## Middle Eastern Women Writing Past Western Stereotypes

## By Saskia Wright

As a middle school student in Bogota, Colombia, Saudi writer Rajaa al-Sanea's Girls dle Eastern women authors always write about of Rivadh gave me my first glimpse of Mid- male oppression. This prejudice affects the way dle Eastern literature. Structured as a series of their work is read, reviewed, and critiqued. emails from an unidentified narrator, the novel Woman writers who stray from stereotypes tells the story of four women in their twenties as are often at a disadvantage and are less likethey fall in and out of love in the Saudi capital. ly to be acknowledged for their literary talent.

The story is both witty and poignant, and I was immediately hooked by the char- about this experience in a TED talk. acters' vibrant personalities. While I was intrigued by the differences between their lives dle East, you are expected to write the stoand mine, it was easy for my teenage self to em- ries of Muslim women, preferably the unhappathize with them through their highs and lows. py stories," she said. "Leave the experimental

ers we build around each other. Whenever we enand appreciate those who are different from us.

Reading al-Sanea's novel brought me closer to the women in Saudi Arabia, just like it dle Eastern women are incredibly diverse, Lebbrought me closer to the women in my imme- anese journalist and writer Zahra Hankir condiate surroundings. However, what I read as a solidated 19 nonfiction essays on a range of story about human relationships has become a topics by Arab and Arab-American journalpolitical statement in the eyes of many others, ists in Our Women on the Ground; Essays by

deemed inflammatory and controversial, and the government immediately banned the book after its tic, Hankir said, "None of them were strivrelease. At the same time, Western critics such as ing to dispel stereotypes about who they are. The Guardian's Rachel Aspden have criticized Girls Instead, they were focused on the task at of Riyadh for being "more a love letter to America hand, their jobs, and oftentimes survival."4 than a poison pen to the Saudi establishment," implying that the novel wasn't critical enough of life one way to be an Arab woman; and there is no in the Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> In both contexts, al-Sanea's story has been politicized based on others' preconceived notions of women authors from the Middle East. intending to do so, and without a Western audi-

In the west, it is often assumed that Mid-

Turkish author Elif Shafak spoke

"As a Muslim woman from the Mid-Literature is important to weaken the barri- and Avant Garde to our Western colleagues."2

Non-Western writers are perceived as repgage with somebody else's story, we develop our ca-resentatives of their respective cultures rather pacity for empathy. It becomes easier to understand than creative individuals, Shafak says. This inhibits their imagination and silences their voices.<sup>2</sup>

On a mission to demonstrate that Mid-Within Saudi Arabia, Girls of Riyadh was Arab Women Reporting from the Arab World.<sup>3</sup>

In an interview with The Atlan-"There is no one Arab woman; there is no

one Arab [woman] experience," she continued. "By telling their stories, these women, without

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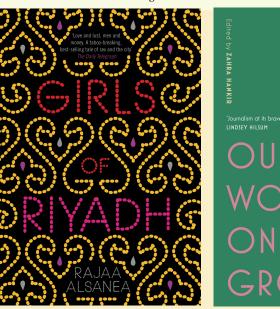
ence in mind, have punctured prevalent narratives rooted in flawed post-colonial discourse."4

The essays are powerful because they reveal the individuality of their authors. Each woman has chosen to write about a topic she deems important. None of the works focus directly on the issues of Arab women; yet through their writing, these journalists are sharing the experiences of Arab women in their own way.

Hankir selected the work of Lebanese journalist Nada Bakri, who said that Middle Eastern people, specifically Arabs, have been unfairly represented in the media for decades.4

"I wanted through my work-the reporting, the stories, the people that I interviewedto change these misconceptions about us as much as possible," Bakri said. "People will try to put you in a mold when and if they can, especially [considering] that there is already this widespread narrative about what an Arab woman is like, and people believe it and they find it hard to reject. What I could do instead of letting them tell me who I am, and what I did, is let the work itself poke holes in that narrative."4

In an interview with Penguin Ran-



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dom House, Rajaa al-Sanea explained that she never intended for Girls of Riyadh to be published for Western audiences. She believes this makes the novel more authentic.5

"My Western readers will look at Saudi through a keyhole and they will be able to connect with those who live in a totally different society and vet have the same dreams, emotions, and goals."5

When I first read Girls of Riyadh, I held no preexisting views or judgments about the Middle East. Thus, reading the novel felt exactly as al-Sanea had intended: as if I were looking through a keyhole and discovering a new society.

One of my English professors taught me that there are three steps I should follow when reading any text. First, read it to the end and stop myself from formulating any premature opinions. Second, fully consider and absorb the argument laid out by the text. Only after completing these two steps should I challenge the author's argument.

Like I read Girls of Riyadh, this approach can help us leave our preconceived notions and stereotypes behind and appreciate an author's work for what it is, not what we think it should be.

ESSAYS BY

ARAB WOMEN

REPORTING

FROM THE

ARAB

WORLD