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## BEYOND SCHEHERAZADE: THE RE-EMERGENCE OF THE FEMALE ARAB LITERARY VOICE THROUGH MULTIPLE FORUMS

### Abstract

Arab women have had a long history of participation in literary life, particularly in the community oriented, interactive literary salons that have existed since pre-Islamic times. The inherent message of such forums has always been, and continues to be, that literature is for sharing. Today, the voice of the female Arab writer persists, multifarious and authentic – it can neither be obscured nor ‘packaged’ in a way that is readily comprehensible to a global audience. Writers included in this analysis of the Arab female literary voice include Assia Djebar, Fatima Mernissi, Farzaneh Milani and Simin Tehran. Each in her own way, these women express an interest in social justice and freedom that is inherently consistent with the true principles of Islam. Hissa Hillal, winner of the Millions Poet Contest, is also discussed with regard to her contribution to a very public dialogue. Joumana Haddad, a radical poet, writes of killing Scheherazade and the oppression that she embodies. Whether or not we continue to honor that legendary storyteller, it is evident that the voices of the new generation of female Arab writers take us to a place that is beyond Scheherazade and the strictly patriarchal social system she survived. These women have a literary voice in their own right, not merely in reaction to harsh circumstances.

**Keywords:** Scheherazade, Arab women, voice, female writers, social systems

### Introduction

Literature in the Middle East has a unique trajectory that in some ways parallels, but by no means follows or duplicates, that of Western literature. One might argue that literary life has a keen and up-to-the-moment relevance for those living in the Middle East, which, in western countries, has been supplanted by the juggernaut of popular culture. Of course, that may be an oversimplification - but it does seem to speak volumes that the Arab equivalent of ‘American Idol’ is a program in which contestants recite poetry and are judged on its literary merit, not on their glamour or manner of presentation.

In fact, Arab women have had a long history in literary life. The literary salon, facilitating the exchange of ideas and showcasing of creative work, is an ancient form going back many centuries. Al Khansa, in the seventh century, established a literary salon in her home, as did Sukayna Bint Al-Husayn, great-granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammed, centuries later<sup>1</sup>. The tradition persisted or was periodically revived up until the twentieth and twenty-first centuries<sup>2</sup>. These relatively informal literary establishments offered an ongoing, cooperative forum in which women could hone their literary talents and exchange ideas. Perhaps this long history of literary salons is part of the reason that literature has continued to play such a central role in the Arab consciousness - literature is for sharing; it is an informal and communal activity. Whereas in the West the primacy of the shared, curated word became a casualty to technology, the oral tradition giving way to the commodity of books, subject to market fluctuations, in the East, any such breach was minimized and literary life continued to be seamlessly integrated into society. Of course, that may be an idealistic view, given that literature throughout the world has long since become a commodity, and the artists themselves, male or female, are all too often 'packaged' so as to fit the demands of the market. However, the presence of traditions and their modern translations which provide alternatives to that trend play a vital role in keeping the literary voice alive.

What, specifically, is the place of the female Arab writers within that ancient tradition and its modern permeations? The voice of the Arab woman may occasionally appear to be in dispute, but it has never been, and still is not, obscured. Rather, there is a roster of women waiting to take their places in the continuum of literary tradition, while boldly interpreting that tradition and their own identity. Whereas some women boldly speak out against repression, other women continue to weave their own perspectives into the continuation of an age-old tradition. Implicitly and by necessity, they forge their identities and promulgate their ideas in subtle or explicit opposition to that tendency to 'package' and essentialize the experience and voice of a Muslim woman. New literary voices must emerge, in part, in resistance to existing perceptions.

Yet their challenges in doing so are significant, and not least because of the perception of the stance of the Arab Muslim female writer in the West and worldwide. As Lamina Ben Zayzafoon notes, the Arab Muslim woman is "produced according to the law of supply and demand to serve various political and ideological ends"<sup>3</sup>. To determine what these ends are, one need only consider persistent American interests in Middle Eastern land and resources and the familiar, constructed figure of the 'brave'

<sup>1</sup> A. al-Uhhari, *Classical Poems by Arab Women*, London 1999, p. 58 and G. Talhami, *Historical Dictionary of Women in the Middle East and North Africa*, Plymouth 2013.

<sup>2</sup> G. Talhami, *op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> L. Moore, *Arab, Muslim, Woman: Voice and Vision in Postcolonial Literature and Film*, New York 2008, p. 2.

