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theless performed by the individual. All people have multiple identities, she asserts, and call strategically upon one or another to accrue value. In order to elucidate this, Sadiqi focuses on the genre of introductions. She taped and videotaped fifty people to see which identities were most salient and why, finding that “class, education, language skills or work status” had more importance in women’s speech than did their gender identity but that their gender identity was inseparable from these factors (312). In other words, her data demonstrated that gender alone does not hold a powerful place in identity construction but is always attached to other identity markers.

Sadiqi’s book is rich in detail. It provides a cultural map for the study of gender and linguistic practice in Morocco. Sadiqi rightly asserts that work on gender must take into account “the dynamics of multi-lingualism, reading of religion, illiteracy, and orality” in order to avoid Western ethnocentric paradigms of feminism (314). Sadiqi’s work provides an excellent and highly readable example of scholarship that tilts the balance a bit more equitably toward non-Western communities. It is a powerhouse of a book that will appeal not only to linguists but to cultural anthropologists, folklorists, feminists, and anyone interested in the history of gender studies in Morocco, North Africa, and the Islamic world in general.

The Tree and Other Stories

Abdallah Al-Nasser, translated by Dina Bosio and Christopher Tingley. Interlink, 2004. 124 pp.

Reviewed by Moneera al-Ghadeer, University of Wisconsin-Madison

The stories in *The Tree* are selections from Abdallah Al-Nasser’s previously published story collections, especially *The Mirage* and *The Snow Siege*, which both appeared in 2002. Dina Bosio and Christopher Tingley translated *The Tree* from Arabic, and their translation reads very well; Salma Khadra Joyyusi contributes a helpful introduction to the collection.

Al-Nasser has worked in journalism for a few decades and contributed to many Arabic newspapers in Saudi Arabia and abroad. *The Tree*

is well suited for courses on translation and as an introduction to short fiction in Arabic because the stories are vividly written and concise but with appealing simplicity. Al-Nasser was an avid reader, essayist, and story contributor before publishing his last two story collections. He is a persuasive stylist but of a particular kind—less experimental and ambiguous than his contemporaries in the Arab World. His language effects are of clarity and minimalism, evocation and allusion.

Set mostly in perplexed, transformation-torn Arabian cities and villages, *The Tree* presents an explicit divergence where modernity and history meet resistance and ambivalence. Reflecting on the past reaffirms its richness, inscribing long-lasting traces on what subsequently came and changed the old Bedouin life. What is striking is the way in which the author juxtaposes the old with the new, a manner that does not manifest itself in a violent rejection of either world but instead stages a conscientious dialectic, opening this encounter for further reflection. The stories that deal with this encounter between the past and the present tend to depict powerful scenes of serenity and peace attributed to the landscape of the country and villagers' simple yet insightful perspectives. Many short stories in *The Tree* lyrically capture this world of oases and villages with a sweet sorrow and conspicuous longing for the simplicity of life.

Al-Nasser's stories undertake diverse themes, some of which are related to the social and cultural transition after the discovery of oil in 1938, as well as memory, childhood, travel, and writing, among others. Al-Nasser explores the power of the desert, curiosity, and the unquenchable human desire to discover the unknown. Travel seizes his characters, and departure emerges as their fantasy, sometimes combined with anguish. In "Setting Out," Abu Salem is anguished by his desire to leave the village. "Shall I leave the farm, the wide open spaces, the men's gatherings, and go off to the city where everybody's nobody?" (88) This desire to leave the village brings about conflicting emotions and "deep melancholy, which swept through him whenever he thought of leaving the village" (88). Indeed, his torment is well depicted, but the city's seduction is compelling. The village is what he calls home with its friendliness, comfortable living, animals, and birds, but the city represents the enchantment of the unknown; it is where a job, money, and a big villa surrounded with trees can be had. Toward the end of the story, we are

surprised to learn that the narrator is a doctoral student in Scotland recalling his first departure from his village to Riyadh. What is notable in Al-Nasser's stories is his tactful, sudden, and amusing ending of his narratives.

