Abstract: Undergraduate college students in the USA often encounter the Arab Middle East through novels translated into English. These novels are often presented by instructors and understood by students as stylized but accurate depictions of Arab societies as they currently exist. This article argues that the extremely limited number of translated Arabic novels that have made their way into American classrooms perpetuate stereotypes about Arab societies. These novels present students with themes that are often ahistorical and infused with violence, misogyny, and religious fanaticism. Although students may be highly interested in learning about Arab societies, the literary content they come across encourages affective rather than critical or complex responses.

Keywords: literature, novel, translation, masculinity, war, women

This study of what is taught and what is not taught at the college level in the US was prompted by our suspicions that few undergraduate students in the USA engage in current or complex conversations about Arabic literature. We suspected that a book needed to meet certain expectations about violence, tribalism, misogyny, and religious fundamentalism to make its way through translation politics and into the classroom. Our intuition needed to be quantified. We thought that a survey of the novels that are commonly taught at higher education institutions in the US would give an opportunity to examine the big picture: what vision of the Arab Middle East may a college student construct based on what he or she reads in a literature course?

According to the results of our survey, this singular vision of Arabs, Arab societies in the Middle East, and, by default, Arab Americans is likely to fall far short of reality. The literary content of the undergraduate courses we identified in our research confirms rather than refutes stereotypes that students have already acquired from various sources: film depictions of Arabs as “wealthy and vile oil sheikhs … crazed terrorists … or camel-riding Bedouins” (Shaheen, 2003: 173); arts, such as belly dancing, that have been de-historicized and thus made safe for consumption (Maira, 2008); mass media narratives on the practice of Islam

Dr. Sally Gomaa, Department of English, Salve Regina University, Newport, RI, USA.
Dr. Chad Raymond, Department of Political Science, Salve Regina University, Newport, RI, USA.
(Said 1997); and even English-language fiction, which often presents Arabs as stock characters “with no individuality driven by hatred and a desire for revenge” and Muslims as “prone to the tendencies of extremists—brutal punishments, autocratic and theocratic rule, and medieval thinking and practices—that a great many Muslims themselves oppose” (Christison, 1987: 399). Ethnic, religious, and regional diversity is replaced by a monolithic racial construction in which Muslim and Arab are synonymous (Jarmakani, 2011).

While stereotyping is obviously detrimental to Arabs in general, it also has a pernicious effect on those whom US college students are most likely to encounter in everyday life: Arab Americans. To begin with, stereotypes are artificial, selective, universal, and instrumental. They “reflect and serve to justify existing prejudices. They are not adopted and employed on the basis of an ever-renewed critical analysis of the object but rather … correspond to certain a priori expectations” (Haarmann, 1988: 177). In addition, certain traits most familiar to the observer are singled out, grossly exaggerated until they become threatening, and applied to all members of the other group, which provides the justification needed for discrimination. As a result, security can only be regained by banishing the group one has identified as one’s opponent (Haarmann, 1988: 178). Therefore,

> every attempt to assert American identity must involve a simultaneous stigmatization of any sense of Arab identity ... To reassert their status as “good” and “loyal” and worthy of respect, Arab Americans must distance themselves not only from negative stereotypes, but also from the people who are most likely to suffer from these images and their consequences.

(Howell and Shryock, 2003: 455-456)

Our survey did not identify literature that can tackle this complex and nuanced issue.

The dismal findings from the survey discussed below do not match the steady growth in the number of US students taking Arabic language courses or studying in Arabic-speaking countries. According to the Modern Language Association (MLA) 2010 report on the study of languages other than English in the US, the study of Arabic registered the largest percentage growth at US colleges. Enrolment in Arabic language courses, the report states, “grew by 46.3 percent between 2006 and 2009, building on an increase of 126.5 percent in Arabic enrolments in the previous MLA survey” (MLA, 2010: 1). In 2009, the Institute of International Education (IIE) published its research on “Expanding U.S. Study Abroad in the Arab World: Challenges and Opportunities.” “Between 2004 and 2007,” it found, “the number of U.S. students who studied abroad for academic credit in Arab countries grew by 43 percent” (IIE, 2009: 9).
What prompted this rapid increase? It is reasonable to argue that 9/11 is part of the reason (see Devi, 2010; Taha, 2007; Wilner, 2004). This fact alone points to how politicized students’ approaches to the Arab cultures of the Middle East may be. Edward Said writes in Covering Islam that he has not been able “to discover any period in European or American history since the Middle Ages in which Islam was generally discussed or thought about outside a framework created by passion, prejudice, and political interests” (1997: 24). The same argument applies to the entire region, which enters American media only within the framework of war, conflict, and turmoil. Therefore, American students have “scant opportunity to view the Islamic world except reductively, coercively, and oppositionally” (Said, 55). This is a powerful charge. Our paper engages this claim by trying to identify patterns in the novels from Arabic-speaking countries that are taught in US college classrooms.

