

Getting Beyond Grape Leaves

Arab-American women tell their stories

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1996

a review of

Food for our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists, Edited by Joanna Kadi, South End Press, Boston, 1994, \$16.00

There's sand in the pages of my edition of *Food for our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*. This is not a derogatory reference to those named in the title, but rather because I am reviewing the anthology of poetry and essays at Makena Beach, on Maui in Hawaii.

It's where I live now, having spent most of my life in a Palestinian family in Detroit, in the midst of a large Arab-American community. I miss the interaction with women, especially first-generation Arab-American women like me. Arab-American women, and the writers in this book, would understand how I felt when, at a party shortly after I arrived in Hawaii, I was asked my nationality, and the information that I was Palestinian stopped the conversation cold. The veil, as it were, descended.

Other People's Definitions

Poet Lucille Clifton has said that "one of the blessings of being born an African-American woman on this continent is that I learned early not to buy other people's definitions, especially their definitions about who I was." The women in this book are just beginning to feel this freedom. Nearly every writer expresses the confusion of living between cultures, and of never completely finding her place.

Martha Ani Boudakian writes, "I live a hyphenated existence—two poles coexisting...I function in two worlds, and I am on the margin in both of them..." Thus, the question of what to call oneself arises frequently in the book. Often, writes L.J. Mahout, "it has depended on the company." In "Say French," poet D.H. Melhem's persona is that of a mother advising her child to deny her roots—her way of protecting her against racism:

"immigration officials and neighbors / employers perplexed by exotics / non-anglo-saxon / non-west-European-non-toxic / attest / the best are / types here / longer...// people don't mean / to be mean I nevertheless / better say / french."

A fascinating debate occurs in the context of color. Are Arab-American and Arab-Canadian women white or "other?" My own decision to call myself brown or "of color" reflects both political and personal experience—with western feminism, with racism, with imperialism. It is a choice that I continue to make, notwithstanding a horrible little argument on the subject I had recently with my blood sisters, who consider themselves white. The thoughts of the authors on the question of color were wholly gratifying, for they elucidated the experience which led me to

my own choice. Lisa Suhair Majaj, a Palestinian-American, and others write about spending much of their lives “passing:”

“While the incidents that first made me afraid to reveal myself were minor—pointed questions, side-long glances, awkward silences—they were enough to thrust me firmly back into a desire for invisibility. But passing, as I was to learn, wreaks implicit violence on the lived reality of our experiences. Passing demands quiet. Silence, with time atrophies the voice...Silence made it possible for me to blend into my surroundings, chameleon-like; it enabled me to absorb without self-revelation what I needed to know. But its implications were disastrous...I do not know at what point I began to choke. Perhaps there was never a single incident, just a slow disposition of sediment over time. Until one day, retching, I spat out some unnameable substance. And I attempted to speak.”

Many of these authors traveled to the Middle East in hopes of answering their questions of identity. Their writings are reminiscent of the journal I kept during my own trip to Palestine— anecdotes about “security” precautions (for Arabs) at Tel Aviv Airport; of homes bulldozed without cause; of tear gas canisters, inscribed with “Made in Pennsylvania, U.S.A.” collected by children; of the pervasive, intimidating specter of soldiers and settlers armed to the teeth. I still see the home in which my mother grew up, and my grandfather—who, at 92, has lived through four occupations—explaining as he showed me the holes in the walls, “These are the bullets of the British, here the Jordanian, here the Israeli.”

Political And Human Rights

My trip allowed me to speak with some authority about the political and human rights situation of the West Bank and Gaza once I returned; after years of public speaking about Palestine it was vitally important for me to be able to say, yes, I have seen and heard and experienced what I talk about. It seemed that simple. Yet I recognize now that in other ways the journey raised more questions than it answered, and this feeling is reinforced by the writers here.

Mary Salome, who identifies herself as a “living being, a human being, a woman, a lesbian, a Syrian-Irish-American, and a feminist,” discovered on-her pilgrimage that the Middle East was no more “home” than America, and that “there is rarely room for me to claim all of who I am.”

These women are still experimenting, still searching for their definitions. In those instances where they choose to defy ethnic definition altogether they are particularly compelling. Marilyn Rashid (who is also a Fifth Estate contributor) writes. “Instead of Arab and American I’d rather deal with words of smaller places or regions you can see and smell, places you can imagine or realistically get around in.

