



## Tablet & Pen: Literary Landscapes from the Modern Middle East

*Reza Aslan (Editor)*

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The countries that stretch along the broad horizons of the Middle East—from Morocco to Iran, from Turkey to Pakistan—boast different cultures, different languages, and different religions. Yet the literary landscape of this dynamic part of the world has been bound together not by borders and nationalities, but by a common experience of Western imperialism. Keenly aware of the collected scars left by a legacy of colonial rule, the acclaimed writer Reza Aslan, with a team of four regional editors and seventy-seven translators, cogently demonstrates with Tablet and Pen how literature can, in fact, be used to form identity and serve as an extraordinary chronicle of the disrupted histories of the region.

Acting with Words Without Borders, which fosters international exchange through translation and publication of the world's finest literature, Aslan has purposefully situated this volume in the twentieth century, beyond the familiar confines of the Ottoman past, believing that the writers who have emerged in the last hundred years have not received their full due. This monumental collection, therefore, of nearly two hundred pieces, including short stories, novels, memoirs, essays and works of drama—many of them presented in English for the first time—features translated works from Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Turkish. Organized chronologically, the volume spans a century of literature—from the famed Arab poet Khalil Gibran to the Nobel laureates Naguib Mahfouz and Orhan Pamuk, from the great Syrian-Lebanese poet Adonis to the grand dame of Urdu fiction, Ismat Chughtai—connected by the extraordinarily rich tradition of resplendent cultures that have been all too often ignored by the Western canon.

By shifting America's perception of the Middle Eastern world away from religion and politics, Tablet and Pen evokes the splendors of a region through the voices of its writers and poets, whose literature tells an urgent and liberating story. With a wealth of contextual information that places the writing within the historical, political, and cultural breadth of the region, *Tablet Pen* is transcendent, a book to be devoured as a single sustained narrative, from the first page to the last. Creating a vital bridge between two estranged cultures, "this is that rare anthology: cohesive, affecting, and informing" (*Publishers Weekly*).

## Tablet & Pen: Literary Landscapes from the Modern Middle East Details

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Reza Aslan (Editor)**

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## **From Reader Review Tablet & Pen: Literary Landscapes from the Modern Middle East for online ebook**

### **Elaine says**

I FINALLY finished this book and it was completely worth it! I keep telling people it was like trying to read Shakespeare and Melville and Twain and Poe all at once. All of it is great literature, but very dense. I would not recommend picking this up for "light reading," but if you want to understand a little more about what is going on in the Middle East right now, I suggest you get yourself a copy of Tablet and Pen. So much backstory and history that you can read in a newspaper article but not fully understand is expressed so well through stories, essays, and poetry. I think the poetry is especially good, which is saying something since poetry is one of the hardest things to translate.

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### **Lesley says**

Aging, I continue to despair at my bottomless ignorance about non European, non American culture. Thus my delight in discovering this anthology, a literary history and commentary on 20th and 21st century Middle Eastern culture and history. This collection of nearly 200 poems, short stories, essays and novel excerpts come from Arab, Turkish, Iranian, and Pakistani writers. Aslan arrange the works both chronologically and thematically, e.g. "Once Upon a Time: Politics and Piety in Persian Literature, 1930-1940", or "Strangers in a Strange Land: Turkish Literature after Ataturk".

A few quibbles: lumping together Syrian, Lebanese, Iraqi, Palestinian, Egyptian and Jordanian writers as all "Arab" deprives us of some of the best in contemporary poetry; it feels odd, for example, to include only 5 Palestinian writers as opposed to 14 Turkish and 15 Iranian. A more representative anthology would recognize the uniqueness of the various Arab literary cultures.

Women account for 14 of the 69 authors included; better than I expected, yet far short of parity. Admittedly, identifying female authors may be a challenge, yet Nathalie Handal managed to find over 80 for her *The Poetry of Arab Women* collection. I think Aslan could have tried harder.

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### **Mariam says**

I cannot rate this book as it was rudely torn from my grasp and tossed out the window of a moving vehicle. I will amend this entry once I purchase a copy of my own.

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### **Melanie says**

This is a great resource, especially for teaching undergraduates when literature in translation is needed. I especially liked the story "The Room with the Blue Light" by Ghulam Abbas. The author is new to me.

