

## Feminism and Religion in Alifa Rifaat's Short Stories

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When one speaks of feminism in so-called Third World countries, one must be careful not to confound it with Western conceptions of feminism. This statement is especially relevant when applied to feminism in Arab countries, and particularly when it comes to feminist writers in Egypt, an Arab country which had seen a major feminist movement emerge in the latter part of the nineteenth century and acquire true recognition in the past fifty years or so.<sup>1</sup> Following in the path of such women as the founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union, Huda Sha'rawi (1879-1947), women writers in Egypt have constantly struggled to obtain an identity of their own. This quest for an identity has, for the most part, limited itself to finding an identity for women in Arab societies within the boundaries of the Islamic tradition.

Muslim authors such as Alifa Rifaat and Nawal Sadawi have fought largely for an independent identity for women within the context of Islam, without adopting a secular view or one which deviates from certain accepted social norms. Such authors, of course, hold the view that there indeed is a dignified and independent place for women within Islam, provided that the Qur'anic teachings on women are followed more faithfully. By borrowing some ideas from Western feminists and changing them to fit their own situation, these writers argue that the male dominance that governs most Arab societies is the result of misinterpreting the Qur'an on the part of men, and ignoring many of the parts that deal specifically with women and their social rights.

In many respects, Alifa Rifaat may be thought of as belonging to that group of Arab feminists who advocate a view of women which does not stray from Islam. Equipped with a deep knowledge of the Qur'an, Rifaat, not unlike Sadawi, seems to argue that if Qur'anic teachings were indeed practiced and read in the proper way, Arab women would enjoy a much higher social status, one that comes very close to equality with men. Unlike Sadawi, on the other hand, Rifaat's views do not seem to be influenced by Western conceptions of feminism at all. Being monolingual, and having lived in Egypt all her life, Rifaat is able to write about the situation of Egyptian women in villages as well as cities with an untainted, if somewhat occasionally limited, point of view.

Rifaat was born in Egypt in the late 1930s, and was brought up in the Islamic tradition, acquiring a profound understanding of it at a relatively early age. It was not, however, until she was widowed that Rifaat began publishing her short stories. Her first collection of short stories, *Hawwâ ta'ûd li Âdam* (*Eve*

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<sup>1</sup> For a survey and analysis of feminist authors in Arabic literature, see Miriam Cooke's article "Telling Their Lives: A Hundred Years of Arab Women's Writings." *World Literature Today* 60 (1986): 212-16. Also see Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, eds., *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

*Returns to Adam*), published in 1975, was for the most part nothing more than a series of romances that were devoid of any social critique. During the next six years, Rifaat published more than ninety short stories in various Egyptian journals and magazines, and in 1981 published another collection of stories entitled *Man Yakûn al-Rajul?* (*Who is Man?*), a book that proved so controversial that it was not sold in most Egyptian bookstores. Rifaat, whose works until that point in time were largely ignored by the public, found herself the target of religious fundamentalists and conservative critics who considered certain themes in her stories (such as lesbianism, female circumcision, and rape) as too violent or as too deviating from the existing social norms in the Arab world. Other critics, however, delighted in the new Rifaat, and reviews of her books by certain Arab as well as Western critics proved quite encouraging for the author, who in 1983 published a new collection of stories which she called *Salât al-Hub* (*Prayer of Love*). In 1985, she published her latest collection, *Fi Layl al Shitâ' al-Tawil* (*In the long Winter Night*) and then proceeded to write a historical novel by the name of *Jawharat Far'ûn* (*The Pharaoh's Jewel*), a novel called *Bayt fi Ard al-Mawtâ* (*A House in the Land of the Dead*), and is currently putting the finishing touches on her latest novel, *Kâda lil-Hawâ* (*Almost Love*). In addition, some of her short stories have been translated into English by Denys Johnson-Davies as *Distant View of a Minaret*,<sup>2</sup> and a collection of her stories entitled *Mansura* was recently translated into German. Her work has also been occasionally read on the BBC.

Many of Rifaat's books and short stories have created controversies that have spread throughout the Arab world, causing dissatisfaction among many religious leaders as well as other authors. *Man Yakûn al-Rajul?*, for example, was banned in certain Arab countries because its content was seen as going against Islam, and as a result, the author has earned a reputation not only as a feminist—a dreaded word in itself in parts of the Middle East—but also as a former Muslim who, not unlike Salman Rushdie, has turned away from the faith. Yet, whereas Rushdie has often been criticized in the Egyptian press as being too influenced by the West, and England in particular, such accusations could not be directed towards Rifaat, who had never as much as stepped foot in the West. Being completely ignorant of Western conceptions of feminism, Rifaat therefore proceeded to create a definition of her own and found herself surprised at being labeled a feminist as her works became more and more known.<sup>3</sup> Her situation, in other words, greatly differed from that of other Arab feminist authors, such as Sadawi, who had been influenced—or at least had read works by—their Western counterparts.

