

The Lifted Veil: Protest in Alifa Rifaat's Short Stories

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At present Alifa Rifaat's short stories that are available in English are those found in a volume under the title *Distant View of a Minaret*.¹ The Collection is an artistic dialogue with Islam and with men in whose hands women have been perpetually placed. Rifaat is not the female iconoclast desirous of pulling things down in the tradition of Western feminism; her veil is merely raised purposely to protest the fate of womanhood in a male-dominated society. While doing this, she still accepts Islam, accepts the "superiority" of men over women in the family even if she would want more generosity from men, more understanding, and more appreciation of the female condition. Consequently, in the first story, the title story, sex is the test for empathy. But the author's female protagonist does not have this empathy from her husband: ". . . on each occasion, when breathlessly imploring him to continue, he would--as though purposely to deprive her--quicken his movements and bring the act to an abrupt end" (1). The husband is a conservative Muslim who knows how far a woman should dare in bed: "Sometimes she had tried in vain to maintain the rhythmic movements a little longer, but always he would stop her" (1). The woman is supposed to be a receptacle, an unfeeling clod of rock who has no place in the sexual act; she is the man's comforter, but nobody owes her sexual fulfillment. After sex she is supposed to run to the bathroom and have a bath, "repeating the formula of faith as the water coursed down her body" (2). The man is the center of attention, not the woman. The story ends with the man taking ill upon the insistence of the wife that he stay a little longer "inside her."

Most of Alifa Rifaat's female characters are either women who are little understood by their husbands, or widows, or old maids who could not be married. By so doing, their problems as women are usually pointed and decided, and we are led, as it were, to "inspect" their circumstances with our view narrowed to perceive just these. In "Bahiyya's Eyes," Bahiyya refuses to go to a doctor for her eye problems because she believes that "cure lies in the hands of Allah alone" (6); moreover, "it's all a question of fate and destiny" (7). The truth, insists Bahiyya, is that she has been crying all her life. Her problem began "from the tears I shed since my mother first bore me and they held me up by the leg and found I was a girl" (7). Part of Bahiyya's circumstance stems from the tears of protest she used to shed because Awwad, her brother, was indulged by their parents. Awwad "would be playing in the water channel or romping round the fields, and when he came home he'd expect us (the girls) to serve him like my mother served my father" (8). A girl like Bahiyya would oppose such arrant nonsense: "But my nature wasn't the same and the tears were always running down my cheeks" (8). In other words, Bahiyya's near-blindness is attributed to the protest she used to put up as a child against the fallacy of male superiority. Thus her refusal to be cured of threatening

¹Alifa Rifaat, *Distant View of a Minaret and Other Stories*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (1983; London: Heinemann, 1985). All references are to this edition.

blindness and the dominance of patriarchy are both ordained by Allah, the Sublime. This "acceptance" is satirical, for it is, in fact, the women who are more superior, having been given "the task of continuing His creation" (9). To "control" Bahiyya, she is circumcised by fellow women who force her "legs open and cut away the mulberry with a razor" (9). At maturity her husband is chosen for; it is Dahshan—not Hamdan—whom she had loved with her whole heart. The important realization by the aging Bahiyya is that "all my life I'd been ruled by a man, first my father and then my husband" (11). Her worries are centered not on these circumstances, but on the fact that she grew up without exploiting the strengths and weaknesses of womanhood: "It's just that I'm sad about my life and youth that have come and gone without my knowing how to live them really and truly as a woman" (11).

The mysterious is at the center of "My World of the Unknown." The story is both a spiritual experience and a sensual fulfillment, which are usually denied the Muslim woman. It is the simple tale of a woman and her husband who move into a new place. A mad woman called Aneesa claims ownership of the house. Aneesa, it is later discovered, is the mysterious lover of a strange snake that inhabited the house. According to Sheikh Farid, the Sheikh of the Rifayya order summoned by the new tenant to chase away the snake(s), "the sovereign of the house has sought you [i.e., the wife of the new tenant] out and what you saw is no snake, rather it is one of the monarchs of the earth . . . who has appeared to you in the form of a snake" (69). But the mysterious snake comes again to visit the wife of the new tenant. It is a spiritual and sensual transformation as the snake "began to caress my body . . . till my whole body tingled and started to shake in sharp, painful, rapturous spasms" (73). What the "busy" tenant fails to give to his wife sexually has been afforded her by a mysterious being who is perhaps aware of her sexual deprivation. As for her husband, he is both ignorant and naive, inviting a medical doctor to attend to his wife without realizing that "it was from love [she] was suffering" (75). It is now clear why the so-called mad woman, Aneesa, wants to have access to the house again and again. She shares a union with the snake; people passing by the house she so loves "would hear her conversing with unknown persons" (67).

