

Writing Women's Bodies: A Study of Alifa Rifaat's Short Fiction

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A caption under a picture of Alifa Rifaat (Alifah Rif'at) in a 1993 *Middle East Times* (Egypt) captures Rifaat's intentions for writing about women's lives and sexuality: she is inspired, the caption reads, "by a woman's Islamic right to a fulfilled emotional and sexual life." Although Rifaat is not as widely known in Western countries as is Nawal Sadaawi, to whom she is sometimes compared, Rifaat has had at least a modest impact in Egypt, where her fiction has met with a range of responses, from conservative efforts to keep her fiction out of bookstores, to encouragements from her literary acquaintances to write even more boldly about the lives of women,¹ a familiar topic of her fiction.

Rifaat has not achieved her writing easily. Early in her life, Alifa was strongly reprimanded by her older sister for writing, forcing Alifa to turn her energies to other pursuits. As a young married woman, Alifa met with expulsion from her home and threat of divorce when she related to her husband that she had published a story. Alifa's attempt to continue writing under a pseudonym failed—Rifaat's given name is Fatima—her husband finally forcing her to swear on the Quran that she would stop writing. When, fourteen years later, after having suffered symptoms of psychosomatic illness for an extended period, Alifa asked for and was granted release by her husband from her promise not to write, she found that he had forgotten the promise he had forced from her.²

Several other factors may suggest why Rifaat's fiction has not gained wider recognition. Although she is self-educated, having read methodically through a number of small libraries during the years of her exile from writing, Rifaat does not possess a university degree and thus does not have direct connections to academic literary groups. With the exception of two pilgrimages to Mecca and one visit to Europe, she has traveled little, remaining a quiet secret for most readers outside of Egypt. Finally, Rifaat's professed devotion to Islam has allowed for easy categorization of her fiction as limited, with critics often interpreting her female protagonists as weak or submissive. Miriam Cooke describes Rifaat's women protagonists in an Arabic collection of her short fiction

¹ Alifa Rifaat, personal interview, 19 July, 1993.

² Rifaat, personal interview.

as passive characters who sacrifice their protests to their beliefs.³ J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada interprets Rifaat's female characters as limiting their expectations to "want[ing] more generosity from men," suggesting that the female characters "accept the 'superiority' of men over women in the family."⁴ Ramzi M. Salti, implying Rifaat's confinement to Egypt, describes Rifaat's eye to her women characters as "an untainted, if somewhat limited, point of view."⁵

Such views underestimate considerably the quality and impact of Rifaat's fictional depictions of women. For not only does Rifaat's fiction frankly address women's emotional and sexual lives—among her stories one finds plots about clitoridectomy, social expectations of virginity, women's sexual satisfaction within marriage—but the underlying motifs in her stories powerfully subvert the prevailing beliefs and practices that Rifaat feels take away women's original sexual rights under Islam.

To help explain this latter quality of Rifaat's fiction, its subtle yet profound subversion of popular societal beliefs about women, I turn to Fedwa Malti-Douglas's study, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing*.⁶ In this study, which examines the role of women in popular medieval tales, Malti-Douglas demonstrates a connection between possessing one's voice and possessing one's body. She explains that when women are not silenced in the medieval tales by being completely absent from them, as in Ibn Tufayl's (d. 1185–1186) well-known *Havy ibn Yaqzân*, they are rendered silent by other means, ranging from rarely being given first-person narrative roles (33) or initiating speech (44) to being methodically assaulted. A striking instance of woman's assaulted body occurs in Ibn alWardî's (d. 1457) version of the popular island (al-Waqwâq) tales, where, whether in the image of a naked queen surrounded by her court of virgins or of voiceless female heads possessing vulvas that hang on trees like fruit, women are depicted as body. Male visitors to the islands pick the women-fruit for the purpose of a single act of sexual intercourse, after which the woman dies. Even without this explicit aggression, the women-fruit fall to the ground and die, an action associated in the tale with the emitting of a sound by the women. In such tales, Malti-Douglas summarizes, "woman's voice is occluded; her body is not" (89).

³ Miriam Cooke, "Telling Their Lives: A Hundred Years of Arab Women's Writings," *World Literature Today* 60 (Spring 1986): 215.

⁴ J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada, "The Lifted Veil: Protest in Alifa Rifaat's Short Stories," *The International Fiction Review* 17.2 (1990): 108.

⁵ Ramzi M. Salti, "Feminism and Religion in Alifa Rifaat's Short Stories," *The International Fiction Review* 18.2 (1991): 108.

⁶ Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991). All references to Malti-Douglas are to this text and appear in parentheses in the text.