There's also an insightful review of this book by Elias Muhanna in The Nation. I can send a copy to anyone who wants it and who does not have access to The Nation.

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## **D says**

First read: 3 Jan 2016 – Finished Reading

The book is a conglomeration of writings, from a perspective not always seen in the West.

Among the first Egyptian artifacts plundered by the French was a pair of grand obelisks known as "Cleopatra's Needles." Today, the first of these obelisks stands along the River Thames in London; the second has stood for more than a century in New York's Central Park - Reza Aslan

The Balfour Declaration of 1917, in which Britain promised support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people," and the British Mandate of 1922, whereby the region was administered by the United Kingdom on behalf of the League of Nations, has resulted in sporadic violence between Palestine's Arab population and the increasing numbers of mostly European Jewish immigrants flooding into the Holy Land to lay the groundwork for the future state of Israel.

The fires of Arab nationalism flared with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. The British and French, who promised the Arab peoples independence in exchange for siding with the Allies, reneged -- in fact, the colonial powers had no intention of relinquishing control over the region. Two years before the end of WWI on May 16, 1916, Britain and France had secretly signed the Sykes-Picot Agreement, parcelling out the vanquished Ottoman lands among themselves.

Still the nationalist aspirations of the Arabs would not be extinguished - neither in Syria, which declared independence in 1920 under King Faisal I, nor in Egypt, where a wave of demonstrations forced Britain to grant the country its sovereignty in 1922. Of course, all this was merely an illusion of independence. France stormed Damascus a few months after independence was declared, placing the territories of Syria and Lebanon under a French mandate, and the British did not relinquish their political and economic control over the new Egyptian state.

Jordanian poet 'Arrar (pen name for Mustafa Wahbi al-Tal) and Egyptian short-story writer Yahya Haqqi began using the power of the written word to condemn the failures of their political and religious leaders.

Palestinian poet 'Abd al-Rahim Mahmud -- This land, this holy land, is being sold to all intruders/ and stabbed by its own people!

**My Country by Aziz Nesin**

The witches, demons and monsters who are on my back, who hurl themselves on me, ceaseless command, force and rebuke me.

If I didn't write, what would I do?

In all this world, there is nothing that will inspire and force an artist to work as much as holes in the soles of his shoes.

If it had been in my hands, I would have had the Universal Declaration of Human Rights add the following article: "The right to get sick is man's most indisputable, irrefutable, natural and social right: every human may get sick."

## Chronology

The Qajar dynasty, kings (or *shahs*) ruled Iran since 1794.

1921 Reza Khan carries out bloodless military coup in Iran back by Russia and Britain

1925 Reza Khan declared shah, launching Pahlavi dynasty

1935 Persia's name changed to Iran

1939-45 World War II; Iran declares neutrality

1941 Britain and Russia depose Reza Pahlavi and replace him with son, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi

At the start of the 20th century, however, as Iran was divided into Russian and British zones of influence, and the country's weak and corrupt shahs became pawns in the global chess game being played out by superpowers, Persian literature underwent a revolution of sorts.

As in Turkey and the Arab states, it fell to Iran's writers and poets to call society to account for its failings. "O people who are sitting, cheerful and laughing/ on the shore," cried Nima Yushij, "Someone is losing his life in the sea//Someone is struggling in the rough, dark/ and formidable sea."

### The Blind Owl by Sadegh Hedaya (1903-1951)

It was the 13th day of Nouruz (Literally, 'New day'; the Persian New Year, celebrated on the first day of Spring)

(My uncle) resembled me in a remote, comical way like a reflection in a distorting mirror. I had always pictured my father something like this. On entering the room he walked straight across to the opposite wall and squatted on the floor. It occurred to me that I ought to offer him some refreshment in honor of his arrival. I lit the lamp and went into the little dark closet that opens off my room. I searched every corner in the hope of finding something suitable to offer him, although I knew there was nothing of the sort in the house -- I had no opium or drink left.

The only thing in this mean world that I desired was her love; if that were denied me I wanted the love of nobody.

I understood all this. This girl, this angel, was for me a source of wonder and ineffable revelation. Her being was subtle and intangible. She aroused in me a feeling of adoration. I felt sure that beneath the glance of a stranger, or an ordinary man, she would have withered and crumpled.