"Mansoura" is also the story of a sexually deprived wife. Sayyid, Mansoura's husband, is not conscious of his sexual duties to his wife, and so Hindawi, on whose lands he works, capitalizes on this weakness of his: "Hindawi would come knocking at the door from there, bringing with him sweets and things that dazzle a woman's eyes. The girl would open the door to him and she'd make him tea" (51). But Mansoura knows she should not have done that. She gets Sayyid to accept to be around her and goes to tell Hindawi that their escapades are over: "She told him that what had been between them was past and done with, that she belonged to Sayyid" (53). However, Hindawi's heart is burnt by intense hatred and jealousy, culminating in his murder of the repentant adulteress. Although Sayyid is wrongly imprisoned for killing Mansoura, the dead woman does take revenge on her actual murderer. In this story, the thematic motifs of fidelity in marriage and the power of the dead are amply bought together to give Mansoura the aura of a saint. Little wonder then that her name is now uttered along with that of Allah in the fictitious Cairo suburbs of the story: "O Mansoura, O Allah . . . O Mansoura, O Allah . . ." (47).

In story after story, there are subtle comments on the wildness of men, their uncaring behavior towards women, and their lack of generosity towards femalehood, whereas the Koran expects men to give love and affection to women in return for their subordinate and subservient role. In another vein, Rifaat's women, taken to be weak, taken to be playthings, are at the same time subjected to intense social and psychological shocks while men who are deemed to be physically stronger enjoy less cultural stress. The strain suffered by Ni'ma in "An Incident in the Ghobashi Household" or Dalal in "Me and My Sister" is apparently as a result of the disadvantages to which women are naturally exposed. In "The Long Night of Winter," Zennouba is disturbed by her husband's adulterous life and seeks a divorce. Hagg Hamdan, her husband, urges her to go and find out the sort of life her own father had lived, in spite of the latter having "spent so much of his time on his prayer mat" (57) while he was alive. And when Zennouba actually ventures to find out, what she hears from her mother is an eye-opener to her: "All men are like that" (57).

Each of the stories is an indictment of men of various shades of weakness, and of a society in which male dominance is too overwhelming. Alifa Rifaat's protest is not in the feminist tradition of the Western world; hers is a cryptic demand for a change in social attitudes towards women. The author's protest is not outside Islam because she often breaks the plot of her stories, as it were, to enable her characters to respond to the call to prayers. What she has done in *Distant View* is to take a "distant," subtle look at the predicament of women in Muslim Egypt with a view to drawing attention to aspects of the feminine psyche which had never been reckoned with by Muslim men. The author's head-veil is only lifted to enable her to launch ventriloquistic attacks on society; however, soon after that, she fits it on again because she is a devout Muslim woman who believes that "men are in charge of women." Rifaat's approach reminds one of Widad, the widow in "The Kite." Widad will not accept Mitwalli as her new husband, their having silently wanted each other in their youth notwithstanding. When Mitwalli proposes to her after his wife's death we are told that the widow "lowered her head-veil and looked up at him boldly and it was he who looked away" (111).

The literary merit of Rifaat's stories resides in the author's temperate and controlled anger, in her ability to penetrate her characters, particularly her female personae, to bring to us the state of their psychological and mental condition, while presenting us with flesh-and-blood figures. Whether or not her response of "veil-lifting" is the best solution to the issues she raises in her stories is another thing; what is more fundamental is the artistic detachment and sense of moral integrity with which she and her female characters have grappled with the problem of female subjugation in a Muslim setting. The result is that her stories are imbued with much power and with many revelatory signals hidden in fresh symbols and apt metaphors that are too strategically placed in these tales to escape our attention.