

*New Voices of Arabia. The Short Stories. An Anthology from Saudi Arabia*, ed. Abdulaziz al-Sebail and Anthony Calderbank, I.B. Tauris, London 2012, 256 pp.

The anthology of Saudi Arabian short stories entitled *New Voices of Arabia. The Short Stories. An Anthology from Saudi Arabia*, which has been jointly edited by Abdulaziz al-Sebail and Anthony Calderbank is a selection of the most representative, though also extremely varied short forms of prose from a country whose literature does not belong to either the best known or the most frequently translated, this including translations into English. It is enough to recall that Denys Johnson-Davies, the author of a most impressive number of translations of contemporary Arabic prose in the collection of short stories entitled *Under the Naked Sky. Short Stories from the Arab World* from 2000, included a mere two works by Saudi authors, these being *The Dog* by Abd al-Aziza Mishri and *Whiteness of Silver* by Abdullah Bakhshaween. In a subsequent anthology of Arabic literature entitled *The Anchor Book of Modern Arabic Fiction* also edited by Denys Johnson-Davies, which was published for the first time in 2006, amongst over seventy authors whose works either in their entirety or in parts were included in the book we find a solitary representative of Saudi prose. What is more the national affiliation of this author, Abd ar-Rahman Munif, as suggested by the volume's editor, may be controversial and raise a question as to whether this qualification is apt.

The anthology by Dalya Cohen-Mor entitled *Arab Women Writers. An Anthology of Short Stories* and published in 2005, provides us with a few more translations of works from Saudi Arabia. Here we come into contact with three Saudi women writers Umajmy al-Khamis, Sharify al-Shamlan and Kharrii al-Saqqaf.

One could also mention a few more collections of Arabic literature in English translation, yet from a cursory overview of publications aiming at bringing the reader closer to contemporary Arabic literature in an anthological form it is clearly visible that they do not constitute a accurate and reliable picture of the state of literary writing in Saudi Arabia.

One of the first attempts at bringing Saudi prose closer to an English-speaking readership was the anthology published in 1997, *Voices of Change: Short Stories by Saudi Arabian Women Writers*, edited by Abubakr Bagader, Ava Heinrichsdorff and Deborah Akers. The collection, in spite of being innovative and exceptionally valuable in content, concentrated, however, exclusively on women's writing and consequently did not present a full picture of Saudi literary output. Maybe that is why in 2002 Abubakr Bagader, in cooperation with Deborah Akers, published in Jeddah translations of short stories written by Saudi male and female writers in *Whispers from the Heart. Tales from Saudi Arabia*.

In the area of poetry, a work on Saudi literature worthy of note and admiration, one presenting a valuable selection of lyrical translations, is the book by Moneera al-Ghadeer entitled *Desert Voices: Beduin's Women Poetry in Saudi Arabia* published in 2009. Equally this time the editor has concentrated exclusively on women poets narrowing consequently the field of study and limiting somewhat the scope for the work's reception, being exclusively Bedouin poetry.

It does follow though to recognise that the most important anthology to date on contemporary Saudi literature containing translations of poetic, dramatic and prose works without division into the gender of the creators is the book *Beyond The Dunes: An Anthology of Modern Saudi Literature* published in 2006. Its editors being Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Mansour al-Hazimi and Izzat Khattab. The significance of the work is borne out by the fact that in 2009 a French version under the editorship of Abubakr Bagader was devised upon its basis.

The rather modest quantity of translations by which the reader has been able to become acquainted with contemporary Saudi literature, has resulted in an even greater welcome for the anthology edited by Abdulaziz al-Sebaili and Anthon Calderbank. In a collection numbering over four hundred pages we can find the names of forty two writers. These include both men and women, both representatives of the oldest generation, who are referred to as the precursors of Saudi prose (e.g., Ibrahim an-Nasser), as well as writers who have only relatively recently made their debut (e.g., Adi al-Herbish). The works in the volume have been translated by seven different translators. It is worth noting that one of these is Paul Starkey, for many years now known for his translation undertakings, and with it the author of the book *Modern Arabic Literature*.

The editors of the volume have not attempted to apply any rules in the arranging of the materials. The works are not grouped by sex. Neither is their division according to subject matter or the historical period they were created in. There is equally no link amongst the works with regard to formal artistic conceptions as presented by their authors. The only principle adopted in the organisation of the works is the alphabetical ordering of the writers' surnames, according to which the individual works are placed.

The collection *New Voices of Arabia. The Short Stories. An Anthology from Saudi Arabia* brings to us, first and foremost, an extremely broad perspective in viewing Saudi short forms of writing like the short story. This perspective covers the writers themselves and their personalities. It shows their individual artistic and existential experiences, which have consequently found reflection both in the fables constructed, the means of conducting narration as well as the language used. This literary voice carries within it traces of the artistic quest. It points to aesthetic preferences and formal inspirations. Finally, the reader is exposed to traits of creative originality and the unique style of certain writers. This 'author's' perspective also brings with it interesting comparative material both within the local Saudi dimension as equally the world. Concrete artistic tendencies in the way of constructing the literary communiqué constitute the starting point in reading the works of particular authors. They allow us to perceive the similarity and differences in the self expression of certain writers. They give the possibility of grasping the dominating formal concepts and connecting them with the content layer within the short stories.

On the other hand, the anthology, beside the figures of the artists themselves, brings with it a broad thematic range. This aspect may be especially valuable within the perspective of the cultural meeting that reading Saudi Arabian short stories constitutes. In essence the works contained are their own form of chronicle, the pages of which gradually reveal the Saudi landscape and pictures of its inhabitants. This does not, however, mean that

this is easy reading. This collection of Saudi short stories is also a mosaic that we have to put together ourselves. For it requires attention and care to place the pieces in such a way so that finally the picture reveals itself for one to enjoy and marvel. This picture is one presenting the dynamic image of the changes that have occurred over the course of decades in Saudi Arabian society. The confrontation with unhampered modernity, the role of tradition in an evolving society, the widely accepted model of behaviour with the unavoidable need for greater openness in the sphere of inter-cultural relations are merely a few of the problems broached by Saudi writers. Their way of perceiving the world is intensely individualised and passes through the prism of artistic perspective, yet harbours within itself a subtle truth about the reality in which they live and with which they are internally united. The short stories present before our eyes a panorama of generic-dramatic scenes drawn from the Saudi cultural setting. As results from the content of the short stories at the basis of Saudi literature lies respect for its own past with a simultaneous desire to maintain traditions after their adaptation to new contents and functions. I consider a minus to be the book's confusing list of contents. It is a pity that there is not to be found under the surnames the titles of the stories themselves. The anthology *New Voices of Arabia* constitutes an opportunity to become acquainted with Saudi Arabia within the universal expanse of literature.

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“Women (in Saudi Arabia) have since committed suicide because they couldn’t leave the house, and Sophia is running around,” Ali al-Ahmed, director of the Institute for Gulf Affairs, told Newsweek. “Saudi law doesn’t allow non-Muslims to get citizenship. Did Sophia convert to Islam? What is the religion of this Sophia and why isn’t she wearing hijab?”