### Once Upon a Time by Sadegh Hedeyat

There was complete silence everywhere. I felt that all mankind had rejected me and I took refuge with inanimate things. I was conscious of a relationship between me and the pulsation of nature, between me and the profound night that had descended upon my spirit. This silence is a language that we do not understand.

In the almond-shaped panel was *her* portrait... the face of a woman with great black eyes... that wore a look

of reproach, as though they had seen me commit some inexpiable sin of which I had no knowledge. They were frightening, magic eyes with an expression of anxiety and wonder, of menace and promise. They terrified me and attracted me and an intoxicating, supernatural radiance shone from their depths.

Cold Ashes by Nima Yushij (1896-1959)

From nights long gone  
Round a handful of cold ashes,  
Once a small fire,  
A few stones are still left  
On a peaceful path through the forest.

Like the woeful trace of an image  
In the dust of my thoughts,  
Every line of it a story of long sufferings.

My sweet day that was at peace with me,  
Has changed to some sinister image,  
Something cold and solid like a stone;  
The breath of the autumn of my life,  
An allusion to my fading spring:  
Round a handful of cold ashes,  
Once a small fire,  
A few stones are still left  
On a peaceful path through the forest  
From nights long gone.

**Read again: Sat, 10 Jun 2017**

Rise Up! Sa'adat Hasan Manto

Purdah: Literally, 'curtain.' The practice of seclusion for women.

Adarsh: One who is ideal; in this case, ideally feminine.

Baba-ji was an abstemious and God-fearing man. He was also very learned and intelligent. These qualities had endeared him to everyone, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and untouchable. Everybody considered him their leader.

**Those Days** Jalal Al-e Ahmad

East and West are no longer two geographical concepts as such. Instead, these are two economic concepts. The West means the countries with full stomachs, and the East means the ones that are hungry.

Like the grass, I have sprouted a hundred times - RUMI

**Ask Me About the Future** Melisa Gürpinar

Everyone seemed to talk silently

maybe...

if one becomes the house groom in a rich man's villa in Istanbul,  
it's like this, one loses everything in forty years...  
the road was extending achingly...

his son is biting his own hand,  
bitching all the way,  
belly-aching

"Dad, buy me the Team Flag."

**Koofa** by Saadi Youssef (b 1934)

But the first century is no longer the first.

Here we are now leaving it

H  
U  
N  
G  
from  
the gun barrels of tanks.

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**lita says**

I moved this review to my blog

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**Eric Steere says**

I am really struck by the eclectic voices found in this volume. the book spans a century across a region so diverse that of course, a volume containing "landscapes" of the middle east, hits ya pretty hard, as say, a well put together anthology of 20th century short american fiction and poetry would . as seen through the lens of an Westerner, these stories and poems have "magic" to them. beyond that west-east dichotomy though, there are some truly magnificent works of art, some great satirical pieces, and contained within is a poem that predates langston hughes and all of this makes me very sad.

This book breathes, heavy at times, it is visceral, it is soft sometimes like a floral skirt in the wind here in Portugal. In a compilation of Arabic, Turkish, Urdu, and Persian poetry and prose from the last century, Words Without Borders found a brave, accomplished, and discerning editor in Reza Aslan. His selections, in their translations, broken up by period and language, create a narrative more human and inclusive than academic scholarship in all its forms in the social sciences.

The indigenous forms of expression in new literary traditions turns the spectacle on us in the West, in a world with borders we created. This is not done through spurious invective or polemic, but through the

diversity of voices collected and set to an open interaction without charts and figures and the detachment of a hapless academic's reports and scholarship. It is difficult to gauge our complicity in the pieces collected here, globalization and its counter discourses are probed in a borderless collage of mostly exceptional and original expressions.

Tablet & Pen opens with a passionate 1923 manifesto written by Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran, the author of *The Prophet*, a visionary poet on level with Blake who continues to dodge the monotonous homogeneity of modernity disdainful stare a century later. In elevation of the Arabic language's ability to wrest new meanings from the foundation of a rich tradition, he prophesies a renaissance of creativity that the second half of this chronologically ordered collection begins to realize.