The patterns that emerged from our research are grouped under the following topics: Arab masculinities, states of war, and women’s place. This is not to suggest that each novel fits neatly into only one of these categories. On the contrary, some of the novels, such as The Story of Zahra, emphasize intersections between gender issues, postcolonial legacies, sectarian violence, and regional and global conflicts. Mainly, we argue that, for a variety of reasons, these texts provide a safe space for students to read about Arab cultures of the Middle East. First, they are largely outdated. With the exception of The Yacoubian Building (first published in Arabic in 2002), they were all published between the 1960s and the 1980s. Furthermore, these texts confirm a variety of stereotypes the West has sustained of its East: misogyny, fanaticism, violence, pseudo-mysticism, and eroticism. As a result, they invite shallow affective responses from American college students. Students may feel sorry for Zahra in The Story of Zahra or Taha in The Yacoubian Building, but these feelings are not the foundation of a rigorous intellectual analysis. Unless more current, complex, and controversial texts are used, students will not acquire a nuanced, balanced view of the region.

A Sense of the Landscape

The authors performed four Google searches using the following words as search terms:

- syllabus, Arab, novel
- syllabus, Arab, literature
- syllabus, Middle East, novel
- syllabus, Middle East, literature
For each of the above searches, the top 100 results were examined to identify syllabi in which modern Arabic novels in English translation were listed as required reading. To qualify for the study, syllabi had to be for undergraduate college or university courses in the USA that had been taught within the last ten years. Syllabi in which only graphic novels, short story collections, or anthologies were assigned as required reading were excluded. Out of a total of 400 search results, these parameters resulted in a total of only 15 different syllabi being located. Institutions represented ranged from a community college to an Ivy League university.

The syllabi can be categorized by topic and frequency as follows (three fall into two categories):

- Women/gender/sexuality studies: 3
- Arab/Middle Eastern literature: 10
- Arab/Middle Eastern other disciplines: 2
- World/contemporary literature: 3

The 15 syllabi listed a total of 34 different novels (one, *Men in the Sun* by Ghassan Kanafani, is more properly a novella). The novels most commonly found in these syllabi were:

- Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*, five syllabi
- Ghassan Kanafani, *Men in the Sun*, four
- Emile Habiby, *The Secret Life of Saeed*, three
- Sahar Khalifeh, *Wild Thorns*, three
- Naguib Mahfouz, *Midaq Alley*, three
- Hanan al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zahra*, three
- Alaa al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building*, two
- Assia Djebar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Calvade*, two
- Naguib Mahfouz, *Miramar* and *Arabian Nights and Days*, two syllabi each
- Nawal al-Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*, two

Of the remaining 22 novels, each was listed in one syllabus apiece.

**Arab Masculinities**

What impressions of Arab masculinity might students acquire from the literature identified by our survey? According to this literature, the Arab male is first and foremost a product of colonialism. There are no ways of studying him outside the Western view of religion as anti-modern, of nationalism as anti-Western, and of Arab culture as anti-women. Second, the Arab Man still holds on to pan-Arabist fantasies despite the shift towards political identities based upon the

www.plutojournals.com/asq/
nation-state following the disastrous outcome of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Third, the Arab Man is depicted primarily as potentially dangerous, deranged, and (self) destructive. He is likely to take out his rage on himself or on women who exist for his convenience as vessels of revenge. Season of Migration to the North and The Yacoubian Building demonstrate these characteristics.

