



Re-wRitiNG ArAB WoMen In LiTerAture

AT LONG LAST, WE'RE SEEING MORE ARAB *women* DEBUT AUTHORS. SALMA HAIDRANI SPEAKS TO THE NEW VOICES *changing* HOW WE SEE THE *Middle East* – AND CRUCIALLY, THE WOMEN WITHIN IT

Words by SALMA HAIDRANI



We're in the midst of an Arab creative renaissance. From non-fiction to novels, we're seeing a host of emerging women authors of Arab and Middle Eastern heritage dominate bookshelves the world over more than ever before. At long last, they're cementing their place in the contemporary literary landscape.

Take Cairo-born, London-raised journalist Alya Mooro's part-memoir, *The Greater Freedom*, an exploration of what it means to be a Middle Eastern woman living in the West today. Meanwhile, British-Lebanese journalist Zahra Hankir's deeply moving debut essay collection *Our Women On The Ground: Essays by Arab Women Reporting from the Arab World*, features 19 established women journalists from across the Arab world reporting on themes

as far-ranging as the migrant crisis against the backdrop of European far-right rhetoric, dual identities and their changing homelands. Elsewhere, Damascus-born, Manchester-based debut author Dima Alzayat's short story collection *Alligator and Other Stories*, out in the UK in May this year, explores 'otherisation', displacement, womanhood and the immigrant experience.

Though the books vary – Mooro's is part-memoir while Hankir's is an anthology of essays – each of the titles are committed to providing an alternative narrative of the region – and crucially, the women within it.

AN ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE

Mooro's personal experience of feeling torn between both wildly

differing cultures – her Egyptian heritage and coming of age in the UK – played an integral role in incentivising her to pen *The Greater Freedom*. "As I got older, I began to increasingly feel the pull of both cultures. I wanted to explore what aspects of my life were being impacted by this tug rope and why. I wanted women to see and recognise themselves in the text, and to subsequently feel like their wants and fears and choices – whatever they may be – were valid."

Meanwhile, Hankir hoped to offer a more inclusive narrative of foreign correspondence. After all, much of who we associate with this field rarely strays from white, Western and male. Until the publication of *Our Women on The Ground* last August, little was known of the Arab and Middle Eastern women journalists risking their lives to report on the frontlines of conflict.

"The international media narrative on the Arab world has been dominated for decades by Western correspondents who will sometimes cover the region for a year or two, go back to their home countries, then write about their experiences in memoirs or non-fiction books," Hankir tells ELLE Arabia. "I figured: what about the fearless Arab women journalists whose work I'd been following for years? What if we read about their experiences and about how their lives have been affected in a similar space? The women in this book demonstrate that without their voices and work, the stories of the region, with all of its nuances and intricacies and complexities, would remain partly told."

She's not wrong: where else could we be transported to a male-dominated Egyptian newsroom, a migrant centre in Germany amidst the backdrop of the unfolding anti-immigrant sentiment in much of Western Europe to a Saudi Arabian saleswoman selling lingerie for the first time in the Kingdom's history? As Hankir says: "I hope that readers will come away from *Our Women on the Ground* with a far deeper and more enriching understanding of the Arab world and broader Middle East and a strong sense of the resilience of its women."

TRIUMPHS

It's certainly worth celebrating the work these authors have made in reshaping how we see the region and the women within it. Even so, Alzayat is cautious that her forthcoming debut didn't set out to rectify long-held stereotypes. As she says: "I wasn't wilfully trying to create characters who were clearly challenging stereotypes. Instead, it was important to me to present Arab and Arab-American characters who felt like authentic and complex individuals." And Alzayat adds: "Like all individuals, they will be contradictory and at times unpredictable and therefore won't easily conform to stereotype."

Conversely, Mooro welcomes the strides that she's made in challenging tired tropes of what we've come to associate with women of Arab and Middle Eastern descent in *The Greater Freedom* alongside her contemporaries. "It feels very powerful!", she affirms. "It's such an honour to be included amongst such incredible women. I'm grateful to be wielding my pen along with them."



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It's a particularly hard-won achievement, largely in part as women of Middle Eastern heritage like herself were off-rendered invisible in the literature she consumed in her teens and 20s. "I didn't really find any women [like me] in the books I read," Mooro recalls. "If ever I did, they were often written from Orientalist perspectives, rarely, if ever, telling their own stories." After witnessing how under-represented communities, including the African-American community, were reclaiming their own narratives in their droves, while conversely, she found that stories from the Middle East were few and few between, "I became increasingly aware of how narrow and reductive the narrative around Middle Eastern women is – especially in the West – and I felt that it was imperative to provide an alternative voice," she adds.

