

Recenzje

Ishaq Tijani *Male Domination, Female Revolt. Race, Class and Gender In Kuwaiti Women's Fiction*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2009, 165 pp.

The subject of women, their problems, dreams, ambitions, place in society is one increasingly examined within the Middle East. This refers both to literature as politics, daily life as well as laws and privileges. Opinions on this matter are discussed equally by men, an example of which is the book by Ishaq Tijani *Male Domination, Female Revolt. Race, Class and Gender in Kuwaiti Women's Fiction*.

The beginnings of women's movements in Kuwait go back to the second half of the twentieth century when the struggle with the traditional social scheme of Arabic society commenced, one clearly directed towards men and closed within the framework of traditional patriarchy. The author, in showing the factors conducive to an activating of women particularly in the area of literary creation, enumerates: education, the growing possibilities for female employment, class affiliation, the activities of the press, as well as the formation of women's groupings.

In the first chapter *Modern Arabic Fiction in Kuwait: Emergence and Development*, Ishaq Tijani deals with matters connected with the beginnings and development of contemporary Arab prose in Kuwait. He presents a historical sketch drawing attention to such aspects as for example the social and political structure of Kuwaiti society. Tijani basically divides his historical outline into two periods: before and after the discovery of crude oil: the period from the foundation of the state by the Banī 'Utub tribe and the subsequent stage connected with the economic development of the country after the discovery of crude oil. We have journalism to thank for the general shaping of Kuwaiti literature, beginning with the establishment by 'Abd al-Azīz ar-Ruṣayd in 1928 of the first magazine, within which the initial literary attempts of Kuwaiti writers were published, for example the first short story *Muntra* by Ḥālid al-Faraġ of 1929.

In chapter two *The Kuwaiti Female Literary Tradition: an Overview* the author emphasises how important a factor in Kuwaiti emancipation was educational reform. In 1938 there was opened the first girls' school while the University of Kuwait in 1966, several years after its founding, started to accept women enabling them with the same to gain an education. Hence the turn of the 1970s is a period of increased women's education,

and also a time when often women would depart to study abroad. The two most popular destinations at this time were Egypt and the United Kingdom. Women who obtained higher education started to work as teachers, nurses and with the passing of time also as government civil servants in ministries such as the Ministry of Education or Health. In obtaining academic degrees they started to work in institutions of tertiary education. All of these changes resulted in Kuwaiti women obtaining economic independence enabling them to realise their goals and literary ambitions.

In 1963 two organisations came into being: the Women's Cultural and Social Society and the Arab Women's Development Society. These resulted in the widespread distribution of culture and literature amongst Kuwaiti women, organising, for example, the First Kuwaiti Women's Day in 1970.

Tijani underlines that one of the fundamental viewpoints expounded by young Kuwaiti literature is the image of a woman within the context of marriage. It is indeed within this subject matter – its rituals, traditions and consequences – that the majority of criticism contained in the prose is concentrated. Of exceptional significance appears the portrait of the young girl changing into a mature woman: a mother and wife. The symbolic titles *Sirr al-muṭallaqa* (*Secret of the Divorcee*) and *Min warā' al-ḥiğāb* (*From behind the veil*) by Fāḍil Ḥalaf or *Imra'a fī inā'* (*A Woman in an Urn*) by Laylā al-'Uṭmān take the reader directly to the subject under discussion and raise questions as to the reason for the female unhappiness perceived within the patriarchal cultural model, where, for example, the absence of children appears to deprive a woman of any value whatsoever, expelling her beyond even the dregs of society. Through a united position writers are calling for social reform for the sake of the young generations. On the basis of the short stories we are able to conclude that marriage constitutes one of the overriding institutions regulating and determining the lives of women. It may constitute a route to reclaim a lost social position, the gaining of respect or the complete thwarting of a woman's aspirations.