Season of Migration to the North (Arabic, 1961; English, 1966) is the most frequently used novel on our survey. In the story, the narrator returns to his village in Sudan after a seven-year sojourn in Europe to earn a doctorate in “an obscure, English poet” (9). He is intrigued by a mysterious, yet compelling figure, Mustafa Sa’eed, who has moved to the village in the narrator’s absence. Sa’eed’s career starkly contrasts with the narrator’s. For example, Sa’eed’s sexual conquests in England are so wild, so exotic, and so horrifying that they lead to suicide and murder. The narrator’s sexuality, on the other hand, seems more controlled whether in the North or at home, as evidenced in the denial of his feelings towards Sa’eed’s widow. In London, Sa’eed sets himself up as “a colonizer” (94) and his house as a “den of lethal lies” (146). English women view him as “a symbol” of their yearning for “tropical climes, cruel suns, purple horizons” (142). They see in his eyes “the shimmer of mirages in hot deserts” and hear in his voice “the screams of ferocious beasts in the jungles” (145). This is the fodder from which many a fantasy, sexual and imperialist, is constructed. Sa’eed is literally washed away by the Nile half way into the novel. By contrast, the narrator feels “a sense of stability” like “a seed sown in a field” (5). Although at the end he, too, is seduced by the “destructive forces of the river” and is poised between North and South, surface and bottom, “casual flight” and “migration,” he “chooses” life (168). Contrast, therefore, provides a way to navigate the novel’s complex narrative style and to investigate its main concern with North and South.

Yet, the novel eludes this simplistic approach. It blurs the line between “North” and “South” by examining the way space itself is a cultural or psychological construct. For example, Mike Velez argues that the novel unsettles and decenters the geographical vision that justified imperialism:

While the novel’s settings—the vast “greenness” of England pitted against the “sand-strewn” deserts of the Sudan—signify a conventional geographical topos, the axis of colonial North and colonized South are undone via Salih’s interrogations of space and place as constructed in the colonialist era … . Salih borrows the familiar, the literary, archetypal imagery of North and South, in order to re-envision the fraught relations between the West and East. These archetypal metaphors, pitting a green, fruitful North against a dry, barren South, formed the geographic logic embedded within the Imperial notions of progress. (2010: 191)
This “logic” is undermined by Mustafa Sa’eed’s ability to recreate an exotic, wild den in the North and an English library complete with a fireplace on the equator. In addition, Mustapha Sa’eed and the narrator are not simply or neatly at the opposite ends of the spectrum. The narrator’s fascination and even obsession with Sa’eed indicate his desire to be him, to enjoy the same wild sexual conquests, to make love to Sa’eed’s wife, and to go to the West as an “invader.” In “The Nature of the Uncanny in Season of Migration to the North,” al-Halool argues that the narrator recognizes in Sa’eed an uncanny version of himself. Sa’eed both frightens and entices the narrator because he embodies his repressed desires. Furthermore, ...

... in the narrator’s subconscious, Mustafa is a repressed phenomenon whose presence on the conscious level is threatening because it stirs up in him a latent compulsion to repeat his alienating experience in England. This explains why the narrator seeks refuge in the native heimisch villagers, and most notably his heimlich grandfather, from this “stranger’s” menacing presence (5-6, 9, 52). In other words, the narrator seeks protection from himself, from his repressed alter ego, who is given the ironic name-epithet, Mustafa Said [Sa’eed] (roughly, “The Happy Elitist”). Indeed, the very fact that the narrator twice reminds other people of Mustafa Said [Sa’eed] (60, 162), and that he is the only main character who has no name (in spite of his major role in the narrative and the unfolding of events) further suggests that the narrator and Mustafa Said [Sa’eed] are one and the same person (2008: 36-7).

This compelling argument places the novel’s sexual politics on the collective as well as the individual level. The narrator’s prudish sexual conduct does not ward off the violence of colonialism and its rape mentality towards the natives. Also, far from moralistic, the choices he makes are reactive and fearful. In the end, he sees himself in dubious terms somewhere between traveler and migrant; native and foreigner; Western and Eastern; ego and alter ego; repressed and projected self.