In the more widely known *The Thousand and One Nights* (14th–16th centuries), the central female figure, Shahrazâd, indeed possesses and uses her voice, although the extent of its use is to hold at bay Shâhriyar, whose role is similar to that of the males who pluck the women-fruit in Ibn al-Wardî's island tale. Although one could interpret Shahrazâd's role in her story positively—her voice is heard, and she saves both her own life and the lives of the women whose turn would follow—the story resolves itself without questioning the colonizing relationship between Shahrazâd and the royal Shâhriyar. As Malti-Douglas points out, Shahrazâd finally gives over her role of storyteller to that of perfect woman—lover and mother (28)—thus relinquishing possession of her voice and body.

Another form of colonizing women's bodies occurs in these early tales through associating women with darkness or disorder. Malti-Douglas points out numerous references in the popular medieval tales to woman depicted as darkness, including the frequent references in *The Thousand and One Nights* to women as "dunyâ," literally the darkest, least spiritual, of places (16). These and other images of women in the early tales—woman as source of evil (55), as possessing guile and unbounded sexual energy (52)—are, according to Malti-Douglas, deeply engendered "into the Muslim unconsciousness" (53). Such qualities are easily rationalized as needing regulation, thus justifying the colonizing efforts over women's bodies.

In a second section of her study, Malti-Douglas demonstrates how several contemporary women writers have rewritten women's bodies against the ideas of these early texts. These contemporary authors, Malti-Douglas argues, have developed narrative voices that subvert the controls over women's bodies through using, and reclaiming, their bodies in the narrative: "The woman Arab writer of the late twentieth century achieves her literary voice, but she must do so through the body" (8).

Although Malti-Douglas does not include Alifa Rifaat among the contemporary women authors whom she illustrates as challenging with their bodies the images of women in the social consciousness, I would argue that not only does Rifaat write through the bodies of her women characters, but that in so doing, she rewrites many of the myths that legitimize the colonizing of women's bodies. That Rifaat accomplishes her end of reclaiming women's bodies through seemingly passive women characters adds to the irony already implicit in her rewriting the well-ingrained myths about women. I will illustrate her technique in three short stories: "Who Will Be the Man?," a young girl's narrative of her clitoridectomy, "Distant View of a Minaret," the story of denial of sexual fulfillment to a married woman, and "Bahiyya's Eyes," a narrative, through the voice of an aging woman, of the life experience of a woman's body.

In "Who Will Be the Man?,"⁷ Rifaat rewrites the myth of woman as dark, uncontrollable sexuality. Rifaat identifies the myth she is revising by employing it directly in the story through images connecting women's sexuality with darkness. At the same time, through the body and voice of a young girl who undergoes a clitoridectomy, Rifaat substitutes for the negative interpretations typically associated with such images an interpretation of woman's sexuality as natural and God-given.

The story's central protagonist, Bahiya Hasan al-Kamawi, unlike the typically unnamed women characters of the medieval tales,⁸ names herself fully at the story's beginning. Moreover, she presents herself as possessing stature and as participating fully in the natural and social worlds. Against the initial scene of Bahiya's daily partaking of nature's most delicious fruits, Rifaat sets that of Bahiya's clitoridectomy. In response to her experience, not only does Bahiya challenge the right of others—even her mother—to her body, but she determines to define her own 'purity' and sexuality. Rifaat supports her protagonist's rebellion by surrounding the traditional connection between female sexuality and darkness with the image of a bright, purifying fire that leaves Bahiya "safe as Abraham" and having "reached God" (76). Similarly, Rifaat connects Bahiya's preparation to enter the well room, a symbol of her awakening sexuality, with her contemplation of the Quaranic verses on the surrounding walls.

Thus, through the physical and emotional pain of her young protagonist's body, Rifaat achieves a reversal of the myth that would define woman's sexuality as darkness. Rifaat, moreover, uses Bahiya's voice to challenge, with knowing and anger, those who would colonize woman's body by defining it as needing external control. Bahiya's naive question during her clitoridectomy, "'Is he dead at last?'" (75), turns into a conscious challenge by the story's end, as she bitterly ponders, "who will be the man?" The anger explicit in the second question, which "scratch[es]" Bahiya's heart with a "thorn," is a more conscious form of the anger implied in the earlier question, a generalized wish for the death of the colonizer.

If "Who Will Be the Man?" contains a suggestion of the male colonizer's death, "Distant View of a Minaret," the title story of the English language translation of Rifaat's short stories,⁹ includes such a death literally in the plot. This story recasts the myth that would connect women's sexual experience with death, as central in such tales as *The Thousand and One Nights* or Ibn al-Wardī's

⁷ *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, ed. Margot Balsan and Miriam Cooke (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 387–93.

