

Between Representation and Reality: Disabled Bodies in Arabic Literature

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In Palestinian Ghassan Kanafani's novella *Rijal fi al-Shams* (Men in the Sun, 1962)¹ – considered one of the seminal texts in modern Arabic literature – we briefly encounter the story of the female character Shafiqah whose leg was amputated “from the top of the thigh” leaving her a “deformed woman”² who has become a “burden” on society.³ To be sure, Kanafani's narrative assigns Shafiqah a marginal position in the text: her story is focalized through the reminiscences of a male character while descriptions of her in the text are brief. In the same way that her house is located on the edges of town, Shafiqah's disabled body is located on the margins of society and of a text which, as its title indicates, ultimately concerns the fatal exposure of the male body and through it the Palestinian body politics.

To a large extent, the story of Shafiqah's representation (or lack thereof) is also the story of the cultural and social representation (or non-representation) of disability in the region – and particularly female disability: her fate is the fate of many if not all disabled Arab women. It is not enough to see the question of representation as merely a literary or aesthetic concern here which can be opposed to some pre-existing ‘real world’ because there is a continuum between literary and socio-cultural responses to disability which together do much to determine attitudes towards the real disabled body. As disability scholar Rosemarie-Garland Thompson puts it: “[...] representation informs the identity—and often the fate—of real people with extraordinary bodies.”⁴ The literary representation of Shafiqah and other disabled bodies (male and female) in modern Arabic literature can thus become a portal into a larger politics of representation – variously affecting gender, identity, politics, sexuality, and colonialism – which affects the disabled body in the region. In the process of interrogating the ways in which the modern Arabic literary tradition has represented or not represented the

disabled body – the ways in which it is permitted to appear or disappear – we begin the work of writing the (as yet unwritten) modern cultural history of Arab disability.

It is worth reflecting a little more on the ramifications of the exclusion of the disabled body from modern Arabic literary culture. Despite what we will see to be the increasing literary visibility of people with disabilities, the genre of autobiographical and life writing by people with disabilities remains very limited. Personal accounts and memoirs of what it means and feels to have certain bodily configurations are largely absent. This, of course, is at odds with the burgeoning number of disability narratives in the West. Writing in the context of North-America, for example, G. Thomas Couser notes that “the cultural representation of disability has functioned at the expense of disabled people, in part because they have rarely controlled their own images,” noting, however, that in “late twentieth-century life writing, disabled people have initiated and controlled their own narratives in unprecedented ways and to an extraordinary degree.”⁵ If, as Couser argues, “disability has become one of the pervasive topics of contemporary life writing,”⁶ then the scarcity of such accounts in the Arab context becomes all the more a pressing question. Perhaps the answer to this finds its roots in a Sida report (and other reports) published in 2014 which notes that parents of children with a disability are often reluctant to admit their child has a disability.⁷ These cultural and social attitudes have even had an impact on the accuracy of the statistical data being produced and which often relies on projections rather than accurate figures.⁸

Arguably, this culture of nondisclosure is one of the main reasons for the large absence of authentic and lived accounts of disability to date. The long-standing reluctance to acknowledge or speak about disability feeds into and impacts the availability of first-person accounts – one of the exceptions to this remains Taha Husayn’s *al-Ayyam* (The Days, 1926-1967) which chronicled the experience of blindness of one of the Arab world’s leading intellectuals.⁹ One could, of course, argue that memoirs and autobiographical accounts of

experiences of disability have in the past decade or so been published but one is struck by the fact that these are published in Western languages (mainly English and French) rather than in Arabic.

For Sara Scalenghe, writing in her introduction to *Disability in the Ottoman Arab World*, the radical disparity between the number of Western and non-Western histories of disability is proof that the “need for histories of disability in non-Western contexts is particularly urgent if we aspire to avoid Euro-American centrism.” This “disability imperialism,” as she puts it, is particularly “ironic” given the rate of disability in the Global South.¹⁰ If Arab culture is undoubtedly the victim of such “disability imperialism,” it is also guilty of trafficking in, and perpetuating, its discursive machinery. As a PhD student, I recall how a prominent literary scholar of Arabic literature laughed when I told him I was working on literary representations of illness and disability pointing out “there are no such characters.” By the same token, I cannot but recollect the look of horror on the face of a well-known editor of a Middle Eastern publishing house who questioned my choice of a PhD research: “Why this topic? It’s so depressing!”

Yet, if the history of modern Arabic literature in some ways mirrors the history of disability in the Arab world, though, it has also begun the work of shattering the prism through which the disabled body is seen. To focus on the last decade alone, the Lebanese novelist Hassan Daoud’s *Makyaj Khafif li Hadthih al-Laylah* (Light Makeup for Tonight, 2004)¹¹ and the Iraqi Betoool Khedairi’s *Ghayib* (Absent, 2004),¹² for example, have also challenged the representation of disabled bodies as either marginal or spectral, on the one hand, or over-burdened with symbolism, on the other, by offering narratives on the corporeal and affective reality of disability – and in particular female disability.

