
Anthologies of poetic traditions showcasing male and female pre-Islamic and Islamic poets have preserved the work of leading poets for posterity and in the process admirers of Arabic poetry have a wealth of figures whose work and lives are studied to this day. *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology* is a riveting, superbly crafted tapestry synthesizing impressive vignettes of the diverse voices of Arab women poets.

This pioneering work answers, for the first time in English, the need for a record of contemporary Arab female poets from well-established ones to regional poets as well as emerging figures. In doing so, it has also served to link contemporary poets in a historic timeline that traces the development of pre-Islamic poets to current day composers, while highlighting the evolution of Arabic poetry from its set and long-held rules to the current free verse and other types of evolving verse that has its following throughout the Arab world.

Regardless of the languages in which the featured 83 poets compose their work, this anthology illustrates the trends that unite the poets. It sheds light on poets from countries including Lebanon, Jordan, Yemen, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, as well as Arab-American and Arab-Canadian poets, their culture, backgrounds, factors that influence their work and their unique contributions.

This work reflects voices of survival, freedom, contention, the need for social reform, the quest for peace and in many instances the political climate and effect of war and dispossession on the poets and their communities. The courageous voices featured illustrate the aspects of the daily lives of the poets, their own growth, the role which tradition, religion and beliefs play in their lives and the lives of those around them. It also serves to broaden the readers’ views of Arab women on the whole and of Arab poets living in the Arab world or outside it.

In the opening pages of this Academy of American Poets bestseller book, the editor Nathalie Handal refers to the importance of poetry in the Arab world stating that “Arab women poets have participated in this illustrious literary tradition since pre-Islamic times” (p. 1). She then goes on to cite famous poetesses and their role in the evolution of Arab and Islamic world’s literary history.
This is followed by a brief historic account of Arab women writers of the nineteenth century and their place in the literary scenes in various Arab countries. In doing so, she alludes to the factors that led to the struggle to break away from neoclassical poetry and the role women played in this phenomenon. They did so, through their awareness of the value of collectivity and establishment of literary salons in the tradition of salons established by early Muslim female poets hundreds of years ago, predating popular salons in sixteenth-century Europe.

This is followed by a foray into the thematic and stylistic evolution of Arab poetry, the role of leading poets such as Kahlil Gibran, Amin Rihani and the Iraqi poet, Nazik al-Mala‘ika who heralded in free verse by defining her vision of the theoretical structure of this form and the need for it to mirror the experiences of contemporary Arab poets. The editor also covers the emergence of the prose poem and the differentiation between such verse in Arabic and English.

She then touches on the factors that have led to the rise in Arab female poets’ the need for self realization and personal identity while referring to various feminist literary activists.

One of the most important features of this book is the categorization of the poets by geographical region and the analysis the editor embarked on in tracing the characteristics of each group, their growth, and the factors that influenced their thinking and work. Country by country and in some cases region by region, a well-informed analysis is undertaken of the early stages of contemporary poetry in each country, the role of education, in some cases migration or exile from the country of origin, politics, feminist movements, as well as the constraints and boundaries set by societies on the compositions of the featured poets.

Starting with Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine the prominent characteristics of the works are brought forth. Referring to the creation of a francophone literature of Arab writers writing in French such as the work of Etel Adnan, the pioneering Arab American and multicultural poet, and Nadia Tuéni, the editor notes the importance of a homeland, the role of war, the growth of feminist consciousness and the role played by an Islamic reawakening as well as women’s movement, all factors that came together to assist women to become more aware of Islamic principles and empowered them on socio-cultural levels. The call for reform, following the Lebanese civil war became, according to the editor a model for other women poets and writers in the Arab world from Iraq to Saudi Arabia and Yemen in the 1970s.

Handal also refers to the Palestinian poets’ work as “filled with dark shadows of blood and death, struggle and resistance” (p. 19), and points out the
love of homeland, the strains of daily life and oppression as illustrated in the work of numerous poets led by one of the most prominent women writers, literary critics and poets, Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Fadwa Tuqan the avant garde poet and other Palestinian poets whose work has been published in English, Hebrew, Swedish and Arabic.

Handal then makes the transition to the influences of war in other areas of the Arab world when she notes that a recurring theme of war is picked by most poets from countries such as Iraq and Yemen, while the yearning for freedom is echoed by all the featured poets irrespective of their mother country. War and its connection with identity is illustrated throughout the work as seen in the work of the Iraqi-American poet Dunya Mikhail when she invokes her roots and homeland in “Rain”:

The evening is white
and the heart is an icy carnation.
The evening is white
history is snow
the eyes
Baghdad Observer
your hands
the appointments’
snow (p. 210).