Hankir echoes Mooro's sentiments. "I'm thrilled that women of Arab and Middle Eastern descent are finally getting the long overdue attention that they deserve." Though Hankir concedes that women of Arab and Middle Eastern descent have 'done excellent work over the decades to fight for greater representation in literature', she stresses that "the [end of the last decade] in particular has felt like a watershed moment for Arab millennial writers."

Perhaps one of the authors' collective greatest triumphs is encouraging more would-be-authors of Arab and Middle Eastern heritage that penning books can be – and is – within their reach. "I believe this solidarity has had a snowball effect in that more women have been more following suit to enter the literary space," Hankir agrees. "I can only hope that young Arab women will read this book and are inspired to embark on their own projects. A few such women have already reached out to me with ideas and nothing brings me greater joy."

Another feat worth celebrating is how each of the authors' books can serve as powerful tools to help women of Middle Eastern and Arab heritage the world over to navigate their identities. "We must see ourselves reflected in what we read," Hankir stresses. "I grew up in the UK as a child of immigrants who had left a civil war in Lebanon with a skewed perception of what it meant to be a young woman coming of age, in that I never saw myself in the books that I read. Some of the most moving messages I have received from people about OWTG are from young and aspiring Arab and WoC journalists who are hugely encouraged by the book and the accounts of the women in it."

Mooro is also heartened by the reception to *The Greater Freedom* from readers the world over: "The feedback has been incredible. Every day I receive messages on Instagram from Middle Eastern women thanking me for vocalising what they have long thought but didn't have the courage or ability to say." Perhaps more powerfully, Mooro's book has incentivised readers to live more authentically: "Many tell me they're now reassessing how they want to live their lives and how they want to raise their children or at least how to shed some of the ingrained shame and guilt. That's what I hoped for when writing."

CHALLENGES

The authors might have made a tangible impact on the literary landscape – after all, half a decade ago, visibility of PoC authors were far and few between: back in 2016, of the thousands of titles published in the UK, only fewer than 100 were by British authors of non-white backgrounds. Meanwhile, in a U.S. best-selling list that same year, only 30 of 500 authors were PoC.

Despite their collective triumphs, writing their respective books wasn't without its challenges. Mooro reveals that she faced a 'massive burden of responsibility' when writing on a community that has been much maligned in the West over the past few decades, particularly exacerbated post 9/11. "When there's so few books on marginalised communities, each story looked at as if it is the be all and end all on that subject and those people," she sighs.

Did Mooro also encounter challenges shedding light on the realities of what some Middle Eastern and Arab women can experience whilst remaining cautious of subscribing to orientalist tropes? After all, much of what she explores throughout *The Greater Freedom* can make for challenging reading, from exploring the demands expected of this group, be it the pressures of motherhood, marriage to the 'pull' of balancing conflicting cultures. It's these that could all too easily be presumed to be a universal experience. "It felt like a real tightrope to be open about the realities of life as a Middle Eastern woman – and sometimes the restrictions that come with that – without pandering to already ingrained ideas that the West may have," Mooro agrees.

THE NEXT DECADE

Given that these authors have made significant strides to amplify the voices of women of Middle Eastern and Arab heritage, what could representation then look like in the next decade? While Mooro is confident that by 2030, there'll be 'a multitude of books reflecting a dizzying number of their experiences, stories and lives', conversely, Hankir is less optimistic, conceding that there's still a 'long way to go'. She suspects that this is only attainable if more women of Middle Eastern and Arab heritage working within publishing push for change: "we're currently mostly relying on allies." Even so, she does hope that representation might be 'far more inclusive and wide-ranging than it is today'.

For Alzayat, it's imperative that we see more authors of Arab and Middle Eastern heritage so that this group can inevitably take ownership of writing about themselves rather than being written about. As she says: "What I hope for, and what I think is happening, is that there are more voices in the mix so no one can claim or has to claim to be the voice of the Arab experience."

Continuing their commitment to re-shaping how we see the region and celebrating the women within it is integral to each of the authors' next projects. "I definitely think that there's more to be done in this space and I hope to embark on another project that'll focus on the women of the Middle East and their resilience and power in some way," Hankir reveals. Mooro, too, is committed to continue sharing stories authentic to her community. As she affirms: "I'm seeing that people are hungry for these alternative narratives and it's our responsibility, as people who can, and as creatives, to provide them".