Muslim woman battling the oppression of her society and daring to make her voice heard. Moore rightly points out that such a figure has been made into a commodity by news media and literary criticism alike. The content of the message that these writers convey, though in practice multifarious, may all too often be distilled down to a set of predictable tropes. After all, accounts of resistance and “escape from disabling circumstances”, as Moore points out, “sell”<sup>4</sup>.

Of course, that is not to suggest that accounts of resistance and escape by Muslim women are in any way inherently inauthentic; only that such accounts may be privileged above others, and that a certain, consistent interpretation of women’s authentic accounts may be chosen and assumed without much question or debate - in some cases, without even a second look.

Taking this second look is what we should all, as readers, feel a moral obligation to do. Every writer’s message is rooted in her own lived experience and community, while the reader’s perceptions are likewise rooted in his or her own. One writer discussed here, Hissa Halal, likens herself and her poetry as a message in a bottle, hoping it will reach the other shore. Like the recipient of a message in a bottle, we must be acutely aware of what it is, exactly, that we hold in our hands; the vessel, the message within it, and somewhere beyond our reach the autonomous and complete life, the courage and the intent, of the person who wrote it. When considering the current and future literary contributions of emerging female Arab writers, one must receive their message within the context of culture but also, even more importantly, separate from it, as only doing so can create an openness which allows the awareness of new permutations of identity to flow in. If we can find the space within which to listen, the emerging voices of these female writers offer the potential to transcend and forever change entrenched positions and stereotypes.

## Re-examining tradition

When examining the voice of the currently emergent female Arab writer, one must not forget that she comes from multiple strands of history, one of them being the feminism that emerged in parts of the Arab world in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1928, Syrian writer and feminist Thunaya al-Hafez (1911-2000) established the Damascene Women’s Awakening Society promoting female membership in her nation’s intelligentsia; some years later, she started a literary salon named after Sukayna Bint Al-Husayn, her predecessor in such enterprises<sup>5</sup>. May Ziyadah had established a women’s literary

<sup>4</sup> L. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> G. Talhami, *op. cit.*

salon in Egypt as early as 1912<sup>6</sup>. Though these women appeared to be pioneers, they were certainly aware that they were part of a lineage. Al Khansa (575-664) recited her poetry in a market in Mecca, critiqued the work of other poets, and was considered the finest elegiac poet of her day<sup>7</sup>. Surely the cultural memory of such distinct figures influenced later writers. Many writers of today are incontrovertibly part of the same lineage. At the same time, the women who created and participated in the twentieth-century movement continue to exercise and hone their voices today.

Assia Djebar is an Algerian writer who was educated partly in France, and writes primarily in French<sup>8</sup>. Although her publication history dates back to the 1950s with her debut novel *La Soif* (the thirst), she has garnered international attention in the past few decades, winning prestigious literary prizes such as the Neustadt Prize for Literature (1996) and a Peace Prize for the German Book Trade (2000). Whereas *La Soif* – published under an assumed name because she feared repercussions from her family – is a coming-of-age novel about a young woman's liberation and adventures, in later years Djebar tackled topics more closely connected with the tenets of her Muslim faith. In *Far from Madina* (1991) she examines the role of women in the time of Mohammed. In fact, this novel has been called a re-telling of the Qur'an from the female perspective, as the author attempts to rehabilitate the relationship between Muslim beliefs and the status of women<sup>9</sup>. As is often noted by historians and sociologists alike, the initial effects and intention of Islam was to promote equality between men and women. It was subsequent political situations and interpretations that obscured this initial purpose.

Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan writer of the same generation as Assia Djebar, expresses a very similar perspective. In her work entitled *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Mernissi notes that Mohammed himself included his wives in social and religious practice<sup>10</sup>. The exclusion of women was a deviation from the principals outlined in the Qur'an, which the author delineates, although she questions hadith interpretations – those stemming from the collection of traditional sayings of the Prophet Muhammed, rather than from the holy book itself. Both of these authors express an important and empowering perspective – namely, the idea that the repression of women's rights and social participation represents a repudiation and indeed a perversion of Islamic principles. This stance is a valuable one as it allows women to strongly assert their right to social agency from within the faith that is a unifying tenet of their societies of origin. Once the proper orientation to women's rights has been found within Islam, women are supported by this

<sup>6</sup> J. Peterson and M. Lewis, *The Elgar Companion to Feminist Economics*, North Hampton 2001.