"Language is but one manifestation of the power of invention in a nation's totality or public self. But if this power slumbers, language will stop in its tracks, and to stop is to regress, and regression leads to death and extinction"

The contributions selected speak to an inexhaustible vitality and originality across the four languages with clear directions in each (the rise of the short story in Arab literature, an increasingly self-conscious Persian perspective against dogma, the growth of the poetic idiom in Urdu, etc.

Persian literature presented in the first half of the anthology finds its most literary and impressive seriousness in the excerpt from *The Blind Owl* by Sadegh Hedayat. He explores a dystopian world, irrational and purposeless. He writes bravely as an artist in the severity of a loneliness unique to the writer's deepest probing. It is a nightmare of solitude in the face of a reality whose totality alienates the protagonist: "There was complete silence everywhere. I felt that all mankind had rejected me and I took refuge with inanimate things. I was conscious of a relationship between me and the pulsation of nature, between me and the profound night that had descended upon my spirit. This silence is a language we do not understand...I experienced a sense of infinite weariness"

In contrast is the sharp levity of Nobel Prize winning author of the Cairo Trilogy, who in the satire of dogma and morality in an excerpt from *The Seventh Heaven*, weaves a transcendent but earthly reality with a comic absurdity of authority with brutality.

Palestinian writer Ghassen Kanafri declared at mid-century that "Insofar as I am concerned, politics and the novel are...indivisible" It takes to wonder how any Palestinian art is not to be conditioned by the politics of occupation, the stark divisions of wealth and corrupt regimes of patronage, the emblematic forces of religious fervour (and its undeniable political function) and the neoliberal driving forces of modernity, mass-consumption, and secularism. Indeed, "Refugee Poet" Mahmoud Darwish (a welcome introduction for my first reading of his work) articulates the defining political deficiency in the Arab world in the displacement and slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, what became the central rallying cry for all Arab nations, and the source of their humiliation in 1967.

Kanafri's brilliant short story, "Letter from Gaza" (which, as promised by title, is written in the style of a letter) communicates the inability of the "writer" to leave to "the land where there is greenery, water, and lovely faces" (Sacramento), where the writer was to join his childhood friend after making some money in Kuwait. On returning he found his gentle niece maimed in his absence by the conflict, instead imploring his western oriented friend to return.

"No, my friend, I won't come to Sacramento, and I've no regrets. This obscure feeling that you had as you left Gaza, this small feeling must grow into a giant deep within you. It must expand, you must seek it in

order to find yourself here among the ugly debris of defeat.

I won't come to you, but you, return to us! Come back to learn from Nadia's leg, amputated from the top of the thigh, what life is and what existence is worth.

Come back, my friend. We're all waiting for you".

Abu Salma bemoans the status of a refugee poet, "Beloved Palestine, how can I live away from your plains and hills?" "when phantoms torture my eyes". "We return" he writes, "with raging storms". From the minimal rhetoric of "Identity Card", Darwish excels especially in communicating the arbitrary nature and consequences of occupation against their human and natural counterparts, forging a heavy resistance... "Does that anger you?"

Nima Yushit's poem "Cold Ashes" (Persian) is one of my favourite pieces in the collection. It is cold and hard as a stone firmly rooted "on a peaceful path through the forest / from nights long gone". He excises the nostalgic to the deep erosion of a life and tradition he had known, the hard archaeology of suffering with no lofty promises, written before mid-century.

It is intriguing to think of the extent of isolation these Eastern literary arts maintained in form, teasing and interrogating the limits of their language. Turkish poet Melih Anday funnels a kind of metaphysical Wallace Stevens to an imagist William Carlos Williams. This description is not to degrade the work by looking at it from the perspective of Western literature, but to applaud its universality in the instigation of meanings we render.

I can't comment on omissions (except for the scarcity of female writers, which is probably for reasons well beyond the editor's control, like patriarchal domination!), but there were only a handful of pieces I was not impressed with, and this is unavoidable in such a lengthy and eclectic volume. I am excited by writers I've read for the first time, I know there are more and I will never exhaust the wonderful literature that continues to blossom in this horrible period of sectarian and revolutionary blood.

The poem "Inclination" by Hamid Reza Rahimi, a contemporary Persian poet, marks the zenith of my enjoyment of this collection and for this reason I have included it here at the end, where it belongs.