Nevertheless, the theme of travel is more than juxtaposing the old world with the new; it shows that the writer is skeptical as he revisits the same theme in many stories. "The Tree," the first story in the collection, addresses a similar theme but contextualizes the discussion of modernity and tradition within a moving and astute story of a tree in the village. The narrative opens with a suggestive and emblematic description of the old tree whose "roots went deep into the earth, tangled in all directions, and they were as strong as iron" (1). Not only does the old tree bear an uncanny representation of the past, it also unearths many arguments about modernization and its influence on old tradition. The villagers consider it "their own heritage," and their lives' activities revolve around it, from holding their gatherings and the village council there, to taking naps under it, to sending school trips to it (1). The tree exerts "a sense of veneration," and the narrator cannot replace its uncanny presence with any new or larger trees and things because it belongs to "a sacred myth cherished in his heart" (4). Then, the narrator tells us how a hospital will be built where the tree stands. At this juncture, everything turns upside down and a fascinating discussion arises, focusing on the mishaps and benefits of uprooting the tree and building a hospital, the debates ranging from superstitious claims to rational justifications. The villagers feel that the hospital would bring misfortune, and the history teacher feels the village would lose its name, and the Arabic teacher insists on his grammatical rules and declares that the village cannot be renamed "The Ex-Tree Village" because it sounds incorrect (5). The Qur'anic teacher fears that going along with these plans would lead to blasphemy. Here, we can see how uprooting or transplanting the tree (the heritage) instigates opposition and resistance from different directions. Nevertheless, with its engaging details, the story encapsulates the debate about modernity and its relation to Arabic tradition, showing that it is far from being settled. Further, there's a sense of aggressiveness in this context, since some have argued for uprooting the tree. However, al-Nasser ends his story by stating that "[a] year later, the people were passing by the tree on their way to the hospital," which implies his consideration of the possibility that mod-

ernization and tradition can coexist, but he also reveals that the graveyard is larger now, situated next to the tree. Is this a gesture toward the decay that accompanies modernity or ambivalence toward it? Or is it a temporal gesture, showing the disparity between what his memory captured and the actual present? Obviously, Al-Nasser likes to write about these encounters because he is, more often than not, the kind of writer whose imagination takes him back to the past, evoking inevitable pathos.

The last story in the collection, "Um Rajoum," depicts the ordeal of a few passengers whose driver loses his way in the desert while heading to Um Rajoum, "a stopping point half way to the city" (117). One can read this story with Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*, as both narratives encapsulate the desert's bleakness and singularity as travelers face a dreadful death. "It was a cold night with a full moon, and the village was clearly visible there amid the vast desert" (115). Al-Nasser traces the anxiety and anticipation of the passengers who "go out, gazing up at the sky in terror—and despair" (119). Unlike Kanafani's blazing sun, Al-Nasser depicts a voyage at night, when the travelers are desperately following the moon since it is the only sign left to recognize their direction. They are well aware of the uncanny powers of the desert that can simply swallow them up, making them vanish without a trace. This realization causes more panic, especially after no gasoline is left in their vehicle; the narrator describes how "they got out of the vehicle, sat down and started to weep, waiting for the end they knew coming. In the midst of their angst and thoughts of death, a woman traveler asks them to look at Um Rajoum's outskirts. Once more, Al-Nasser offers a sudden conclusion of heightened dread, an unexpected hope in the throes of despair.

This preoccupation with the desert may be predictable, but the approach is not. Whereas the writer's juxtapositions between the past and the present are recurring, they still question the direction in which to go. This undecided position suggests that a clear-cut answer will not solve the dilemma, and the individual and community will have to negotiate their way through these fascinating yet troubling changes. The stories in *The Tree* show ambivalence in the discussion of modernity and tradition, one that cannot easily be erased or avoided; any decision between the past and the present has to acknowledge that one informs the other, compelling individuals to face a compromise.

Traversing different cultural and urban borders seems a kind of

seduction that appeals to many narrators. The bewildered human voice in the darkness of the desert, the melancholic traveler, and the generous foreigner are among the author's characterizations. One may consider some of Al-Nasser's texts as short fiction with sudden endings, realistic narration, mostly male narrators and sometimes a first-person narrator. In general, there is not much experimentation with the narrative voice and the story as a genre.

What is strikingly noticeable is the almost-absent critical reflection on women and gender in *The Tree*. In fact, we have two stories about two nameless women. "Flocks of Doves" focuses on a young Arabian woman who left her dreams behind to marry a rich man. "He was plunged in his work and ambition, while she lived on in her lavish, secluded world, along with her silence" (104). The passivity by which Al-Nasser depicts his female character is unsettling, since he fails to vigorously address her predicament or interrogate the social dynamics that force this young woman to be a prisoner of wealth and let her dreams fade away. Ironically, this story is followed by "The Snow Siege," "where the anguish of a [nameless] Western woman unable to make a necessary journey due to lack of funds stirs in the old Arab protagonist his chivalry toward women, and his irrepressible urge to give where help is needed" (xii). Disappointingly, when women appear in Al-Nasser's narratives, they are nameless phantoms (either secretaries with no names or "she," an absent third person), and this type of presentation is quite unexpected, especially when we know that most of the stories are situated in the Arab World, a social space in which women remain segregated from men. What motivates this lack, and how can we read this double exclusion? If Al-Nasser contemplates a swift modernity that has taken a nomadic society by surprise, so to speak, then where do women stand in relation to this modernist approach, and why are they excluded from participating in it?