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“Women in Print”

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I'm glad that I'm the second speaker, because what Randa has said is sort of an introduction to all that I want to say. Basically, the cultural context that she talked about is the same context I'm going to talk about. The whole title of this session is “Women in Print,” so my focus is women in literature, or rather women writers, which is not very different from women journalists. It's just that with journalists there is some kind of mobility that is not necessarily available for women writers. However, I believe that mentioning the achievements of women writers in the report is quite an important intellectual step because for a long time literary creativity has been relegated to a lower status. Culturally, literary creativity has always been perceived as a luxurious practice that is categorically incongruous with societies dominated by more serious problems, of which poverty and access to resources are not the least. In this report, literature becomes an essential denominator in measuring the cultural structure which is intertwined and cross-cutting with the societal, legal, political, and economic structures—all of which are dealt with in the third part of the report, under the title “The Societal Context of the State of Women.” The title at once implies the link between society and literature, and that's why I want to look at the achievements of Arab women in the field of literature from a slightly different angle than that of the report. The report details three stages in the development of women's issues, or rather the construct “woman,” in contemporary Arab thought. Literature writing as I see it goes parallel with those stages. The first stage is termed “The Realization of Difference: The Other Woman in the Middle of the Self.” These were the golden days of the reformist Sheika Rifat at-Tartawi that paved the way in the last quarter of the 19th century for the rise of women's journalism and the inauguration of several literary salons. That was also the time, for example, when Qut al-Qulub al-Demerdeshiya's novel was written only to prove that Heikal's *Zeinyab* is not the first Arabic novel. That was the time also of the poet Aisha at-Tamouriya, the poet who wrote in Arabic, Farsi, and Turkish. The second stage termed “The Awareness of

Transformation: First Attempts to Restrict Gender-biased Jurisprudence.” This is when Qasim al-Min and Mohammad Abdu legalized women's education, which meant that women could participate in the public space. Literature belongs to that public space even if it is motivated by individual and private trajectories. We get, for example, names like Malak Hanfi al-Asif, Nebawiya Mousa, and the poet Mai Ziyada. The presence of women in the artistic and literary arenas in the twenties of the last century was so remarkable that it deserved a conference that was held in 2001 in Beirut by the Lebanese Women's Researcher Group. I venture to say that this transformation stage, the second stage as termed by the report, extended until the sixties of last century. That is when several women's rights were obtained. It should be noted here that the women managed to cross the border from the private space to the public, yet family upbringing, and this is what Dr. Khalaf talked about yesterday, was still essential in either encouraging or discouraging women writers. This could be seen in the report in the briefings, for example, of the Palestinian poet Fadwa Tukan and the Iraqi poet Nazik al-Malaika. Fadwa Tukan was older than Nazik al-Malaika, yet al-Malaika started before Fadwa Tukan due to the family upbringing. Al-Malaika was very much encouraged by her family, while Tukan was repressed and oppressed all the time also by her family. Nonetheless, ever since the sixties, the wheel turned and it was impossible to interrupt the cycle. So when the report states that the number of Arab women creative artists is on the rise albeit slowly, one should not be surprised. In 1957 Naguib Mahfouz published his trilogy. That was the official declaration that the new society needed the new woman. Under the title “The Beginnings of Individual Consciousness and First Confrontations with the Culture of Inferiority,” the report surveys women's writings. I believe that this goes with the third stage of women's positions in contemporary Arab thought, again, as detailed by the report, which is termed “Institutionalizations.” It's the moment when the fully fledged feminist novel was born. This novel was bent on demolishing all the stereotypes that used to limit women's presence. Colette Khoury, Laila Balabeki, Latifa Zayyat are just a few names. It's therefore understood how the images of women changed. For example, Fawziya Abu-Khalid, the critic, constructs a full pattern template that allows her to transcend prevailing stereotypes of women. The prevailing stereotypes were the woman as riddle, as seductress, as symbol of cunning, and as symbol of honor.