Season of Migration to the North appeals to students and teachers for a variety of reasons. Its surface structure is a series of contrasts that are readily identifiable by students; it is compared to Conrad’s Heart of Darkness in several comparative literature journals; and it lends itself well to the application of psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory, which are familiar conceptual tools in literature courses. According to Parry, the novel is simultaneously “a melancholic evocation of a rural community in sub-Saharan Africa, a melodramatic tale of Arabian days and nights in the equator and the English North, and a critique of colonialism” (2005: 72). The reference to Arabian days and nights, especially, explains why the novel taps into familiar realms in Western imagination. Sa’eed might as well travel on a flying carpet or deploy a magic lantern to seduce European women. Therefore, although the novel was provocative at the time it was published (and was banned in Sudan), it now provides a comfortable space for American students.
to ponder the relationship between East and West because (a) it is ancient history in their eyes, and (b) it deals with British colonialism and its aftermath rather than neocolonialism and American foreign policy. However, *Season of Migration* is not a depiction of an Arab society in the present; instead, it conveys an image of the Arab world that is ahistorical except for events related to Western colonialism and the arrival of so called modernity. In doing so, it continues in the Orientalist tradition of exoticizing and sexualizing the Arab, Muslim, African male.

*The Yacoubian Building* by Egyptian writer Alaa Al Aswany (Arabic, 2002; English, 2004) draws a realistic picture of Egyptian society in the 1990s. Despite controversial topics, such as abortion, homosexuality, and religious fanaticism, the novel’s success is phenomenal—it sold 130,000 copies in France alone and has been adapted for a big-budget film and one TV soap opera in Egypt. The Yacoubian Building, an actual building in downtown Cairo, provides the narrative structure of the novel as well as the trope that generates its meaning. The building’s initial glory as a European architectural gem in downtown Cairo evokes colonial history, while its deterioration points to the stark failure of Egypt’s leadership since the 1952 Revolution to reform corrupt, sclerotic social institutions. Poor, disenfranchised, and desperate Egyptians gradually move into the building’s storage rooms on the rooftop until they form “a new community … that was entirely independent of the rest of the building” (14). The building, therefore, is a metaphor that captures the distance between the characters’ private interior lives and an exterior social life filled with decay.

The novel represents the lives of its multiple characters in tandem, with the only focal center being the building itself, to highlight the sweeping effects of corruption and injustice under dictatorship. For example, Busayna and Taha follow similar paths: they both belong to the rooftop community; they are high school sweethearts; and both have no resources other than their own ingenuity and resilience. Arguably, their story is one of seduction. Busayna is seduced by a decrepit man with an “old, coarse smell” (187) 45 years her senior, whom she eventually marries. Taha, on the other hand, suffers one humiliation after another. The first one is his rejection from admission to the Police Academy. Joining the police force, despite its public image of brutality, is Taha’s only way to maintain some level of dignity, but his class position as the son of a doorman confines him to the world of the rooftop. Lost, lonely, and deeply crushed, he is welcomed into an Islamist organization where for the first time he is valued and treated with respect. After an innocent participation in student protests against the United States’ attack on Iraq in 1991, he is detained, tortured, and sodomized. Upon his release, he is hell-bent on revenge, which presents itself in the form of a suicide bomb attack. Busayna’s advice to Taha early in the novel captures the spirit of Egypt in the 1990s: “This country does not belong to us. It belongs to the people who have
money … Make money, Taha” (59). In the end, the way Taha is courted and wooed by twisted Islamist rhetoric is not much different from the way Busayna succumbs to the expert, refined advances of an aging playboy. In both scenarios, Taha and Busayna are forced to sacrifice their bodies.

Taha’s story, albeit tragic, confirms stereotypical definitions of Arabic masculinity: sexist, angry, and fanatic. Taha’s superficial new-found faith only masks his desire for revenge, and his “love for Busayna” (116) masks his attempts to control her. Even before he joins the Islamist organization, it is Taha’s “habit” to imagine scenes of revenge “whenever he found himself in difficult situations that he could not control” (61). He embraces the terrorist organization’s strict teachings with the same vigilance and self-discipline with which he originally pursued his dream to join the police. “He has changed totally, as though he had swapped his former self for another, new one” (115). The more he becomes involved with the organization, the more the “thirst for revenge took him over and drove him on” (205). Similarly, in his interactions with Busayna, he is more controlling than loving; for example, when “[n]oticing that she was wearing the tight-fitting red dress that revealed the details of her body and low-cut front that showed her full breasts, he experienced a surge of anger and remembered that he had quarreled with her before in an attempt to make her stop wearing it” (21). In our experience of teaching the novel, students quickly identified this sexist dynamic. But they were not able to read through the rhetorics of self-identified “Islamist” groups that co-opt vulnerable youths like Taha into serving their political ends. It has been shocking to us that students see Taha’s self-annihilation through a suicide bombing as a victory over his oppressors. His suicide is not presented as a victory in the novel, and it is surely not an Egyptian way of thinking—this interpretation is instead the product of pseudo-news programming in the US that has made suicide bombing a buzzword.

