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Book review of The Situe Stories by Frances Khirallah Noble

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Perhaps the most striking feature of *I Saw Ramallah* is its sense of moderation, tolerance, and modesty. Barghouti resists sliding down the easy slope of self-indulgence in rosy romanticism or deluded nostalgia about his native land before the occupation. Rather he engages in self-criticism, undermining as he does the oft-used cliché, which would have Muslims incapable of scrutinizing their own past.

The book was translated by Ahdaf Soueif, author of *Aisha* (1983) which was shortlisted for The Guardian Fiction Award, *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992), *Sandpiper* (1996) a collection of short stories which she translated into Arabic *Zīnat al-Ḥayāh* and won the 1997 Cairo International Book-fair award for Best Short Stories of the Year, *Mukhtārāt min Aʿmāl Ahdāf Suwayf* (1998), and *The Map of Love* (2000), which was short-listed for the 1999 Booker Prize. Soueif, who sometimes assumes her husband's last name, the poet and biographer Ian Hamilton, is associated with Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation, London (<http://www.al-furqan.com>). She has a doctorate in Literary Stylistics and has drawn both praise and criticism for introducing gender politics to the Arab literary scene.

Soueif herself attempted a similar journey late last year, sending dispatches of her encounters to *The Guardian* newspaper. Her experiences of the restrictions suffered by Palestinians under occupation or within Israel are similar to Barghouti's, or Edward Said's before them: experiences that evoke an oppressed humanity.

Mourid Barghouti's book is all the more poignant at a time when Ramallah has been under siege and *al-Intifāḍah* has become associated in the mainstream West with "violence" against Israeli security. As if in response, Barghouti calmly narrates and contextualizes the impact of decades of unfairness and injustice upon the Palestinian people. In his foreword Edward Said describes *I Saw Ramallah* as "one of the finest existential accounts of Palestinian displacement that we now have." The content is as accessible to the layperson as it is a must to researchers.

FADI H. DAGHER

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The Situe Stories. By Frances Khirallah Noble. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000. Pp. xi, 182. ISBN: 0-8156-0657-5 (alk. paper)

The Situe Stories offer eleven engaging narrative interpretations of the Arab American, specifically Lebanese Christian, experience of assimilating into the United States. Noble, who writes from an intimate understanding

of her subject, has tied these tales together in a unique way thematically. Each of these family-centered stories includes the character of a “situe,” [= *sittī*] the Arabic word used in Lebanon for grandmother, or aunt in some cases.

The first and final stories serve as bookends for the collection both in time and central character. The opening tale takes place in Lebanon at the beginning of the 20th century and relates the early life and emigration of a young woman named Hasna. Hasna, who is saved by her situe from a grave illness that leaves her bald, grows up longing to join her older brothers in America. The story ends as Hasna, now blond-headed and no longer bald due perhaps to the constant therapeutic ministrations of her grandmother in babyhood, departs for the new world along with her beloved horse. Hasna’s situe stays behind with her mother. Yet her situe is connected to Hasna by an “invisible thread” which allows her to sense every turn of her granddaughter’s journey. It is a metaphor perhaps for the cultural and emotional ties that connect family members dispersed across oceans and time.

The last of the collection’s stories finds Hasna in the present day at the end of her life. She has by now become old, widowed, a situe herself. Living alone in her southern California bungalow, she finds consolation from the lonely boredom of her life in alcohol, knowing that her Americanized children will come and eventually move her into a dreaded rest home with strangers.

The situes in these stories illustrate the variety of roles assumed by these women in their new homeland. Situe is represented in some of the tales as a steady presence in the background, a symbol of cultural and family traditions, someone to be cared for. We read of situe the chaperone who accompanies her daughters and grandchildren on a summer vacation to the mountains of California. Although her family takes advantage of resort activities, situe never leaves the vicinity of the cabin, supposedly because of her heart, as she manages, however, to keep it spotlessly clean and swept. There is Lena’s mother-in-law “who lived and moved in their house like a shadow,” while her son Mansour becomes a bookie in order to provide Lena with the comfortable Americanized life she covets and his daughter Linda with the surgery she needs. There is situe who insists on taping a medal of St. Jude, Patron Saint of Desperate Causes, on a new grandchild’s navel, the traditional way to ensure a flattened outcome. Situe in another story takes on the role of family protector, who offers sanctuary to her granddaughter and her war-protestor boyfriend while she denies their presence to the inquiring police. Situe also represents women who ensure economic

success for their families through their business acumen and domestic art skills.

The tales each strive to illustrate the assimilation of Christian Arabs into American life from the perspective of the women they portray. Genevieve, who works in the same shoe factory as her father, secretly marries the son of the Italian neighbor, not the Syrian man her mother prefers. Esene learns English from her husband to the shock of her in-laws. (Another) Hasna comes out of a stifling retirement and capably and efficiently stocks and opens a store for her retarded yet beautiful son, as she had for her daughters. That he unexpectedly dies only offers her the additional opportunity of preparing for an ornate funeral as well as an opening.

Written in a lively personable style, many of the stories' characters remain unforgettable in the often poignant descriptions of the challenges they faced coming from a cultural framework that is inevitably changed by interactions with American traditions and values. This work is appropriate for general collections as well as those that feature Arab American and feminist literature.

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Mandate Days: British Lives in Palestine 1918-1948. By A. J. Sherman. Baltimore & London. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. Pp. 264. Includes bibliographical references, illustrations and index. \$17.95. ISBN: 0500251169 (Paperback)

Mandate Days: British Lives in Palestine 1918-1948 is an enjoyable and learned read. The book covers the years of the British Mandate in Palestine from the last days of the First World War, through the era of the British administration under the League of Nations Mandate, to the British withdrawal and the slapdashed handover of Palestine to the United Nations. Although there have been numerous works written on Jewish and Palestinian relations, this work is unique as it views the history of this region by examining the professional and personal lives of British military and civil personnel, their families, and other British civilians who served and worked in Palestine under the League of Nations Mandate, an era that many historians tend to cover only marginally.

The author of this work, A. J. Sherman, was born in Palestine during the British Mandate. He holds degrees from Columbia College; Harvard Law School; Columbia University; St. Anthony's College, University of Oxford;