After analyzing the influences of different countries and geographic regions on the poets’ work, the editor includes a section on Arab-American and Arab-Canadian women starting off with a historical perspective of the emigration of predominantly Christian families from the Levant and Palestine and then the emigration of Muslims following the 1940s and the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Handal touches on the emergence of Arab-American organizations in the 1970s and 1980s, the publication of literary journals and magazines and the recent inclusion of this vital group in multicultural and American anthologies. With the increase in Muslim emigrants and the growth of the Muslim population, an added feature is the presence of those who identify themselves as Muslim American poets and writers. This notwithstanding the Arab-American poets have, according the editor, “gone back to their culture of origin and tried to understand it, be part of it, nourish it and expand it in their lives and beings, while remaining in an American context or background” (p. 44).

The role of Arab identity is highlighted in the poem “Arabic” by Naomi Shihab Nye, the leading Arab-American poet:
The man with laughing eyes stopped smiling
To say “Until you speak Arabic-
you will not understand pain”.

Something to do with the back of the head,
An Arab carries sorrow in the back of the head
That only language, cracks, the thrum of stones
weeping, grating hinge on old metal gate (p. 243).

The issue of cultural identity and questioning Arab identity is also alluded to and the effect of the Gulf War on young writers in their “profound self revelation”, the influences of politics and stereotypes, and discrimination are all clearly defined in this section. Handal then showcases the works of numerous popular American poets such as Nye, as well as Lisa Suhair Majaj, D.H. Melhem, Brenda J. Moossy and Lorene Zarou-Zouzounis.

Handal defines the steps she had to take for this project to proceed, from the difficult task of locating the poets in a time of faxes and then later on during the early days of emails which helped improve communication. This, according to her, has in a way limited the number of featured poets. She acknowledges that there are probably numerous poets that are not included due to the non-availability of contact data in spite of the various methods she used in trying to trace them through various organizations. The editor also states her aim of including more poets in future printings.

Another feature that imbues this volume with richness and diversity is the approach Handal used to translate the poems composed in numerous languages including Arabic, French, and Swedish while adhering to a complex translation system to fully capture the poets’ thrust.

*The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology* is definitely an ambitious project entailing a tremendous amount of work in translating compositions and establishing the intricate process of bridging the cultural and linguistic variances in numerous languages. The work fully serves the poets’ intent through establishing a working process that includes translations, edits and re-edits. This in itself is an amazing exercise when one takes into consideration the differences in poetic traditions, images, ideas, religious and cultural references, rhyme, meter and technical aspects of compositions.

One choice Handal made helped a long way towards rendering the poems into English, her choice of working with translators who are rooted in the original and targeted languages and who are poets in and of themselves. Another choice that added the finishing touch was working with established British poets on the final stage to smooth out the English text.
The inclusion of short biographies of the featured poets offers a fascinating insight into their lives, adding another dimension to the compositions featured. The bios also reflect the editor’s selection of featured poets based on technical and artistic merit in addition to their sense of history, even though she did also include non-established poets in order to highlight new voices.

The anthology on the whole serves to satisfy to some extent the curiosity about the status of women in the Arab world and shows awareness of their remarkable contributions and creativity. It truly serves to, as Handal states, “eradicate invisibility” of Arab female poets and fulfils the editor’s aim to “bridge the religious, linguistic and geographical space existing among Arab women worldwide” (p. xii, ‘preface’).

Encompassing the diversity that characterizes the Arab world in general, this objective and balanced analysis of the rich traditions of both the past and the present in the realm of poetry is a must read for poets, poetry students and the general public. According to the editor, the book is currently included in curriculums in many universities worldwide, but mainly in the United States.

One of the most remarkable results of this work is the way it can help change perceptions as Handal stated when asked (by the reviewer): “Those who have a chance to read this book, will see Arab women differently afterwards, that is the power of the word. Also, creative mediums are powerful weapons — they not only take us to new words, works and worlds but they awaken in us the need to know more and hopefully help us build bridges of understanding”.

Nimah Ismail Nawwab


These lectures were delivered in the summer of 1979, soon after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. As such, they may be viewed more as a defence of the new order than an unbiased, disinterested analysis of a historical event.