⁸ Malti-Douglas 34.

⁹ Alifa Rifaat, *Distant View of a Minaret and Other Stories*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davis (London: Heinemann, 1983). All references to "Distant View of a Minaret" and "Bahiyya's Eyes" are from this edition and appear in parentheses in the text.

island tales. Rifaat achieves this recasting through the simple but startling move of reversing the roles between female and male: it is the male who dies following a sexual experience.

Supporting this startling reversal in plot is the story's narrative framework, for the entire narrative takes place within the consciousness of the woman protagonist, who studies her husband's body, thus reversing the familiar pattern, as described by Assia Dyebar, of the observing man and the "watched woman."¹⁰ That the narrator studies her husband while engaging in sexual intercourse with him gives prominence to both the woman as gazer and the woman's body as locus of knowing. Further emphasizing the role of the woman's body as primary vehicle of consciousness is the story's lack of dialogue. With the exception of a single brief exchange between the woman and her son about her husband's death, the narrator remains focused on her own life of body, as she reflects throughout the story on her husband's denial to her of sexual fulfillment. The husband's direct voice is fully occulted.

Very specifically and deliberately, then, and with the added irony of the final scene in which the wife calmly drinks the coffee she has prepared for her dead husband, Rifaat achieves a full reversal of the gendered object and subject positions, and in this way repudiates the connection between women's sexuality and death. In fact, as in "Who Will Be the Man?," Rifaat uses religious imagery to support the woman's right to her sexuality, in this case by paralleling the husband's denial to his wife of sexual pleasure with the gradual closing off to her view of the city's many minarets. Thus does Rifaat give another of her women protagonists voice through her experience of body. By shifting the sex/death connection from female to male, Rifaat turns the story of a seemingly passive woman, her body controlled and confined, into a radical narrative.

In "Bahiyya's Eyes," Rifaat's central character, an aging woman, recites the life story of her body in a toneless monologue that resembles, in its unbroken string of laments, the continuous recitation of Shahrazâd in *The Thousand and One Nights*. In the medieval tale, the narrator's voice serves to save her physical body. In similar fashion, Bahiyya takes control of the narrative, even to the point of providing real or imagined responses from other characters, in order to take control metaphorically of the body/life that has been denied her. Bahiyya's narrative is a litany of her body, a rehearsed, powerful act of reclaiming her body from the plethora of violations done it. Whether it be the denial of access to the natural and social worlds, the denial of freedom to space and movement, the denial of sexual fulfillment, the denial of self-determination—all these elements are detailed in the narrative with parts of Bahiyya's body; her body and words become one in the story.

¹⁰ Assia Dyebar, "Introduction to Nawal al-Saadawi's *Ferdaous: A Voice from Hell*," in Balsan and Cook 387.

Unlike the beautiful Shahrazâd, Bahiyya's "worth" lies not in her potential connection to a male—Shahrazâd finally marries Shahriyar—but in her own vision. Although Bahiyya's physical sight has dimmed, she employs the memory of her body experience to see beyond the authority of the male doctor, whose voice we hear only through her own, as she describes to him her once flawless vision. Indeed, throughout the entire narrative, Bahiyya, without pause or hesitation in her speech, claims her own (in)sight by reciting the litany of events that have defined—and claimed—her body. In so doing, Bahiyya breaks through others' definitions and denials of her body in order to claim her own expectations: "I'm not crying now because [I] . . . regret that the Lord created me a woman. No, it's not that. It's just that I'm sad about my life and my youth that have come and gone without my knowing how to live them really and truly as a woman" (11). One can see a parallel here with the effects of imperialism on those it colonizes, with the colonized person, as described by Edward W. Said, experiencing separation "from his or her own instinctual life."¹¹

In Rifaat's short fiction translated into English, one finds Rifaat addressing myths about women engraven into the culture through earlier literature. In her stories, Rifaat typically employs a strategy of creating female characters who, while appearing to accept compliantly the prevailing images of women, strikingly subvert and revise those images. Through the stories of their own bodies, the female characters rewrite the stories that have allowed domination over their bodies, with their seeming compliance all the while disguising the subversive nature of their act.

Edward Said has pointed out that resistance requires "work[ing] to recover forms already established or at least influenced or infiltrated by the culture of empire."¹² Alifa Rifaat employs this handicap to her—and women's—advantage by becoming the infiltrator in order to alter the forms that work against the lives of women. She rewrites those images of women that have been most destructive to their lives in an attempt to improve the lives of contemporary women. In Rifaat's stories translated into English thus far, she has moved considerably beyond her expressed modest goal of reaching and teaching other women and deserves recognition for her achievement.

¹¹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993) 257.

¹² Said 210.