**States of War**

The Middle East is often presented to students as a landscape of war, most frequently through the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Lebanese Civil War. The second, third, and fourth most assigned novels on our survey describe different aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the 1960s and 70s: *Men in the Sun* (Arabic, 1963; English, 1999), *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist* (Arabic, 1972; English, 1989), and *Wild Thorns* (Arabic, 1976; English, 1989). These novels were controversial in content as well as innovative in narrative technique at the time of their publication, but obviously Palestinian life in and beyond the West Bank and Gaza has evolved since then. For example, *Men in the Sun* depicts the abject conditions of Palestinian refugee life. Due to its stream of consciousness
technique, it portrays deep feelings of despair, betrayal, and hopelessness. Discarded and disowned by Israel, by the international community, and by inter-Arab rivalries, three Palestinian refugees agree to hide in a water tank to travel from Lebanon to Kuwait without proper documents. The journey does not go as planned and in the end the driver drags their corpses one by one out of the tank to throw them “onto the end of the road, where the municipality’s dustcarts usually stopped to dump their rubbish” (73). This unceremonious end symbolizes their dehumanization and worthlessness. While students reading the novel today may sympathize with its characters, they can afford to do so without entering the murky realm of current Israeli-Palestinian relations and the role played by the US in shaping these relations. Therefore, even though the Arab-Israeli conflict might dominate students’ perceptions of the region, these perceptions can remain outdated, outmoded, and emotionally one-sided.

The Lebanese Civil War (1975-90) is another example of how war dominates thinking about Arabic literature. This war was the result of intricate connections between post-colonialism, sectarian violence, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the Palestinian refugee crisis. In the 1920s, Lebanon was created under a French mandate to protect France’s interests in the region. The creation of Lebanon exemplified the extent to which the geopolitical map of the Middle East expressed the whims and wishes of the colonial powers (as in the case of the 1917 Belfour Declaration and the Iraq/Kuwait division). In Lebanon, the Maronite elite minority regarded France as the source of spiritual and cultural guidance: “The face of Lebanon would point westward toward Europe, and its back would be turned toward the Arab world” (Cleveland, 2004: 224). Meanwhile, the Muslim majority, traumatized by separation from Syria and tenaciously clinging to Arabic roots, were increasingly poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised. In setting the minority over the majority, France ensured “the existence of a volatile political mix in which competition for power would be based on sectarian affiliations” (Cleveland, 2004: 224). The Lebanese Civil War attests to the success of this insidious scheme as Lebanon’s precarious position between East and West became unsustainable due to the politicization and militarization of Palestinian refugees in south Lebanon in the early 1970s.

The Story of Zahra (Arabic, 1980; English, 1994) presents the war as the culmination rather than the source of the social and cultural ills that destroyed Lebanon. Misogyny, in particular, connects Zahra’s personal plight to the national trauma. The novel opens with her mother’s hand “pressed tightly” to Zahra’s mouth. As a child, she was her mother’s unwitting accomplice. Trips to the dentist, the doctor, and the seamstress were alibis for the mother’s passionate yet hopeless love affair. Because “the hand,” a metonymy for the mother, “smelled like soap
and onions” and because it was “plump and warm,” Zahra “wished she would keep it there forever.” In Part I, she does. Zahra never speaks up or protests:

It was all part of fear, of fear, above all, that my image of myself might be overturned ... the image of which I had run off hundreds of copies for distribution to all who had known me since childhood. Here is Zahra the mature girl who says little, Zahra the princess, as my grandfather dubbed me; Zahra the stay-at-home who blushed for any or for no reason; Zahra the hard-working student ... Zahra in whose mouth butter would not melt, who has never smiled at any man, not even at her brother’s friends. This is Zahra a woman who sprawls naked day after day on a bed in a stinking garage, unable to protest at anything. Who lies on the old doctor’s bed ... (40)