In this sense, contemporary Arabic literature has become one of the most powerful platforms through which to challenge the culture of invisibility that people with disabilities

experience. It bears stressing here that the shift in representations of disability has not always been occasioned by any particular attempt to challenge particular discourses of able or disabled bodies but, rather, has been provoked by the political climate. After all, it is hardly coincidental that contemporary literature from Iraq is fraught with images and representations of maimed, amputated, and impaired bodies that cut across gender and social class.

If this shift in representation by authors is a cause for hope, it should be pointed out that it is not always accompanied by an equally receptive reader. It is possible to argue that reader reaction to these shifts have, if anything, revealed just how reluctant Arabic literary culture remains to reading and representing the disabled body. Note, for example, the violent critical reaction of critic Yassin Refa‘iyah to the Syrian writer Haifa’ Bitar’s novel *Imra’at min Hadtha al-‘Asr* (A Woman of This Modern Age, 2004),¹³ which depicts a woman who discovers she has breast cancer and undergoes a mastectomy and then chemotherapy: “This is not how a woman with breast cancer feels!” wrote Refa‘iyah in one review.¹⁴ For sure, Maryam, the main protagonist in the novel, speaks about her ill and ‘impaired’ body in ways that are deeply unorthodox in the Arabic literary tradition, but Refa‘iyah’s condemnation says as much about the prevailing normative discourses surrounding ‘impairment’ ‘illness’ and ‘dis-ablement’ of bodies. In the same way Refa‘iyah’s presumption that he can speak for, and on behalf of, women with cancer, reveals the profound patriarchy that is still embedded in discourses on female disability.

In the end, disability narratives – be they fictional, autobiographical, or social – matter not only because they cut across the divide between ‘literature’ and ‘life’ but because they also provide a vital and individual perspective into the predominant quantitative studies that are being conducted on disability and disability issues in the region, especially the Arab world. For British-Iraqi Raya Al-Jadir – who helped launch *Disability Horizon Arabic*, and who speaks from her own experience of disability: “Many still believe that criticising the

social structure that suppresses the rights of disabled people is unpatriotic and fear that speaking out means criticising the country [...].[...]The problem I have with many organisations and charities in the Middle East is that most of them are not user-led and instead of challenging the obstacles, they encourage disabled people to adapt or work within them,” adding that “we need to change social attitudes first and foremost then target the bigger challenges [...]”¹⁵ In both representing and challenging such ‘social attitudes’, Arabic narratives on disability have the potential to change them.

Notes

¹ Ghassan Kanafani, *Rijal fi al-Shams* (Beirut: Dar al-Tali‘ah, 1962).

² Ghassan Kanafani, *Men in the Sun and Other Palestinian Stories*, trans. Hilary Kilpatrick (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), 64.

³ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

⁴ Rosemarie Garland Thompson. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 15.

⁵ G. Thomas Couser, “Disability, Life Narrative, and Representation,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis, 4th ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 399.

⁶ G. Thomas Couser, *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2009), 3.

⁷ “Disability Rights in the Middle East & North Africa,” *Sida Report*, Dec. 2014 <https://www.sida.se/globalassets/sida/eng/partners/human-rights-based-approach/disability/rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-mena.pdf> (Accessed 18 Sept. 2018).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See Taha Husayn, *al-Ayyam*, 3 Vols. (Cairo: Dar al-Ma‘arif, 1971 & 1973).

¹⁰ Sara Scalenghe, *Disability in the Ottoman Arab World, 1500-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 8.

¹¹ Hassan Daoud, *Makyaj Khafif li Hadthih al-Layla* (Beirut: Dar Riad el-Rayess, 2004).

¹² Betool Khedairi, *Ghayib* (Beirut: al-Mu‘assasa al-‘Arabiya lil Dirasat wal Nashr, 2004).

¹³ Haifa’ Bitar, *Imra’ a min Hadtha al- ‘Asr* (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2004).

¹⁴ Yassin Refai ‘yah, “Al-Ghiwaya fi Hudn al-Mawt,” *Al-Mustaqbal*, 14 Jan. 2004. <https://almustaqbal.com/article/45937/> (Accessed 18 Sept. 2018).

¹⁵ Diana Alghoul, “Fighting the Taboo of Disability in the Arab world,” *MEMO: Middle East Monitor*, 3 Dec. 2016 <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20161203-fighting-the-taboo-of-disability-in-the-arab-world/> (Accessed 18 Sept. 2018).