#### "Inclination"

One's throat must be like a garden  
and one's eyes like windows  
through which love passes;  
and one's stature  
must be like a tree  
that rises out of rocks;  
and poetry must be like a singing bird,  
perching on the highest branch of a tree,  
breaking the heavy silence of the world.

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#### **Nick says**

Every anthology makes choices, honoring some, slighting many more. What distinguishes "Tablet & Pen" is its ambition--undertaking the burden of choice for four discrete languages and traditions, gathered together

under the rubric of the modern Middle East: Arabic, Farsi, Turkish and Urdu. Arabic by itself seems like a punishing task, since it takes in a huge portion of the world, even without including writers from Africa beyond Egypt. Many of the most recognizable names are, including the two Nobel winners, the novelists Naguib Mahfouz and Orhan Pamuk, and great poets like Turkey's Nazim Hikmet and Palestine's Mahmoud Darwish; Urdu fiction is represented by the surgically sharp Sa'adat Hasan Manto and the groundbreaking Ismat Chughtai. Even Kahlil Gibran, previously known to me only from his ubiquity on the middle-class American bookshelves of a certain era, takes a bow with an essay on Arabic literature. There are inevitable disagreements about those not included, and I will limit myself to two complaints: "Woman at Point Zero" by the Egyptian psychiatrist and feminist, and "Meeting at an Airport" by Muhammad Ali Taha. The first is a novel about a woman on death row, the second a poem about the meeting of a couple betrothed but torn apart by history, and each is as moving as anything I have ever read.

The annotation is brief but informative, to the degree that it came close to convincing me that I shortchanged Sadegh Hedayat's hallucinatory novel "The Blind Owl", which I found disjointed and prone to rely on the image of woman as temptress.

If forced to single out one work included for each tradition, they would be the following: Nazim Hikmet, perhaps because I am a sucker for writers who refuse to bend, even incarcerated. From "I Love My Country":

I love my country:  
I have swung on its plane trees, I have stayed in its prisons.  
Nothing can overcome my spleen  
as the songs and tobacco of my country...

My country,  
camels, train, Fords and sick donkeys....

For Urdu, I find myself forced to set aside Sa'adat Hasan Manto, who was as brilliant as the light reflected off a sharp, polished blade, for Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt." She was charged by the British government with obscenity for having the temerity to write about lesbians.

For Farsi, I was most affected by Goli Taraghi's "The Grand Lady of My Soul", about a teacher left alone after the revolution when almost everyone, including his wife and son, becomes militant.

It feels unfair to have to pick just one Arab writer, even without Africa, since, once you start reading, the literary cultures of Iraq, Syria, the Arabian peninsula and Egypt are very different. I was tempted to pick Yusif Idris, one of the lesser-known of the great Egyptian iconoclasts (which includes el Saadawi and much of Mahfouz), but settled instead for, once more, an imprisoned poet, this time a Syrian—Faraj Bayraqdar, whose long imprisonment and torture by the regime of Hafez Assad has severely affected his health.

From a poem understandably titled "Groans":

The river has been choked with the tears of a woman  
Whose son was  
More pure than she had hoped for  
But her dreams were fractured in the night...  
God was in a seventh slumber  
As was her son  
For who would disturb him  
Before the dawn call to prayer??!

This volume clocks in at 611 pages including author biographies, and it is a testament to both the majesty of the subject and the acuity of the selections and notes that, even though there are, inevitably, pages that are difficult to get through, the book seems in the end all too short.

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## **Mary says**

It's an excellent idea to use literature to promote understanding of this sadly misunderstood region. Literature engages us both intellectually and emotionally, so this can touch people in a way historical or political texts might now. There are a few relatively familiar names here, such as Khalil Gibran and Orhan Pamuk, but it's a wonderful introduction to new authors.