Here, Zahra views herself not as a whole but in parts: a mouth, a blushing face, a naked body. These parts can be assembled in any number of ways to please others. In this excerpt and throughout the first half of the novel, the language she uses to describe her exterior self is abstract and full of clichés. For example, the image of the mouth where butter would not melt is an idiom used to describe someone who is shy and quiet in Arabic. Also, according to Ann Marie Adams’s “Writing Self, Writing Nation: Imagined Geographies in the Fiction of Hanan al-Shaykh,” when women are “abstracted” as “mothers” of the nation, they are often “trapped in iconographic roles—symbolized as nations instead of figured as national players or as equal citizens” (2001: 203). This explains why when Zahra visits her uncle in an unnamed African country, he “began to breathe again” and wanted “to touch her hands and face and the hem of her dress” (al-Shaykh, 1994: 69). “Through her,” he postulates, “I hoped to absorb all my life both here and in Lebanon” (69). Throughout the novel, the line between Zahra’s personal space and an imagined, idealized, feminized homeland disappears.

When the Civil War erupts in Part II, Zahra imagines it to be a war on class, patriarchy, and imperialism as well as a war on her own parents. She notices that her father is “shrunken” and that he no longer has “the Hitler-like moustache” and “the brute strength with which he had beaten [her] mother” (152). “This war,” she speculates, “has made beauty, money, terror and convention all equally irrelevant” (161). She views the war as “essential” because it has “swept away the hollowness concealed by routines” and made her “ever more alive, ever more tranquil” (162). The house of fear in which she has lived begins to crack: “what had become of all the fear which used to envelop me as a child?” (148). She now feels free to reclaim the body she had renounced, disavowed, and dissociated from in Part I. But because the personal and the political are so connected in her thinking, her sexual awakening takes the shape of what she perceives as her nationalistic duty. She makes it her mission to divert a sniper whose hiding place she accidentally discovers on the roof of an apartment block: “I wondered what could possibly
divert the sniper from aiming his rifle and startle him to the point where he might open his mouth instead? Perhaps a troupe of dancers would do it? Perhaps a gypsy with a performing monkey? Or perhaps a naked woman, passing across his field of fire?” (157). The last option, the naked woman in a field of fire, is the only one she can arrange and she initiates an intense sexual relationship with the sniper. Her new-found pleasure in the body that she used to abhor is, thus, intertwined with social norms made irrelevant by war.

Because Zahra’s story is limited to her body, the war deepens her subjection to male authority. Before the war, dissociating from her body is her answer to the problem of pain—the pain she feels for simultaneously loving and hating her mother, fearing and pitying her father, and hurting and protecting herself. During the war, Zahra envisions the birth of a new Lebanon and a new Zahra. But she sees her brother’s participation in the war as nothing but a juvenile desire to be outrageous. “No day passes,” he tells her, “in which I do not perform an act once prohibited by government or law or mere public opinion” (163). She notes how he is unable to articulate one good reason as to why he is fighting: “Ahmed came to remind me so much of that pet parrot” (165), claiming to be fighting for the rights of the Shi’ites and “for all the underprivileged” and the “oppressed” (166) against imperialism, America, and Israel. Zahra knows that he is repeating these fancy, grand schemes without fully understanding them. But, to some extent, her sexual affair with the sniper reflects the same euphoria and self-delusion. She, too, is at a loss as to how to comprehend it: “However am I to describe that relationship?” (146) Despite her careful planning, Zahra becomes pregnant. Desperate and deranged, she holds on to the fantasy that she and the sniper will marry, raise a family, and live happily ever after—but in the end she is killed by the sniper’s bullet. In trite nationalistic rhetoric, her child would be the future of Lebanon—hope arising from despair and harmony out of chaos—but this vision is unattainable, and the narrative and the narrator are aborted.

**Women’s Place**

Ask US college students what comes to their minds when they think of women in Arab societies and their answers will likely include references to oppression, abuse, and discrimination. Students often treat the veil as a central symbol of this oppression, a convenient trope that invokes mystery, eroticism, and a need for rescue by American—rather than Arab—men. These perceptions of Arab women are intricately linked with imperialist and orientalist discourses. According to Leila Ahmed’s *Women and Gender in Islam*, for example, the assertion that Islam treated women as inferior was part of the European colonial narrative in the late nineteenth century. Therefore, the preoccupation with the veil is itself
the byproduct of Western hegemony. Ahmed concludes that “the re-emergent veil attests, by virtue of its very power as a symbol of resistance, to the uncontested hegemonic diffusion of the discourses of the West in our age” (1992: 235). Recent developments in the Middle East demonstrate that women wearing the veil, contrary to pedestrian, trivial stereotypes, are able to play prominent, effective roles in public life.