Rifaat's characters, not unlike the author herself, have lived mostly in Egypt and seldom travel abroad. Many of the stories in *Distant View of a Minaret*, for example, feature women who, in one way or another, find themselves oppressed by the men in their lives. Although the settings for her stories differ a great deal, ranging from suites in high-rise Cairene apartment buildings to simple huts in the Egyptian countryside, one constant in her works

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<sup>2</sup> Alifa Rifaat, *Distant View of a Minaret*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davis (Oxford: Heinemann, 1983). All quotations refer to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Based on a lecture by Rifaat at the American University in Cairo in December 1990.

seems to be the need her characters feel to be free and/or to liberate themselves from the social constraints that have plagued them since birth. Her view of the position of Egyptian women is, to say the least, a pessimistic one, and not one of her female characters seems genuinely content with her life, although quite a few of them may choose to believe that they are living a happy and satisfying life. In "Bahiyya's Eyes," for instance, Bahiyya clearly sums up the way she views the role of women while conversing with her daughter by stressing that "A man's still a man and a woman will remain a woman whatever she does . . . Daughter, I'm not crying now because I'm fed up or regret that the Lord created me a woman . . . 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). Bahiyya thus seems completely resigned to her fate as a woman and does not seem willing to change it, accepting instead the traditional role that society seems to have assigned to women. Her regrets are nothing more than just that. Her life, which she recounts to her daughter in detail, seems at first glance to be nothing more than a series of endless struggles and pain, void of any satisfaction or joy. During the course of her conversation, she mentions the beatings she got from her brother, the sexual dominance of her husband after her arranged marriage, and having to face puberty with no prior knowledge, from her mother or anyone else, as to what to expect. Yet, beneath this seemingly gloomy account of her life, or as Miriam Cooke puts it, "the painful drudgery that only fantasy can render tolerable" (215), Bahiyya nevertheless hints at the possibility of joy for a woman in her situation, even under the oppressive circumstances that have always surrounded her. She mentions, for instance, that "of course the whole of life wasn't all misery" (9) because, amidst the chaos surrounding her, she managed to have special moments where she experienced a feeling which she describes as coming close to joy and contentment. Unsurprisingly, these moments occurred when she was alone with nature, away from other people, when she would "sit down and play alongside the water channel and make things out of mud and leave them in the sun to dry" (9). In addition to hinting at Bahiyya's obviously neglected artistic talent, which even she never thought of developing further, there also seems to be an assertion that, despite the complexity of her life, Bahiyya was occasionally able to find happiness in the simplicity which only nature could provide.

Another fond memory that Bahiyya remembers occurred at a later stage in her life when she found herself in love for the first time with a man who returned her affection. Having lived through a joyless childhood, Bahiyya immediately seems to see in this man the savior she had long wished for as she recounts the nights she spent dreaming of him in order to convince herself "that this was the man who'd make [her] feel glad that [she] was born a woman" (10). It is no wonder then that she ironically notes soon after that "there's no happier time for a girl than when her heart's still green and full of hope" (10).

Besides making a statement concerning family situations where girls grow up wishing to be carried away by a lover as soon as possible, Rifaat here seems to be completely disillusioned with the whole idea of romance and happy endings. This view of the world becomes especially significant when one recalls Rifaat's earlier works in which love reigned supreme and carried her heroines to happy endings. Bahiyya's life, of course, does not seem to be going towards a

happy ending as she finds herself drifting towards blindness as an old, unwanted widow who has given all of her life to serving others while getting nothing but misery in return. Yet, there is in the whole story an underlying current of hope which can be seen in the fact that she is recounting her story to her daughter, perhaps in the hopes of enabling her to benefit from her mother's mistakes and strive to change things that have long gone unquestioned in society.