<sup>7</sup> A. al-Uhhari, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>8</sup> L. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 124.

religious and cultural identity rather than being bound by it. The shifting perspective also involves, of course, a rethinking of the stereotypical understanding of the 'plight' of the Muslim woman that has been perpetuated in the West.

## Protest and finding 'voice'

There can be no denying, however, that the voices of Arab female writers – like that of female writers worldwide, living in patriarchal societies everywhere - have been curtailed by social mores and socio-political circumstances. The wearing of the veil – which in itself takes several forms, and is sometimes voluntary and sometimes prescribed either by tradition or by law - may appear to invite a facile interpretation of the garment as oppressive, obscuring identity and preventing free participation. Whether and to what degree this is the case is, I would suggest, something that only a woman wearing the veil is qualified to determine. We must acknowledge that there are and must be strong individual variations in that judgment. At the same time, more generalized trends and counter-trends may well be noticed. In her examination of Iranian women and the literary tradition, Farzaneh Milani notes several far-reaching patterns and trends. Titling her study *Veils and Words*, Milani describes the interplay between the two and she identifies the enforcement of wearing the veil as a form of containment and absence, which women themselves, by engaging in writing and allowing their voices to flourish, refuse and reject<sup>11</sup>. Milani opines that veiling “curtails verbal self-expression as well as bodily expression”<sup>12</sup>, creating a “fetishized” and “idealized” public silence. Thus, the first movement to unveil, occurring in the mid 1800s, was also the era during which Iranian women first published literary works. However, Milani admits that Iranian women are currently subverting that earlier trend to equate the veil with silence. With veiling compulsory in the country, literature by women proliferates<sup>13</sup> (Milani 231).

Simin Tehran is cited by Milani as a poet overlooked by the establishment. Prevalent in a number of her poetic works, her literary creation of the 'Gypsy', a woman with a hybrid identity, a member of the society but not of it, is an “autonomous, unconventional female”<sup>14</sup>. In *Gypsy Poem #8*, the Gypsy is urged to scream and sing in response to the “terror of the night”, where “rapacious monsters” threaten women. In the midst of chaos, the Gypsy has a “longing for liberty” that is expressed through voiced, noisy and inquiring expressions: “stomp your feet/ to receive an answer”. The interplay between

<sup>11</sup> F. Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women*. Syracuse University Press 1992, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 231.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 238.

repression and expression is present throughout the poem, so that the Gypsy is almost obliterated and yet, even in her compromised state, is the emergent heroine:

*Ages dark have crushed your body, warping it inward... rise up and sing  
O Gypsy, to stay alive you must slay silence!... you must sing*

They Gypsy is quite clearly the figure of the female poet herself, fighting repression and silencing, responding to the subtle as well as the explicit dangers that face women within that silence. Life itself is equated with the ability to express oneself. It is most interesting, however, that the subject the author uses is a Gypsy, deemed in all cultures she inhabits to be an outsider, culturally and visibly different from those she encounters, perpetually the Other. Living outside of the parameters of mainstream society, and with the cultural association of the Roma with traveling, the Gypsy embodies a freedom that other women in the society would not be able to attain. At the same time, however, she is imprisoned by her own failure to truly belong. The Gypsy is, in short, a paradoxical figure.

The Gypsy is both the woman's other self and her liberator or heroine, Tehran implies. Like the Gypsy, a woman is part of the society but never truly integrated into it, always in some way apart, because the society disenfranchises her. The Gypsy therefore speaks of alienation. At the same time, the Gypsy, while sorely compromised and crushed inward, possesses a peculiar power that allows her to remerge, to redeem and rehabilitate herself, to slay silence and begin the story anew.