One prominent figure in Western feminist thinking about Arabic women is Dr. Nawal al-Saadawi, Egyptian writer and human rights activist. Her well-known books include *Women and Sex* (Arabic, 1969), *Woman at Point Zero* (Arabic, 1975; English, 1983), and *Memoirs from the Women’s Prison* (Arabic, 1984; English, 1994). Al-Saadawi is credited for her fierce and candid criticism of all patriarchal discourses, regardless of whether they are disguised as morality, religion, or patriotism. For example, al-Saadawi points out that women, as the title of one of her short story collections declares, have “no place in paradise” by interpreting paradise as a construct that appeals to male fantasy. Without even this potential of reward in heaven, women are perpetually assigned to a dark grave. Although not as much an anti-Islamic position as an anti-establishment one, the use of such ominous rhetoric speaks to Western feminists in the language they have invented. In fact, the *Guardian*, quoted on the title page of *Woman at Point Zero*, refers to al-Saadawi as “the leading spokeswoman on the status of women in the Arab world,” assuming that there is one “Arab world” and that one writer can be its spokesperson. Thus, despite being a radical feminist, which is not a popular position anywhere, al-Saadawi is one of the most widely translated and celebrated writers from the Middle East.

*Woman at Point Zero*, which appears on our survey, has more cultural and political virtues than literary ones. It combines biography with autobiography, memoir with fiction, and philosophy with literature. The plot is a fictionalized account of an interview al-Saadawi, a trained psychiatrist, conducted with Firdaus, a woman on death row in the 1970s. Firdaus walks into death with dignity and grace and refuses to sign appeals on her behalf. Her contempt towards death symbolizes her new-found freedom: “I want nothing. I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. Therefore, I am free” (al-Saadawi, 1983: 101). Firdaus is free from all the traps that, she asserts, further the trafficking in women: within the confines of marriage, employment, religion, family, and even nationalism, women have to compromise their integrity. To drive this point home, the narrator’s story encompasses all the injustices females may suffer anywhere: female circumcision, cruel parents, a sexually abusive uncle, suppressed homoerotic desires, domestic abuse, rape, and forced prostitution. It is remarkable that one character could suffer so much in the span of one book, but al-Saadawi’s goal to expose the fake moralistic values that subjugate women is more important than the plausibility of the plot.
The book’s dramatic push comes from Firdaus’s realization that every woman is essentially a prostitute. In a re-evaluation of her childhood, she realizes that she was not given an allowance but was paid for her toil, in the same way she was paid by her uncle for molesting her, which is the same way a woman is paid by her husband to cook, do chores, and bear children, or by her employer to degrade herself for a raise or a favorable annual report. The only difference is who charges the price and who makes the most profit:

I came to realize that a female employee is more afraid of losing her job than the prostitute is of losing her life. An employee is scared of losing her job and becoming a prostitute because she does not understand that the prostitute’s life is in fact better than hers … . I now knew that all of us were prostitutes who sold themselves at varying prices, and that an expensive prostitute was better than a cheap one. (1983: 76)

This powerful realization is driven home at every turn in the novel: in the way Firdaus witnesses how wives are exploited in marriage; in the way she later realizes that the man she loved did not loved her, but loved having sex with her for free; and in the way she sees that her life as an “honorable” (76) working woman is far less dignified than her life as a prostitute because the prostitute does not have to share a bathroom, ride a crowded bus, or suck up to a disgusting boss.

It is doubtful whether students can identify the global charge of al-Saadawi’s work and separate her anti-establishment position from a shallow attack on any particular religion. According to Christison (1987: 409), Nawaal al-Saadawi’s fiction “exaggerates an entire social and political system, a life system. There is a place for social protest in fiction, and there is a place for exaggeration in social protest. But in combining the two, al-Saadawi has done irreparable harm to the Arab image in the West.” While we do not believe that any author is capable of irreparable harm, al-Saadawi’s radical feminist critiques—especially those originally published in the 1970s and 1980s—leave those who are generally ignorant about contemporary Arab societies with the impression that they are as horrifying as she portrays them to be. These depictions, when presented in isolation from counter-narratives, conveniently reinforce students’ pre-existing stereotypes.

