this being a coquette for one's husband or a prostitute, she wonders. Other young fiction writers to come to the fore in Syria are Rosa Yassin Hassan (born in 1974) whose debut novel (*Ebony*), 2004, won the Hanna Mina Prize for the Novel; and Manhal Alsarraj, originally from Hama, Syria, and now living in Sweden, with three novels, the first of which (*As the River Must*) won a prize in Sharjah, UAE, but was banned in Syria because it refers to the Hama massacre of 1982.

Samar Yazbek is a daring and prolific young Syrian writer. Her works are notable for themes dealing with different aspects of repression within society – explicitly Syrian society. The background to her first novel (*Child of the Sky*), is how family and religion become repressive social institutions. Her second novel (*Clay*), excerpted below, concerns the wider relationship between citizens and the ever-powerful military. Her third centres on a lesbian love affair that is doomed on account of attitudes towards social rank and status. Also a cinema and television critic, her fourth novel (*In her Mirrors*), is a love story between a military officer close to the president and an actress. It has been described as 'a novel with a great linguistic wealth, a seductive plot and a humanistic vision.' Her latest work is (*The Mountain of Lilies*), 2008, in which a woman recounts 77 dreams in a way that allows the author to merge styles from different literary genres.

In 'Time's Running out for Scheherazade' Fawzia Zouari reflects on the inheritance passed down to Arab women by the legendary heroine Scheherazade and how it did not allow for relations between man

[14] and woman to develop or the status of women in society to change. Scheherazade took on the position of spokesperson for all women, successfully outwitting the ploys of men with words, and committing the generations of women that came after her to silent submission and silence. Zouari asserts that for her 'storytelling is no longer bound up with the extreme urgency of any one moment . . . . It has no longer to do with living at any cost, but with living fully.' More a poetic reflection than an essay, Zouari's first-person text follows the fault line of Scheherazade's legacy to Arab women to show the deprivation, the emptiness and interminable silence behind locked doors that has lasted till present times.

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