



Nawar Al-Hassan Golley. *Reading Arab Women's Autobiography: Shahrazad Tells Her Story.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. xv + 236 pp. ISBN 978-0-292-70544-9; ISBN 978-0-292-70545-6.



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Three Times Removed From Narratives of the Completed Self

Nawar Al-Hassan Golley's *Reading Arab Women's Autobiography: Shahrazad Tells Her Story* aims to study the different ways Arab women represent themselves, and how these representational artifacts are presented to the West. Although part of a growing body of criticism on Arab women's writing both within its native context and the Western academy, the book sets itself apart as a pioneering attempt to systematically study a group of autobiographical texts produced by women in the Arab world, and is aimed as a first step toward extensive coverage of the topic. It is also a study that focuses on the interrogation of Western theoretical methodologies, assessing the impact of their application on these texts, as well as how suitable they are to such a task.

Golley argues that Arab women write differently, and that this difference is played out in the collective nature of their writings, where individuality is figured in a different key. This collectivity, however, does not preclude heterogeneity in the conditions and selves depicted, and the author makes the persuasive argument that the material treated is too multifaceted to be reduced to one critical methodology or the other. Hence, Golley funnels her

project through a tripartite theoretical cluster, engaging with feminism, Marxism, and colonial discourse to the end of assessing the exigencies of analyzing other cultures; she also does a good job of orienting this theoretical cache to the social, cultural, and political contexts that lead to the kind of reading performed in the study.

In the first part of the book, "Political Theory," the most important topic, with which Golley engages head-on, is the public/private dichotomy and its problematic deployment within an Arab feminist context. Even though colonialism did have its impact on the Arab world, and therefore on Arab women, it is also an epistemological paradigm for the plight of women in the West; as such, feminism becomes counter-discourse on both sides of the imperial divide. Yet Western feminism unwittingly becomes prone to exercising the same kind of "imperialism" that gives rise to it in the first place; for when it attempts to apply blindly such "local" concepts as the aforementioned public/private dichotomy on a "global" scale, it purports to a universality that all the same maintains the very structures of domination it is attempting to overthrow. To that effect, Golley's nuanced reading

of—among other things—the Oriental harem and the Islamic veil as space(s) does a fine job of unpacking and complicating this binary; and even though the latter are two particular instances, they synecdochically stand in for a much larger problem inherent in employing Western paradigms to read the “text” of Arab women’s experience.

In part two, “Narrative Theory,” Golley dismantles the traditional definition of the autobiographic genre as a white male’s narrative of the completed self, a conception that marginalizes the self-representing textual practices of those who do not correspond to such a role. This, however, is not simply a matter of replacing one subjectivity with another, because inherent in the critique is skepticism of the very category “completed self.” Golley discusses possible alternatives, including those proposed by psychoanalysis and deconstruction, yet finds them ultimately lacking for the purposes of her project. The author argues that, on the one hand, the psychoanalytic approach retains the singularity and individuality of the ego, even if in a perennial state of flux; on the other, deconstruction dissolves subjectivity until all that remains is “writing.” For Golley, Arab women’s textuality is too political an assertion as to warrant the dissolution of referentiality; further, through rupturing the normative mode of autobiography, she does away with its notion of individuality, making space for a subjectivity in Arab women’s writing that is not “complete” as such, but rather an integral—albeit outstanding—part of a greater, collective whole.

Another aspect of the abovementioned rejection of the autobiographic norm finds its realization in “Analysis of Texts,” part three of Golley’s book. The traditional conception of autobiography as a genre suggests that one is dealing with text that, despite intending to represent some aspect of its author’s reality, is highly implicated in a very particular literary—aesthetic, stylistic, rhetorical—context. However, a non-Western, female perspective

deploys an alterity that triples the remove from the Western, male premise by stretching the grounds of a genre that made no space for it to begin with. Consequently, it comes as little surprise to find Golley’s methods non-traditional as such, and the unorthodox combination of authors and texts studied adds up when one becomes aware of this approach. For despite reference to “autobiographies” in the title of the book, what we look at instead is a host of writings that are “autobiographical” in nature: memoir coexists with interview, fictional autobiography with travelogue, as well as, of course, “normative” autobiography.

Among the group of texts treated in Golley’s study are anthologized interviews conducted by “Arab” women and “written” in European languages, through which Arabic as an identity marker is displaced in order to make more inclusive a space for the writing of the self. In theory, this advocacy for the displacement of Arabic as the unique language of Arab women’s expression is an exciting and progressive prospect; in this context, though, it raises very serious questions about self-representation, precisely because this displacement is not actively practiced by women telling their own stories, nor is the final product directed toward a “native” audience, let alone accessible to the persons involved in its creation. The author is to be commended for addressing this issue by carefully pointing out the limitations of these interviewees, as well as making salient the very restricted space in which a self can be, would be, or even is constructed in these texts given the circumstances and modes of production.

Reading Arab Women’s Autobiography: Shahrazad Tells Her Story will be of interest to specialists in Arabic literature, feminist academics, and humanities scholars in general. Although it is clearly aimed at a Western readership, many of its insights will also be quite relevant to a potential Arabic-speaking audience, and one would hope to see it translated, especially in light of the valid critique Golley makes regarding the problem of representation.

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