Hissa Hilal is a Saudi woman who caught the attention of the world's media in 2010 when she became the first female contestant on the Millions Poet Contest, described as a Middle Eastern version of American Idol – the obvious difference being that contestants on Millions Poet Contest are not judged on the basis of their ability to perform dances and catchy show tunes while wearing eye-catching costumes; rather, they are poets, reciting or reading verse and judged based on the intrinsic literary merit of their offerings. The set of the Millions Poet Contest is opulent, befitting a show of its stature and the tradition and dignity surrounding poetry itself. Among the row of contestants, Hissa Hilal stood out starkly, but it took a second glance to establish why. All the male contestants were dressed alike, but Hilal was wearing an abaya and niqab, fully veiled but for an opening that allowed her to see out. Fully protected by her garb, she was also vulnerable; before the show was to air, reports of death threats against her resounded. Western news reported that this courageous woman was 'defying death threats' in order to compete<sup>15</sup>. The very fact that a woman was participating in this highly publicized

<sup>15</sup> M. Moezzie, *Hissa Hilal Fights Fatwas with Poetry*, "Ms. Magazine Blog", 24 March 2010, <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2010/03/24/hissa-hilal-fights-fatwas-with-poetry/> [access 24 March 2010].

and public event was shocking to some segments of the public, and the content of her work made her performance unmistakably subversive.

In fact, the content of Hilal's poetic work was a strong statement against the sometimes repressive laws of her country and others in the Muslim world. The poem she shared was entitled "The Chaos of Fatwas", and as the title implies, the piece condemns the practice of violence on religious grounds. The strong sentiments are apparent in Hilal's own explanations of her presence as a contestant. That explanation in and of itself seems to focus on the ability of her message to transcend cultural boundaries and to reach, by implication, the other side of the world. Before the contest, Hilal recalls telling herself: "You'll be like a message in a bottle and reach the other side of the sea" ("Millions poet inspires millions"). Similarly, in an interview, Hilal emphasizes the ability of poetry to transcend national boundaries and build global solidarity. She stated in an interview: "Maybe poetry can do what other things couldn't – to make people feel all over the world that we have to share and care"<sup>16</sup>.

Hissa Hilal is remarkable for the fact that her radicalism does indeed take the form of a 'message in a bottle' – contained, closed (but with the potential for opening), and having a potency that is not immediately apparent. The image of that bottle is one that meshes quite well with the image of the woman covered head to toe in her dark niqab. The cover and the uniformity that it provides hides but in no way negates the power of what is inside. Perhaps the tacit message and utility of the veil is not necessarily effacement, as some have been tempted to speculate, but, rather, containment. Containment may appear, and may indeed be, repressive, but one should never underestimate the power of that which is thus contained, once it is released into the world.

Hilal's talent and message are also contained within traditional forms. In the past, she has edited books of Bedouin women's poetry, clearly interested in maintaining as well as adding to the artistic lineage in her country. She has written two collections of her own, *Lahjat Al Hail* and *Al Nadawi*. Lina Khati, Arab media expert at Stanford University in the USA quoted in Bland 2010 "It's a hybrid of the modern and the traditional. So it's packaged within acceptable parameters. Because it's poetry, one of the most respected forms of expression in the Arab world, you can push the boundaries..."<sup>17</sup>

In stark contrast to Hissa Hilal is the Muslim woman who finds freedom of expression seemingly completely outside of her heritage, or perhaps in reaction to it and to Western stereotyping of Arab women. Joumana Haddad is a controversial and outspoken figure. Her 2010 work *I Killed Scheherazade: Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman* has been called a "sexual polemic". It is an outspoken, semi-autobiographical,

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> Bland, Archie. 2010. Saudi Woman Poet Lashes Out at Clerics in 'Arabic Idol'. *The Independent*, World News: Middle East section, 24 March.

occasionally humorous work in which she blatantly attacks what she calls the hypocrisy of repressive theocratic laws and attitudes as well as the myriad stereotypes Arab women are subject to. Even the title of her work is calculated to be provocative; if there was ever a quintessentially Arab female storyteller, it is that heroine of One Thousand Nights who kept death at bay by entrancing the murderous Sultan with tale after tale. What quarrel could one have with Scheherazade? Haddad's reasoning is explained with great clarity in a prologue to her work: Scheherazade must die because it is time for women to "tell their own stories", un-coerced.