Instead of these four stereotypes, Abu-Khalid provides the woman deprived of her rights, the militant woman, the rebellious woman, and the multiple woman. The latter is my real concern since multiplicity is essential, not only because it reflects reality as it is lived, but also because it has become the norm in the writings of the younger generation of women writers who are unfortunately totally absent from the report. I can understand this; the space is limited after all. Now this brings me to my second point: what is missing from the report is essential to the completion of a panoramic view of the state in art. The first thing is that poetry is not a celebrated genre in the report and I cannot, for example, ignore "The Return of Lilith." This is a wonderful volume that has appeared recently by the Lebanese poet Jumana Hadad where the multiple identity of women is being articulated. This is done through co-opting the Biblical figure of Lilith and through re-writing history. This is just one example. With the younger generation of women writers also the critique of the status quo has moved further to set the woman writer free. I mean to say they are writing about writing as women in a society that does not welcome the practice itself. "Hind and the Soldiers" by the Saudi Badriya al-Bishr and "The Waste Paradise" by also the Saudi Laila al-Gohani, "Bride of the Rain" by the Kuwaiti Busaina al-Aisa are just a few examples. There is also the Saudi Raga al-Sanaa's "Daughters of Riyadh." They are writing about the women writers themselves. Writing about writing. The third point that is missing is that this younger generation does not rebel only against the prevalent stereotypes of women; they also rebel against the authority of the first generation, the pioneers. The writings are armed with a new force that re-envisions, re-thinks, re-questions all the given and taken for granted ideas. In other words, it is a generation that views the world with a new sensibility and a new epistemology. It is not surprising then that this new sensibility exhibits an increased awareness of the Arabic language. In spite of, for example, the popularity and charisma of a writer like Asia Jabaar, the Algerian writer, many women from al-Maghreb are writing now in Arabic just to prove their concern with the local so as to be able to engage with the global—that is to construct at the end what we call the "glocal." We cannot ignore that in the Arab Peninsula there is something really in the making. Women are not using pseudonyms any more. On the contrary, they make it a point that they do exist and write with a very critical eye. Recently, the writing of Saudi women is acknowledged as serious literature.

Several names pose on the literary scene confidently: Badriya al-Bishr, Laila al-Gohani, Omaym al-Khamis, Saba Hirz.... . Last but not least, what is missing from the report (and this, I take it personally) is the production of knowledge. Under the title “Social Sciences” the report mentions the achievements by several women in the Arab world like Nawal Sadawi and Fatima al-Mernissi. However, if we have this new literature and the feminist novel is really coming out clearly, how about the women critics? Recently feminist criticism has become an independent field in the Arab world. If we look at Figure 3.7, this is page 102 in the report, statistics about the specialization of women researchers show that women specialized in language and humanities scored the highest percentage—22%. This is the highest score in the specializations, which means that surely there are women critics. If there is new literature there must be new ways for reading this literature. If we look at Arab universities, especially the departments of language and literature, we can see the effect of the feminist criticism. There are several M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s that are adopting feminist criticism as the main approach and methodology. This kind of criticism had to endure and take on all accusations of the Arab world in order to obtain existence and authenticity. It was accused of being imported, of being a Western construct, of importing Western philosophy, and it stood up to that. So I think that it has to be acknowledged along with all the women critics who worked within the feminist critical framework. Paradoxically, they contributed to the report, for example Fawziya Abu-Khalid, whom I mentioned earlier, provided a good deal of the part that discussed literature. So where is the problem if we do have this literature, if we do have the critical tools, if we have all those wonderful, brilliant women? Where is the problem? There must be a problem. It's basically the problem that Randa talked about: the cultures we're struggling with, the cultures in some areas where writing is just a luxury. A woman shouldn't write, and in the worst cases, the writings of women could be taken as autobiographical. Whatever the woman writes is part of her life, which really restricts the freedom of the writer, whereas, this does not apply to the men in profession. The second thing is, and again this is what Dr. Khalaf talked about yesterday, the multi-roles. I believe that an Arab woman with a career if filmed she must look crazy or hysterical because she's doing several things at the same time, taking care of the household, the kids, and the husband and proving that she is

successful in her career without ignoring her family. She is after one thing, to prove that she can do it as men can. At the end she needs what Virginia Woolf calls "A Room of One's Own." A room, just a room, a private space for herself away from all this maddening crowd. So it's the multi-roles and sometimes the stereotypical division of roles combined with education and family upbringing as we saw in the example of Fadwa Tukan and the Iraqi poet Naza al-Malaika. The third problem is related to education and the curriculum, canonization. Women writers are never part of the canon, they're just taken lightly as cute, beautiful angels who have produced something miraculous. So they are never part of the canonization and I must say that this is somehow a universal problem because until now, for example, Christina Rossetti is not part of the canon of English poetry. Mary Shelley is not part of the canon either. It's always like that, women writers are not part of the canon because the men are much more important. Therefore, their names could never be found in anthologies, unless the anthology is specially constructed around the names of women writers, but they wouldn't be found in anthologies. I guess this all I have to say for now, maybe other things will come up in the discussion.