Michigan, where I was born, or Michigami, as the original inhabitants called it, the imprint of the hand of the great spirit; and Lebanon, the Lebanon, Marjayoun, J’daidit...I am most comfortable, I suppose, defining myself as a Detroitier...in spite of its many social problems, or perhaps because of them, I am proud to have survived here, to have made real connections with others...”

Plastic And Hairless

For Boudakian, “My liberation has made me even more delightfully uppity. I no longer feel obligated to explain myself to the dominant culture or to receive validation from it...I no longer want to be plastic and hairless with conical tits...I feel accountable to the forces that matter: white mainstream culture is not one of them.” Boudakian’s rebellion against name as synonymous with identity continues: her biography states that “she is co-founder of an organization of Armenian feminists that may choose not to name itself.”

Food is a major motif in ethnic North American literature. perhaps because it is a way to preserve our past while asserting our difference from the majority culture. The metaphor is not lost on the writers of *Food for our Grandmothers*, and is appropriate in “Chalked Out” and in “Mint, Tomatoes, and the Grapevine.” But enough already.

Editor Joanna Kadi takes food and spiritual hunger to melodramatic extremes. In the awful pun, “Five Steps to Creating Culture,” Kadi compares making yogurt to sustaining “cultural awareness.”

Each section of the book begins with a recipe and alludes to the character of staple food in the Arab-world diet, but the titles are awkward and the secondary connections made to women’s lives are often a stretch: “Olives—Our Roots Go Deep. Where We Came- From:” “Grapeleaves-Tangled Identities: Claiming Our Selves;” “Mint—Moving Beyond Survival: Celebrating Who We Are,” etc. Tangled identities, indeed. Printing errors also abound making for annoying reading at times.

I was disappointed, too, in the discussion of women and war. Women in Third World struggles for self-determination invariably find themselves participating fully in the larger battle while simultaneously having to combat sexism and misogyny. When they hold up their societal, cultural, familial infrastructures they are called heroic, but putting them on such a pedestal leaves their own issues unheard and unaddressed. Some good points are made along these lines in this book. Nada Elia covered the civil war in Lebanon as a journalist from 1983 to 1987. She argues that “to examine international feminism in terms of the Gulf War would, once again, validate the patriarchal, militaristic discourse feminism seeks to undermine...I do not see the entry of women into the war machine as a feminist achievement.”

“Demonized Arab Men”

In “Military Presences and Absences,” Theresa Saliba discusses the American media’s marketing of the Gulf War through “demonized Arab men and captive or absent Arab women,” which reinforced existing power relations. Neither, however, take these ideas to the next necessary level. There is no discussion of the fact that many of the troubles of Arab-American and -Canadian women come from within their familial and societal units (although Mahoul elsewhere candidly discusses the class, color, gender and sexuality biases within her own family).

I suspect this would amount to an airing of our dirty laundry in public, and that the Arab community in North America is not comfortable in its position here to do that just yet. Without this airing, though, the discussion is weakened. Instead, we are treated to the musings of Zana Macki, who describes the Gulf War as “problematic” and “taxing.” Problematic? Taxing? How about criminal, and obscene?

She further minimizes the ramifications of the Gulf War with an anecdote about “getting even” with a Congressman who repeated a crude joke about Iraqi women in which fish figured in the punch line. Macki and her colleague sent 15 pounds of catfish to the offender to “help him understand the difference between women and catfish.” Arab-American activism meets the soundbite.

The authors make too few positive connections with other women of non-western roots. They seldom get beyond critiquing the racism and classism of much of mainstream western feminism. In an essay on eurocentric attitudes among white western feminists (“Global Sisterhood: Where Do We Fit In?”), Michele Sharif seems almost surprised by the discovery, whereas if one were to ask any radical, African-American woman, for example, such shortcomings of mainstream feminism would not be news.

This omission is balanced by the numerous references to standards of western beauty which clearly affect the collective psyche of women of color. But even this issue is not explored to the degree that it could be. Hoda Zaki’s treatment of this issue, though, struck at the absurdity of it all with great wit. “Hairless in Gaza (or plucking the lines of gender difference)” alludes to the practice of using a mixture of sugar and water as a facial, arm and leg depilatory: “a glue to bind all women,” producing “numbing pain” but, once the process is completed, “our onoutha (femininity) asserted/And we are ready for anything.”

Food for our Grandmothers is an uneven read. Perhaps it is inevitable, since so many of our stories are yet to be explored. It is important, though in bringing together voices rarely heard in any form. Arab women of North America are, at last, beginning to speak.

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