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## **Jason Pettus says**

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

Like many Americans, since 9/11 I've become much more interested than ever before in such subjects as the Middle East, the "Arab World" and the "Muslim World," and have been reading up more and more on the history and culture of the region; and one of the first things you learn when you do something like this is that the traditional colonialist view about this region that has dominated Western textbooks since...well, the colonial period (namely, that virtually all human innovations since the Renaissance have come from Western civilization, and that the Eastern countries have essentially been backwards, superstitious warrior kingdoms since the fall of the Islamic Empire in the same years) is not really right at all, and that in the last 500 years there have in fact been plenty of parallel developments between East and West in such things as science and the cutting-edge arts. And that brings us to Reza Aslan's remarkable new anthology *Tablet & Pen*, which aims to help along this cross-cultural learning process as much as possible; made up exclusively of influential 20th-century works from the Arabic, Turkish, Persian and Urdu languages, and chosen by this Western-raised scholar specifically because they relate so well to famous Western touchstones, Aslan's main point in even putting this together (including many classic pieces being published here in English for the very first time) is to show just how similar the avant-garde lit scenes have actually been between East and West in the century and a quarter between the late Victorian Age and our own Age of Sincerity (or whatever you want to call the times we're currently living in).

And indeed, for Americans like me who previously didn't know anything about this subject, this compilation is a *revelation*, concrete proof of just how widespread things like abstraction and social realism were in the Early Modernist era, even while they were being applied in the East not for the purposes of having more sex and plotting socialist takeovers like Western artists, but rather going hand-in-hand with the nationalist movements forming in those countries at that time, rallying calls to basically unite around what was in some cases literally brand-new languages for a brand-new age (like in the case of a newly democratized Turkey), or at least brand-new applications of these languages in ways the culture had never seen before (like in Egypt, for example, which didn't see its first character-heavy three-act short stories in its entire literary history until the 1910s). The similarities then continue throughout this chronological collection, the stories of the Late Modernist era increasingly about the conflict between Israel and the Arab world, the new role of southeast Asia in post-colonial times, and other tricky issues heading into the countercultural and then

Postmodernist eras; which then leads us to now, and a time when global online culture is bringing the Eastern and Western arts together in a way neither have ever experienced before. An enlightening, fascinating, always thought-provoking and entertaining read, this comes heavily recommended to any Westerner wishing to learn more about the last century of Eastern history, and will dispel many of the notions all of us here in the US have been raised with concerning the importance of the West in particular on the shape of 20th-century global culture.

Out of 10: **9.6**

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### **Preethi says**

Reading this book is one of best things I've done for myself this year. Short stories or excerpts of stories about everyday lives of common men like clerks in courts, peasants, railway station masters, is what you need to give you some perspective about a world you've imagined to be something else.

When you think of stories set in the middle East or about people from that part of the world, I think of Arabian Nights - sailors on journeys rescuing princesses and fighting djinns or of academics spreading their culture in foreign lands or of invaders bringing havoc to the lands they invade destroying the native cultures, or life under dictators or more recently of the millions displaced refugees fleeing unspeakable horrors. To me, all these are extremes. There definitely are normal people there, with their lives going through phases as they see the collapse of their empires or during colonization or, formation of new countries...

Common men/women or little boys/girls that live in the remote villages of Anatolia or in the streets of Istanbul or fighting for independence in Jallianwala Bagh or with relatives in Agra - these are your protagonists.

There is a man refusing to leave Gaza to the sunny shores of California because he witnessed a little girl save her family in a bomb blast. There is a drunk poet hallucinating about a pretty girl in a world that resides inside his closet. There are villagers going to great lengths to ensure that a gray donkey gets to be at Zamzam, its destiny. Then there are displaced Iranians finding each other aboard a ship on the Caspian Sea.

This is literature by well known laureates that have seen the rise and fall of monarchs and leaders , through revolutions when their countries were just forming and many such changes.

And yet, the book is all about everyday lives.

Pick this book up if you have a zeal to know how normal life would've been in some of the fabled countries we've read about as children. Read this if you want a travel to remote Middle Eastern villages from the comfort of your couch. Sample this to see varied styles of writing by some big names as the native languages, lives and lands go through transformation.

Oh, and read this if you like poetry. There's plenty of it in this book.

