

SHELF LIFE

by ELIAS MUHANNA

SO MANY ANTHOLOGIES EXUDE A weary air, devoted as they are to tracing the outlines of a canon or a career. Perhaps the best thing about *Tablet and Pen: Literary Landscapes From the Modern Middle East* (Norton; \$35), which samples 100 years' worth of fiction, poetry and memoir from four major world languages, is its devout and unapologetic eclecticism. There are a few familiar names, such as Orhan Pamuk and Naguib Mahfouz, but the vast majority of the collection's sixty-nine authors will be unfamiliar to most Anglophone readers. Among them are Parvin E'tesami and Forugh Farrokhzad, who gave voice to the quiet miseries of many women in midcentury Iran long before the West grew smitten with Marjane Satrapi and Azar Nafisi. And there's the fiction of Ismat Chughtai, an Indian feminist whose stories treated themes of lesbianism and sexual awakening in a colonial society, scandalizing India's British overseers.

Tablet and Pen is a pleasant surprise from its editor, Reza Aslan, an Iranian-American writer whose previous two books, *No god but God* and *How to Win a Cosmic War*, covered different ground. The former, a lucid introduction to Islamic history and religion, was published in 2005 to critical acclaim, and has become an international bestseller and a staple of college courses. *Tablet and Pen*, the fruit of a collaboration between Norton and Words Without Borders, a nonprofit committed to promoting literature in translation, seems similarly tailored to the higher-education market. It is not hard to imagine that professors of world literature and Islamic civilization will view this capacious and thoughtfully arranged collection as a godsend.

The anthology is divided into three major periods (1910–50, 1950–80 and 1980–2010) and contains several short essays and author biographies by its three regional editors (Michael Beard, Sholeh Wolpé and Zeenut

Ziad). While recognizing the enormous diversity exhibited by the eleven countries represented in the anthology, Aslan argues that what unites their literatures is “a common experience of Western imperialism and colonial domination: the disrupted histories and ravaged lands, the depletion of resources and inequities in wealth and status, the long struggles for sovereignty, and the vacuums of power and identity that so often followed independence from foreign rule.” Such preoccupations, he suggests, represent a common “Middle Eastern” condition, and one not shared by Hebrew literature, which “reflects



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certain social and historical realities that do not align with themes of imperialism, colonialism, and Western cultural hegemony.”

Many of the anthology's selections fit snugly into a postcolonial paradigm. Ghasan Kanafani's “Letter From Gaza” and the poems of Mahmoud Darwish contend with the saga of Palestinian dispossession, while the blistering verses of the Iraqi poet Mozaffar al-Nawwab mock the West and its Arab puppets, who sit “beneath the square-root sign on the sand,” with testicles like “impotent castanets...clicking and jangling all the way to the White House.” The purest expression of the collection's theme is the excerpt from the Iranian thinker Jalal Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi* (“Westoxification”), a political tract that portrays the rise of the West as a fundamental confrontation between rich and poor, in which every conflict and coup d'état is motivated by “the expansionist aims of

mechanized industry.”

Yet the anthology frequently strains against its organizing conceit. The poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad contemplates not a civilizational Other but a far more intimate one: “I have sinned a rapturous sin/beside a body quivering and spent/I do not know what I did O God,/In that quiet vacant dark.” While many twentieth-century Iranian intellectuals have been critical of Western interference in their national politics, Parvin E'tesami and Nader Naderpour were no less disparaging of Iran's religious establishment. Consider Naderpour's scandalous description of Shiism's

holy city of Qom as “a joyless garden/with sparse trees/empty of laughter/silent of speech.” Similarly, many of the Turkish writers in the collection direct their gaze inward, focusing less on Western imperialism than on their own historical traditions. Aziz Nesin's humorous and heartbreaking reflections about his childhood in Istanbul during the 1920s summon images of a society teetering between tradition and modernity. Recounting his experience as a young boy of an important rite of passage, the memorization of a chapter of the Koran, Nesin describes how his mother lamented that she could afford to prepare only a plate of *börek* (cheese pastry) rather than the more expensive *helva* (honeycake) to celebrate the occasion. “Somehow,” he writes, “I can't make my own children understand now what that sadness meant.”

Other writers reflect on the position of the West vis-à-vis their traditions, but they characterize the relationship in unexpected ways. In “The Future of the Arabic Language,” Khalil Gibran explains that while the East once held sway over the West, it now lacks the means to imitate it effectively: “Whereas the Westerners in the past consumed what we cooked, partaking of our food, swallowing it, and transforming what was useful to their very being, the Easterners, at present, consume what the Westerners cook; they swallow their food, but it does not become part of their being.” For Gibran, Western imperialism is less the principal agent of Eastern submission than a beneficiary and facilitator of it.

The influence of Western political, economic and cultural hegemony on writers and poets in the modern Islamic world (or, as Aslan puzzlingly insists on calling it, the “Middle East”) is undeniable. However, the sheer variety of *Tablet and Pen* makes one wonder whether it is the prism through which its literature should be consistently read. ■

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