Conclusion

This article does not have a happy ending: there are no clear recommendations on how to proceed. We conclude that, based on our survey, Arabic fiction taught at the undergraduate level in the US does not reflect an Arab aesthetic or an Arab worldview as much as it reflects a neo-Orientalist vision of the Middle East, replete not with genies and flying carpets but with ominous, scheming jihadists and oppressed, exploited women. This situation is caused by a variety of reasons. To
begin with, it is hard for instructors to teach history, political science, postcolonial theory, and literary analysis, among others, all in one course. This is true in the case of any literature, including American or British. But it is not commonly the case that students come to literature courses with negative stereotypes reinforced by popular media. Also, translation dictates what is available in the first place. Yet, translation is an industry itself motivated by profit and marketability.

Clearly, the topics listed in this article—war, masculinity, and sex—have undergone vast transformations over the last few decades. For example, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict no longer dwells on the tropes of nostalgia and return that are present in earlier writings. Recently, Banipal, Magazine of Modern Arab Literature (Winter, 2012) published a special issue featuring contemporary writers from Palestine. For example, in an excerpt from Ibtisam Azem’s novel Ghareeb Haifawi: Sleep Thief, the main character Ghareeb Haifawi, is a well-educated Palestinian with a remarkable command of Hebrew and high standards for falafel. Given how much he does not fit the stereotype of the angry, uncouth Palestinian, he is mistaken by Nina, a new immigrant to Israel, for an Israeli. Not knowing that she is speaking to an Arab, Nina delivers an angry tirade on how Arabs scare her with their “hateful, vengeful eyes” and their broken Hebrew (95). Ghareeb calmly informs her:

“I’m one of those Arabs. Haven’t you told me that my eyes were as ‘abundant’ as the land that flows with milk and honey? I laughed then until I almost fell off. What a strange metaphor, I thought! I’m an Arab, Nina.” (96)

Nina’s misuse of the biblical reference to the land of milk and honey indicates the fervor of the new immigrant who wishes to immerse herself in the historical and religious discourse. By referring to Ghareeb’s eyes as “abundant,” she is attempting to mythologize her encounter with him. “Ghareeb” in Arabic means strange or stranger. This meaning invokes being an outsider as well as being weird or bizarre. Ghareeb is a stranger at home. He feels like a “ghost” (96), out of history, neither here nor there. The story aims at capturing his ephemeral presence and his complex feelings of loss. While these feelings are not new, the theme of passing, which evokes similar complexities in past American race relations, may challenge students’ expectations, like Nina’s, of what Palestinians are like.

In fact, students are eager to learn about Arabic literature and culture as evidenced in the MLA and IIE statistics cited in the introduction. Also, in our experience students are open to points of view foreign or contradictory to their own. For example, one of the authors taught a special topics course in fall 2010 on Arabic Women Writers. The readings for the course were arranged under three headings: Women and Nation, Women and Religion, and Women and Gender. The reading list included less familiar names, such as Liana Badr, Salwa Bakr,
and Hoda Barakat. It also included selections from Leila Ahmed’s *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), the edited collection *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women’s Novels* (2002), and William Cleveland’s *Modern History of the Middle East* (3rd ed. 2004). Students’ comments on their evaluations of the course were overwhelmingly positive:

- [The instructor] challenged my thought process with the materials read and made my knowledge of the Middle East expand INCREDIBLY. No other class … has encouraged my growth of other cultures. This is not comparable to any other English course given and quite frankly should be a requirement for literature majors.
- There should be more classes like this.
- This class allowed me to question my views of the Middle East and to continue to […] learn more about other cultures to help solve the injustice that my culture produces.
- I have learned so much about Arab women and the Middle East. I feel that every student should take this class because it has opened my mind and this is very important today in particular.

These responses indicate that students are not afraid of encountering a worldview different from their own. On the contrary, they understand that Arab nations of the Middle East are major players in world politics and that the university curriculum as it is does not provide them with many opportunities to understand more about the region. It should be noted that the university where the authors work does not have an Arabic language or Middle Eastern Studies program. But this is not different from many other colleges and universities in the US. The purpose of this study is not to localize the blame on media outlets, publishers, college instructors, or academic institutions, but to point out that much work needs to be done to update and diversify reading lists for undergraduate courses on the Arab societies of the Middle East.

**Works Cited**


Velez, Mike (2010). On Borderline Between Shores: Space and Place in *Season of Migration to the North*. *College Literature, 37*(1), 190-203.