

Sahar Tawfiq

Points of the Compass

Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995. Pp. 96. \$16.00; \$10.00

Reviewed by Ramzi M. Salti

At first glance, Sahar Tawfiq's short stories may seem reminiscent of works by a string of contemporary Egyptian feminist writers—such as Nawal El Saadawi, Alifa Rifaat, and Salwa Baker—who have experimented with the short story genre to broach feminist issues in modern Arab society. Yet although Tawfiq may share much of her vision with these established feminist authors, her literary style is entirely her own. In an innovative and perhaps unprecedented move in modern Egyptian literature, Tawfiq chooses to utilize Egyptian folklore and tales dating back to Pharaonic times in order to examine the rapidly changing position of women in contemporary Egyptian society. As such, her works question the place of long-powerful myths and beliefs in modern Arab society and the ways in which such myths have contributed to the oppression of Egyptian women through the ages.

Although most of the eight short stories in this collection seem to recall ancient literary traditions, sayings, and beliefs at various points in the narrative, the process is employed most effectively in the story "Points of the Compass," the most powerful work in the present volume. Divided into four sections—Westward, Southward, Northward, Eastward—the story is a series of embedded and overlapping narratives by speakers and interlocutors who are never defined or clearly introduced, ranging from Mufida and her poet, to a dialogue between a mother and her daughter, to tales and traditions recounted by an elderly man by the name of Amm Ali.

In spite of the deliberate ambiguity and seemingly incoherent nature of the many voices that comprise this story, there is one primary constant which unifies the work and is itself as timeless and as layered as the story's narrative structure: the Nile, Egypt's "sacred river" (46), whose endless flow serves as a metaphor for constant renewal by functioning as the basis for a reexamination of historical elements that have been generally shunned, ignored, and censored by traditional historians. Because many of the old myths, figures, and traditions that are sporadically recalled in the narrative are left unexplained by the author, the translator has inserted several footnotes which render the text more accessible to readers unfamiliar with ancient Egyptian folklore.

Not unlike "Points of the Compass," the other seven stories in this collection also include several narrative levels. In "That the Sun May Sink," Tawfiq employs the stream-of-consciousness technique to point to the two paradoxical voices emanating from the main character. As the story develops, the reader is quickly made aware of the contradictions that govern the narrator's life, as demonstrated by the opposition between what she says and what she thinks. In

"The Time That Is Not This," the narrator embarks upon a journey of wishfulness, fantasizing about a time that is diametrically opposed to her depressing reality. That same thought is reiterated in "Moments of Walking in Darkness and Sleep, Conversation and Wakefulness," where the line between fantasy and reality, thought and speech, is intentionally blurred, causing the narrator to conclude that "we do not know which moments of our lives are the happiest or which are the most wretched" (42).

Throughout the stories, Tawfiq distinguishes herself as a feminist author with a unique perception of the world around her. Her works strongly embrace the natural world and are affected by a glorious past wherein solutions to contemporary problems may lie. It is through such contemplation that the quest for an identity, both individual and collective, may be achieved by many who may feel disillusioned with a society that is constantly changing at an incredible pace.

Nadine Gordimer

Writing and Being

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995. Pp. 176. \$18.95

Reviewed by Tony Eprile

This volume consists of six essays from the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures that Nadine Gordimer presented at Harvard in the fall of 1994. Despite its brevity, the collection covers a broad range and is possibly Gordimer's finest work of nonfiction to date. The introductory and the closing essays are disarmingly open writings by an author who is self-avowedly jealous of her privacy. Gordimer explores—and underscores—how her commitment to breaking through the psychological and physical confines of a "dying colonialism" has provided both the driving force behind her fiction and the ore that she mines so richly in it. The four essays sandwiched in the middle present a critical appreciation of other writers and how they have tackled the question of commitment to historical and socio-political truth in societies that seek to deny both.

The first essay, "Adam's Rib," begins with a somewhat testy complaint about the "prying game" indulged in by those readers who insist on reducing works of the imagination to thinly disguised biography or autobiography. Gordimer's own writing—engaging as it often does with current events in South Africa—has been particularly subject to this kind of speculation, "a game . . . of I Spy that includes as prey the writer her- or himself" (3). Gordimer quickly moves on from irritated complaint to a deeply considered examination of the ways in which living persons encountered by the author are drawn upon to produce, in Joseph Conrad's phrase, "a form of imagined life clearer than reality." Delving