

Two Voices from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia

Before becoming an academic and a lecturer of English literature, I had always been interested in words. Words, words, and more words. Poetry specifically occupied a special place – I wished to incorporate it into every class I taught. The first time I taught first year composition, I managed to teach some of Sylvia Plath’s poetry. I threw in a bit of Emily Dickinson too. But there was a pressing issue: my students, mostly Kuwaiti, could not relate to these female poets. Their work was not accessible, although they did enjoy reading the material. In Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, there are very few female writers or poets who have their work published, so it was always difficult to find new and innovative material that I could teach. Recently though, I have come across two new writers, albeit self-published, who I believe deserve greater recognition worldwide. I will help to accomplish this by incorporating their work in my teaching.

Now let me introduce the two writers.

Nada Faris

The first is Nada Faris, a Kuwaiti writer. Faris is one of the emerging voices in Kuwait. She currently resides in Iowa, United States where she is giving lectures and reading her poetry to a Western audience. She was also invited to take part in this year’s *Shubbak* Festival in London. She has written numerous articles and participated in different Slam Poetry contests. However, the book I recommend is entitled *Before Young Adult Fiction*. Before focusing on her career as a YA writer, Faris focused her energies on slam poetry and short stories. This anthology combines elements of her early work. She chooses to write in English, and has succeeded in mastering and conquering the language. She labels her work ‘Anglowaiti’ literature, a term that I believe will be widely used in the future. But Faris does not simply dabble in words – her work raises important cultural and social issues, forcing her reader to think, without ever actually forcing anything down your throat. It comes naturally and with the ease of an experienced writer; she possesses a talent that is sure to turn all literary heads. My favorite piece is ‘Artemis’, a poem that speaks to each and every one of us. ‘Artemis’ won first runner up at Taste of Jamaica’s 4th Slam Poetry Competition in 2011. If you don’t have time to read the entire collection, then just flip to ‘Artemis’ – it will commit you to finding out more about this bold writer.

In ‘Artemis’ Faris writes: ‘Damsel in distress / You assume that you’re a princess / Because I crowned you / Built you a throne / And obeyed’. She writes in a way that gets under your skin, and this is made especially clear in ‘Artemis.’ The poem knocks on many doors, covering repressed pain, the betrayal of a former lover, and the agony of failed relationships (and friendships) – but Faris moves through these ideas with as little melodrama as possible. She often uses witty humour, as you find yourself smirking, smiling, and thinking. There is a sense of intimacy in her writing that you only establish with your favourite authors.

But Faris does not deal merely with emotional states. Her short stories are almost always a commentary on cultural affairs in Kuwait. For example, two of her short stories deal with the emotional and cultural burdens of traditional marriages, marital betrayal, a single woman’s struggle to remain unmarried, as well as other issues. ‘Thirty Year Marriage’ portrays the

protagonist's marriage to his wife, Haifa, who cannot, for the life of her, discern what has happened to their love. Both Jassem and his wife struggle to speak to one another, or to communicate a complex set of emotions they both carry. It is left to the reader to decide whether the dying marriage is the husband or the wife's fault. Faris does not draw her own conclusion. This short story communicates what is usually left unsaid in Kuwaiti society, behind closed doors, marital affairs and relationships are deemed private, and are to remain so. I look forward to teaching 'Thirty Year Marriage' because I am certain that both my male and female students will be able to relate, and will have much to say about how *they* feel about relationships and marriage within their society. For a Western reader, the book also provides definitions of the Arabic words used in the text.

Hala Abdulla

The second writer is a Saudi poet, Hala Abdulla. Unlike the stereotypical image of the Saudi woman, (and I am wary of course of using the article 'the') Abdulla is a defiant and rebellious writer. She has maintained a blog for years, as well as a Twitter account, both of which have followers from all over the world. Even more admirable is her project of creating Writing Clubs in both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. These clubs have managed to reach people from different age groups and both genders. I had followed her progress a few years back, and was thrilled to discover that she has finally published a poetry collection, entitled *Strip*. With a title as provoking as that, I am surprised that Abdulla's book has not gained as much publicity as it deserves. She informed her loyal readers that her very close friends collected and published her work for her, as a birthday surprise. Of course, it comes as no surprise, that these friends are a close network of women, all of whom are very supportive of Abdulla's voice, and have felt that her work speaks *for* them and *about* them.

I have attended one of Abdulla's performances in Kuwait, where she performed a poem entitled 'Woman.' The poem is infused with a strong essence of pride in being a woman in an oppressive society and a patriarchal culture. In the poem, the narrator writes to her unborn daughter, insisting that there will be numerous occasions in the future when her daughter will feel the burden of being a woman. She posits scenarios that we, as Arab women, know all too well. But this time, she hands us (and her unborn daughter) the proud words, the responses to use, when confronted with patriarchal jargon:

When they tell you that you are a forbidden entity and bound you to chains shaped by their sick society, you will tell them you are as holy as a baby's first breath.

When they tell you that you are one third of your male counterpart, you will tell them that your head will always be held as high as your brothers.

My little girl, promise me that you will never be silenced. Swear that you will never allow your tribe's honor to burden your back. And when the whole world rests on your shoulders, never allow your knees to kiss the floor

'Woman' was performed with such fervour that Abdulla's voice shook with rage and passion. Reading the poem myself, I am able to enjoy the beauty of her carefully crafted words, the raw emotion that manifests itself through her well-thought out sentences, and the complex state of being a woman in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. Like Abdulla, I have been told more than

once to bow my head, to submit to the way things are, to the tribe, to honour, and was silenced for years. Only through academia have I managed to speak. Both Abdulla and Faris use creative writing to speak out, to embrace their voices as female writers, and to assert their own identities through their writing. They are currently setting the example for their audience.

In the Gulf region, and particularly Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, there are a number of emerging writers and poets who use English, but retain a very distinct element of being *Khaleeji* (pertaining to the Gulf). Although they write in English, their work is essentially preoccupied with a *Khaleeji* identity. My research interests have always focused on women's writing worldwide, but in Abdulla and Faris I believe we are currently witnessing the rise of these two important female writers.

Bio: Shahd Alshammari's research interests focus on madwomen in different literatures, including Victorian, postcolonial, and Bedouin. Alshammari is also interested in Disability Studies and the correlation of disability studies with identity in the Arab world, having been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis at the age of 18. Alshammari believes in engaging the personal with academic life.