After all, there is desperation to the actions of Scheherazade. Her accomplishment is grace under pressure, at its most extreme, as not only her fate but that of myriad other maidens rests in her ability to perform, to entertain, ultimately, to please. It is a type of power that is, paradoxically, very much bound and shackled. Moreover, everything depends on the favour that Scheherazade is able to find from the powerful male gaze. The power of Haddad's work and her central concept of killing the legendary princess who has come to symbolize the grace under pressure of Arab women are explained as follows:

A historical myth had to be killed so the body, and therefore also the mind, could be liberated, and this experience had to be written so it could be better affirmed. So, before listening to noise, we must listen to silence.<sup>18</sup> (Haddad 1)

It is a simple and yet a tall order. The nature of the desired silence is something that Haddad addresses in an introductory section entitled "Dear Westerner", in which she systematically dismantles preconceptions westerners may have regarding Arab women, warning that she will not provide the "never-ending lullaby of the clash of civilizations"<sup>19</sup>. She asserts that although the misunderstanding, historically, has been mutual, it is wrong to characterize Arab women as "veiled", 'oppressed', or any of a half-dozen stereotypical concepts that are often applied. Rather, Hammad asserts the uniqueness of the individual which transcends these cultural norms. Much as her point is valid, of course, it is also tempting to view it as both simplistic and exclusive of some Arab women who do wear the veil, and who may indeed, in one way or another, feel themselves to be oppressed. However, Haddad's argument is primarily one against essentializing these – or any – qualities of the female. In the last lines of her book, an afterword addressed, this time, to both Westerners and Arabs, she makes a simple and powerful point: individual identity is changing all the time, and therefore simply cannot be pinned down or generalized. She states: "I have drastically changed *while* you were

<sup>18</sup> J. Haddad, *I Killed Scheherazade: Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman*, Chicago 2010, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

reading. And so have you”<sup>20</sup>. The best defense against the tendency to essentialize is simply the knowledge that identity itself is never static.

It may be unreasonable to blame the fictional princess for the predicament in which she finds herself, or, indeed, to fail to praise her for her ingenuity in overcoming it. It is reasonable, however, to want to find one’s way beyond the Scheherazade paradigm, and finally to shed her as one would an outworn skin. As Scheherazade is at least in some way a temptress, relying on her beauty to find favor, it may even be said that the wearing of the veil aids in freeing one from the patriarchal gaze, if only by hiding one’s essence from it. The key factor is what is created and expressed behind that barrier, and how it can find its way to the outside.

### The Importance of forums

The resurgence of the literary salon offers a forum that is enmeshed in both European and Arab history and has the potential to exist outside of the literary publishing establishment. It is event-based and cooperative. It harkens back to that earliest form, the oral tradition, as practiced by Al Khansa and her contemporaries in the marketplace in Mecca in the seventh century, as well as later incarnations of the literary salon (al-Udhari). In Damascus, Syria, a weekly poetry salon is held every Monday night at *Bayt al-Qusid*, or House of Poetry. It is described variously as a ‘populist’ and a ‘free-wheeling’ space. Though not exclusive to women, the salon encourages and engenders free participation from both men and women, most of them young and unpublished. According to participants, it is a “space for freewheeling expression in a country where that space is usually in short supply”<sup>21</sup>. Women are also finding forms for expression in purely online communities, one example being “Wallada’s Salon: Poetry of the Desert Women” (2004 to present)<sup>22</sup>. The site calls for Arabian female poets writing in English. Its pages reference Scheherazade as well as various historical female figures, clearly drawing upon a sense of shared history and bringing it forward into the contemporary era.

The creation of these poetry salons is profoundly liberating to the individual voice of the emerging artist. It is paradoxical, though, likewise, totally logical that in our current digital age a tradition harkening back to the earliest forms of literature – the oral tradition – is finding a new power and relevance. Poetry salons typically grow within fairly

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 140.

<sup>21</sup> K. Fahim and N. Mahfoud, *Evening of Poetry Provides Space for New Voices*, “Damascus Journal.” “New York Times,” 19 September 2010 [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/20/world/middleeast/20poetry.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/20/world/middleeast/20poetry.html?_r=0) [access 19 September 2010]/

<sup>22</sup> “Wallada’s Salon: Poetry of the Desert Women,” <http://www.freewebs.com/reem22/>.

tight-knit communities of participants, who share their work by reading or reciting out loud for the audience. The poet receives both support and valuable feedback from the audience. The paradigm engaged therein is fundamentally different from either a typical paid performance or sharing work through traditional publication channels. In both of those scenarios, the literary work becomes a commodity, through the sale of tickets to a performance or through the sale of a literary manuscript and, later, of a published book. In a poetry or other literary salon, the tendency toward commodification is, at most, very slight – that is, if there is a fee for participation, it is nominal, and primarily existing to cover the cost of the venue. There is no industry behind literary salons, and no potential to make a significant financial profit. Likewise, the barriers to participation are low. A literary salon is the perfect venue for an emerging writer who would not be able to gain an audience through traditional, commodified publication channels. There can, of course, be a meritocracy that occurs within the salon format, as the work of some writers and performers may become more popular than others. However, there is typically no real barrier to even those less developed in their craft to participate. Moreover, the supportive and communal environment lessens the effect of any hierarchy that emerges based on merit.

