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| **Rifaat, Alifa (1930-1996)** |
| **أليفة رفعت; Rifaat, Fatimah Abdullah** |
| Fatimah Abdullah Rifaat, born in Cairo on 5 June 1930, belonged to an Egyptian family of Turkish origin. She began to write in her youth, but her works were not published until late in her life, due to the opposition of her family first, and her husband next, who considered writing not suitable for a woman. When very young, she was forced to marry a mining engineer, from whom she divorced after eight months of marriage. She then married a cousin who did not allow her to publish regularly (he let her write for a couple of years and then pressured her to stop), but only sporadically and with the pen name Alifa, nor to continue her studies. Rifaat resumed writing only after this husband’s death. She published her first short story in 1955 and continued publishing from the mid-seventies onwards. She died in Cairo in 1996. |
| Rifaat, who wrote short stories and a novel, addresses issues of the body, sexuality, and love in a peculiar way, which is why her family opposed her writing. The main subject of all her short stories is the relationship between husband and wife She depicts married life as a coin with two faces: the first one is meant to appear to others and the second one is the couple’s real life inside the house. Starting from her personal experience, she often narrates the life of a couple where the woman is strongly encouraged, if not forced, to marry regardless to her feelings, taking into account only the economic status of the spouse. Another important subject in Rifaat’s short stories is sexuality, which she uses as a literary tool to criticize Egyptian society, as it considers women inferior to men, and to call for women’s solidarity. This is particularly apparent, for example, in ‘My world of the Unknown’ (Rifaat, 1983: 61-77), where the main character, looking with her husband for a new house, gets fascinated by an abandoned villa on the river which no one wants to rent. When she reaches the house, a woman named Aneessa tries to stop her and to make her go away. Forced by the Police to abandon the place, Aneessa warns the protagonist: ‘I’ll leave her to you’. ‘Who?’ – I shouted. ‘Who Aneessa?’. Once again pointing at the bottom of the house she said: ’Her’ (Rifaat, 1983: 67). ‘Her’ is a fascinating she-snake with whom the protagonist falls in love. The text, written in the first person, is the story of the protagonist and of her feelings toward a possible relationship with the she-snake that later in the short story will assume human features. Narrating a love and sexual relation between a she-snake and a human, Rifaat sets the relationship in the *‘abqarī* world where, following Muslim tradition, *ğinn* – male and female supernatural creatures – live. Only in this world can the non-normative relation happen, because it does not upset the patriarchal order.  In ‘Just another day’ (Rifaat 1983: 113-116) Rifaat addresses another subject she recalls more than once, the one of death, describing the deceased from the point of view of an old woman who is going to die. In another short story, ‘Badriyya’s husband’ (Rifaat 1983: 29-38) a young wife discovers her husband’s homosexuality. Although she is highly disappointed, because this means she will not have a happy marital life, there is no blame on the husband. As Natasha Maria Gordon writes, Rifaat’s voice is a revolutionary voice, because ‘Her narratives exist in spaces where Islam, and all its traditional weights, rest alongside female sexuality, pleasure and pain – merging into a strong fundamental female identity’ (El Miniawi, 2013: 403).  File: Cover.jpg  Figure 1. The cover of *Distant View of a Minaret*, published in English in 1983, which contains fifteen short stories. The English translator Denis Johnson Davies suggested that Rifaat let some of her short stories be published in English. The English collection.  Source: <http://www.name-list.net/img/portrait/Reinart\_6.jpg>  In the short story ‘Another evening in the Club’, the main character, Samia, loses an emerald ring in the ‘Club’, and through this haphazardous event, she will know who her husband really is. Rifaat’s descriptive power is remarkable, especially when she describes the feelings of her female characters. Her work, can be read at:  <http://books.google.it/books?id=wySWeOZh9xEC&pg=PA68&lpg=PA68&dq=Alifa+Rifaat+short+stories+online&source=bl&ots=RcQFeUXMab&sig=XFl5KBnRjX_gOrRLviBLT11JA-M&hl=en&sa=X&ei=B6SMT73RFYmWiQKFh8HACA&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Alifa%20Rifaat%20short%20stories%20online&f=false>  Notwithstanding her pioneering work, Rifaat is not widely known in Egypt or abroad. List of WorksIn ArabicShort storiesحواء تعود لآدم(1975) Ḥawā’ ta‘ūd lī-Ādam (Eva comes back to Adam).من يكون الرجل؟(1981) Man yakūn ar-rağul? (Who’s the Man?).صلاة الحب(1983) Ṣalāt al-ḥubb (Love prayer).في ليل الشتاء الطويل(1985) Fī layl aš-šitā’ aṭ-ṭawīl (A night in the Long Winter).Novelsجوهرة فرعون(1978). Ğawharat far‘ūn (The Pharaoh’s jewel).In English (1983) *Distant view from a Minaret and other Stories*, London: Heinemann (translated by Denis Johnson Davies).  (1983) ‘Just another day’. In *Arabic Short Stories*. Translated by Denis Johnson Davies, Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press. 68-74.  (2005) ‘My Wedding Night’. In Arab Women Writers. An Anthology of Short Stories. Edited and translated by Dalya Cohen-Mor. Albany: SUNY Press. 120-126. |
| Further reading:  (El Miniawi)  (Li)  (Nkealah)  (Nwachukwu-Agbada)  (Ogbeide)  (Ogbeide, Deconstructing Phallocentric Cultural Ascendancy: Alifa Rifaat’s subtle Sexist Agenda in Distant View of a Minaret)  (Olive)  (Salti Ramzi) |