One last point that may be noted about "Bahiyya's Eyes" is that the blame for women's situation in parts of Egypt is never directed towards God or Islam. She does not blame the Lord for "creating her as a woman," but rather blames society for treating her unkindly. Rifaat's position in regards to Islam is therefore far from rebellious. Her quarrel does not lie with God, whose will she accepts completely as can be seen when she discusses her view of gender roles, procreation, and death, a far from atheistic view which does not stray away from the teachings of Islam. Rifaat is specifically dealing with these issues when she mentions that "children who died died by Allah's will, and . . . children who lived lived by Allah's will, and that, in His wisdom, for every one that died there was always another one to take his place," closing with the argument that "Allah the Sublime had in this manner given the female the task of continuing his creation" (8-9). Thus, Rifaat seems neither to resent being a woman nor feel bitter towards God (or nature) whom she holds responsible for assigning pregnancy and child rearing to women and not to men. What she does resent, however, is the lack of appreciation that the woman gets from the man whose "part in the whole affair is just one night of fun" (9). In his introduction to Rifaat's book, Denys Johnson-Davies makes an excellent point when he mentions that "Rifaat's revolt, therefore, is merely against certain man-made interpretations and accretions that have grown up over the years and remain unquestioned by the majority of both women and men" (viii). Rifaat therefore seems to be taking a fundamental feminist position by attempting to rewrite a male-centered history. On the other hand, she is also able to draw clear distinctions in her mind at all times between God's will and the will of men; she never even borders on atheism, yet appears ruthless in criticizing the male traditional role in some Egyptian societies.

Bahiyya's view of religion is echoed by many of Rifaat's characters, who often find in Islam a refuge from an otherwise cruel world. In "Distant View of a Minaret," for example, the wife, whose sex life (as well as life in general) is anything but satisfactory, finds that the only comfort she has is in her religion and in the distant minaret which she can just barely see from her balcony, and her prayers, which become the "punctuation marks that divided up and gave meaning to her life" (3). When her husband has a heart attack a few minutes later, the wife, who has just finished her prayers, finds that she has no feelings towards the whole matter. Her religion, which provided her with daily comfort, is something she faithfully adheres to, yet her husband, who gave her neither tenderness nor comfort, becomes an undesirable element whose existence (or nonexistence) seems insignificant.

Another way in which some of Rifaat's characters find comfort is through the mother-daughter relationship, a recurring theme in many of her short sto-

ries. "An Incident in the Ghobashi Household," for example, clearly demonstrates the lengths to which a mother will go in order to protect her daughter, as does Bahiyya's last wish to see her daughter in "Bahiyya's Eyes." Yet, the unbreakable bond that Rifaat seems to constantly point to between mothers and their daughters seems almost nonexistent when it comes to friendships among women. Rifaat does not emphasize any kind of sisterhood or bond between two women as a way for comfort. Instead, she usually presents the reader with isolated women who, in reality, have much to gain by uniting against their oppressors yet do not protest, instead choosing to believe, "and it is their belief that brings comfort" (Cooke 215).

Rifaat's works, though difficult to find in many Arab countries, are nevertheless widely read. One of the main reasons for her popularity is that she does not, like most other writers, avoid resorting to colloquial words, expressions, and phrases in her narrative instead of writing (as customary) in classical Arabic. This linguistic aspect of her work makes her books flow more easily and gives her stories a new air of realism that some Arabic literary works lose when written completely in the classical language. On the other hand, her use of the vernacular has made her an easy target for critics and linguists alike in the Arab world who have accused her of not knowing how to write in the classical mode. In addition, her heavy reliance on the Egyptian dialect makes her books difficult—but definitely not impossible—to read by Arabic readers in other parts of the Arab world. This last point does not, of course, come through in the translated *Distant View of a Minaret*, where the translator seems to have opted for a higher style in English than the one Rifaat uses in her stories.

Alifa Rifaat's unique style and outlook on life have quickly earned her a place in Arabic literature not only as a feminist, but as also as one of those new writers who are slowly moving away from the eloquent yet occasionally alienating classical Arabic, and towards a language that can be understood more easily by Arab readers. Her linguistic contribution, her courage to write about things that need to be discussed yet are often left unspoken, and her realistic and genuine style have done much to improve the situation of Arab women as a whole, and have given a boost to an already growing feminist movement in Egypt. In addition, her translated works have not only destroyed the negative image that the West often paints of Arabs in general—and Arab women in particular—but have also pointed to the fact that although the situation of women is not the same all over the world, there are nevertheless affinities that women everywhere share regardless of their social surroundings or geographical location. Rifaat herself should also be cited as a model, and her works considered as a positive step towards dispelling certain stereotypes of Arab women common in the West that have long gone unchallenged, both in the West and in parts of the Arab world itself.