In the third chapter *Male Domination, Female Fury in Kuwaiti Women's Short Stories* the author analyses in detail two short stories, which, according to him, have enormous influence on the shaping of the most recent Kuwaiti feminist prose. These are *Al-Intiqām al-rahīb* by Hayfā' Hāšim and *Min milaff imra'a* by Laylā al-'Uṭmān. Both short stories possess many common traits differentiating them from other works their contemporary; they deal with the question of violence against women and the means of opposition employed in relation to women in Kuwaiti society prior to the appearance of the petroleum industry. Both have a simple plot and constitute a radical and revolutionary woman's attitude towards a patriarchal society, one achieved, however, in a varied way. Finally both works present the potential displayed by a woman in the struggle with patriarchal hegemony; they touch on many problems experienced by contemporary Kuwaiti women, the most important of which are domestic violence, unequal laws, childlessness, disrespect for the psychic and physical needs of women, isolation, an inability to express patriotism. The symbol of these oppressed women are young, initially silent and passive girls who decide on radical solutions to gain their own freedom. They constituted a model and inspiration for other women writers from all over the Arab world.

The subsequent chapters IV and V are an analysis of the novels of the two Kuwaiti writers written about by Ishaq Tijani: *Whereas Laylā al-‘Uthmān’s „Wasmiyya takhruj min al-baḥr” treats the themes of love, class, and gender in pre-oil Kuwait, Ṭayyiba al-Ibrāhīm’s „Mudakkirāt khādim” explores the same themes in post-oil or contemporary Kuwait* (p. 83).

The writers depict in their novels the contemporary state within Kuwaiti society and female-male relations. They show man’s authority over a woman, for all decisions are taken by the husband, father or other male members of the family. Marriages are arranged and the woman’s opinion in the matter is not taken into consideration. The heroines’ attitudes in the novels are the expression of revolt against the fossilised social norms in force.

In the final part, chapter VI, *Culture and Gender: Sexuality, Femininity, and Identity in Fawziyya S. al-Sālim’s “Mazūn”* Tijani attempts to emphasize the significance of the novel *As-Sālim* in the awakening of consciousness amongst Arab women through its raising of topics taboo for Arab culture, such as: sexuality, motherhood, abortion, circumcision. The novel *Mazūn* describes the story of three generations of Arab women, played out in Oman, Kuwait, Zanzibar, Cairo and Paris. The main heroes are *Zayāna*, *Zuwayna* and *Mazūn*, whose names derive from the Arabic word *zīna*, which means adultery. The reader perceives within the figures of the heroines various models of women in Eastern society.

Ishaq Tijani’s book *Male Domination, Female Revolt. Race, Class and Gender in Kuwaiti Women’s Fiction* on Kuwaiti literature is in my opinion one of the most interesting that I have managed to read on the topic. It is written in a clear and accessible way, supplemented by detailed footnotes which explain concepts that are not necessarily obvious to every reader. The broadly presented cultural and literary background makes accessible the tools needed to understand the account that emanates from the Kuwaiti writers’ works.

The author in referring to Kuwaiti, though equally more general Arab reality, presents an in-depth knowledge on the subject. The conditions and relations in force within the local patriarchal society of the countries of the Gulf is explained by the author in detail. This enables for a better understanding of both the background for the works as their actual subject matter.

Ishaq Tijani attempts to be objective and does not impose his own views onto the material under consideration, while at the same time desiring to aid the reader in understanding the source materials at a level beyond their initial layered structure. The author presents an in-depth analysis of the life of the individual, her experiences, disappointments and hopes inseparably connected with life in a patriarchal society. He researches the means by which the undergoing changes within modern society are presented, depicting the influence of customs and traditions on the fate of the protagonists, perceiving these as the main cause for the unjust treatment of the works’ heroines.

The work is based on extensive source materials. The only matter that for me was missing was a more expansive body of quotations. Nonetheless, with regard to its factual core, the work is an interesting academic account and above all the original selection of works and the subject matter analysed upon their basis is for me the unquestionable value represented by the work; something that is equally the case for the non-specialist.