The literary salon, in which individuals share their stories and poems with a small group, obviously recalls the very beginnings of literature – the oral and storytelling traditions. Largely, the salon is a reprise of these ancient traditions, interrupted by the invention of print. However, today's digital and social media provide the opportunity for an indefinite expansion of the salon community. These impromptu and naturally small communities are no longer in any real sense closed, as the sharing of the works produced can occur almost effortlessly and with little cost through venues such as Youtube. The capabilities of social media merely extend the characteristics already present in the literary salon format – namely, the presence of a community, the communal (circular) way in which work is shared, and the absence of any profound barriers to communication. Moreover, the dispersal of individuals' work through digital media also facilitates eventual access to traditional publication in some cases.

Literary salons, in one form or another, are gaining momentum in many parts of the world. In some countries, the sharing of poetry takes the form of a contest, almost like a sporting event. These 'poetry slams' allow emerging writers to move through the ranks, some winning titles which launch them on performance tours. Even when they achieve relative fame, however, the tendency to commodify art within this particular forum is low. The poets are participants in a system of interaction rather than product or feature that one pays to access, such as through traditional publishing or performance. For Arab women, participation in a literary salon is, as has been mentioned, part of an ancient tradition which has been revived in the modern era.

## Conclusion

This paper is obviously not exhaustive, nor is it meant to be. Rather, the intention is to gauge the current status and influences upon emergent literary work by Arab Muslim women, while being mindful of the various influences that affect the propagation and perception of this work. It is also worthwhile to recognize that we cannot truly accomplish even this goal except as a description or impression of a moment in time. As Haddad implies in the conclusion of her controversial work, we “drastically change” even in the time it takes to read a book, let alone write one<sup>23</sup>. Even though history, once enshrined in published volumes, may appear to remain static, our orientation to it changes constantly. In this sense, the biggest disservice we can do to emerging writers of any persuasion is to strictly contextualize them within a time and place and make conclusion based on our impression of what those circumstances entail. And yet, as readers and consumers of literature we are constantly driven to try and delve deeper, to understand and interpret the message behind the message, hopeful that the writer’s background might give us some clues as to its nature.

The human tendency toward classification is inherent, and possibly insurmountable. This is precisely why the manner in which we view literature and the means of its propagation are such important factors. If literature is viewed primarily as a commodity and its propagation occurs through promotion and subsequent commercial success, the temptation to ‘package’ it in specific ways, to ensure that commercial success, quickly overwhelms any complexity or fluidity in its interpretation. The networks that are currently arising to foster and facilitate the sharing of ideas and of literary work are a cause for optimism. Of course, these are not perfect systems. Access to a literary salon depends hugely on one’s geographic position, and participation may be limited by informal rules consisting of community and social norms and preferences. Online forums offer greater accessibility, but the ease of their proliferation means that any success they have in showcasing literary voices may be scattered and temporary. Some such forums rise and fall with the fashion, and are not able to provide an organized and stable basis from which emerging writers can work. Nevertheless, despite their flaws, these community-based forums – whether virtual or embodied – can be a source of exposure, dialogue and improvement for emerging writers. They have the potential to circumvent commoditization and provide more direct access and contact between readers and writers. Perhaps these forms are successful because they harken back to a community-based oral tradition that flourished, in various parts of the world, for many centuries.

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<sup>23</sup> J. Haddad, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

This is not to suggest that any other mode can or will replace traditional publishing; but access to multiple channels and numerous voices can only be a positive thing, for female Muslim Arab writers as well as for writers and readers in general. For Arab women, conscious of a long history of women's writing, the empowerment that comes with access to multiple channels of expression is profound. Women continue, rehabilitate or reject the stories that have formed the conceptual frameworks of their lives. Whether the result is a re-orientation of the tenets of faith or a movement away from them, a desire to 'kill' Scheherazade or to honor her, the space opens in which they can tell their own stories and debate these issues openly. Nothing more than that is needed to foster a robust body of work from female Arab writers, as the interest and talent clearly exist.