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### **Tuck says**

i don't have this yet, but read this review in the nation 8.29.11:

"Published on The Nation (<http://www.thenation.com>)

## Shelf Life

Elias Muhanna | August 10, 2011

So many anthologies exude a weary air, devoted as they are to tracing the outlines of a canon or a career. Perhaps the best thing about *Tablet and Pen: Literary Landscapes From the Modern Middle East* (Norton; \$35), which samples 100 years' worth of fiction, poetry and memoir from four major world languages, is its devout and unapologetic eclecticism. There are a few familiar names, such as Orhan Pamuk and Naguib Mahfouz, but the vast majority of the collection's sixty-nine authors will be unfamiliar to most Anglophone readers. Among them are Parvin E'tesami and Forugh Farrokhzad, who gave voice to the quiet miseries of many women in midcentury Iran long before the West was smitten with Marjane Satrapi and Azar Nafisi. And there's the fiction of Ismat Chughtai, an Indian feminist whose stories treated themes of lesbianism and sexual awakening in colonial society, scandalizing India's British overseers.

*Tablet and Pen* is a pleasant surprise from its editor, Reza Aslan, an Iranian-American writer whose previous two books, *No god but God* and *How to Win a Cosmic War*, covered different ground. The former, a lucid introduction to Islamic history and religion, was published in 2005 to critical acclaim, and has become an international bestseller and a staple of college courses. *Tablet and Pen*, the fruit of a collaboration between Norton and Words Without Borders, a nonprofit committed to promoting literature in translation, seems similarly tailored to the higher-education market. It is not hard to imagine that professors of world literature and Islamic civilization will view this capacious and thoughtfully arranged collection as a godsend.

The anthology is divided into three major periods (1910–50, 1950–80 and 1980–2010) and contains several short essays and author biographies by its three regional editors (Michael Beard, Sholeh Wolpé and Zeenut Ziad). While recognizing the enormous diversity exhibited by the many countries and territories represented in the anthology, Aslan argues that what unites their literatures is "a common experience of Western imperialism and colonial domination: the disrupted histories and ravaged lands, the depletion of resources and inequities in wealth and status, the long struggles for sovereignty, and the vacuums of power and identity that so often followed independence from foreign rule." Such preoccupations, he suggests, represent a common "Middle Eastern" condition, and one not shared by Hebrew literature, which "reflects certain social and historical realities that do not align with themes of imperialism, colonialism, and Western cultural hegemony."

Many of the anthology's selections fit snugly into a postcolonial paradigm. Ghassan Kanafani's "Letter From Gaza" and the poems of Mahmoud Darwish contend with the saga of Palestinian dispossession, while the blistering verses of the Iraqi poet Mozaffar al-Nawwab mock the West and its Arab puppets, who sit "beneath the square-root sign on the sand," with testicles like "impotent castanets...clicking and jangling all the way to the White House." The purest expression of the collection's theme is the excerpt from the Iranian thinker Jalal Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi* ("Westoxification"), a political tract that portrays the rise of the West as a fundamental confrontation between rich and poor, in which every conflict and coup d'état is motivated by "the expansionist aims of mechanized industry."

Yet the anthology frequently strains against its organizing conceit. The poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad contemplates not a civilizational Other but a far more intimate one: "I have sinned a rapturous sin/beside a body quivering and spent/I do not know what I did O God,/In that quiet vacant dark." While many twentieth-century Iranian intellectuals have been critical of Western interference in their national politics, Parvin E'tesami and Nader Naderpour were no less disparaging of Iran's religious establishment. Consider Naderpour's scandalous description of Shiism's holy city of Qom as "a joyless garden/with sparse

trees/empty of laughter/silent of speech.” Similarly, many of the Turkish writers in the collection direct their gaze inward, focusing less on Western imperialism than on their own historical traditions. Aziz Nesin’s humorous and heartbreaking reflections about his childhood in Istanbul during the 1920s summon images of a society teetering between tradition and modernity. Recounting his experience as a young boy of an important rite of passage, the memorization of a chapter of the Koran, Nesin describes how his mother lamented that she could afford to prepare only a plate of börek (cheese pastry) rather than the more expensive helva (honeycake) to celebrate the occasion. “Somehow,” he writes, “I can’t make my own children understand now what that sadness meant.”

Other writers reflect on the position of the West vis-à-vis their traditions, but they characterize the relationship in unexpected ways. In “The Future of the Arabic Language,” Khalil Gibran explains that while the East once held sway over the West, it now lacks the means to imitate the West effectively: “Whereas the Westerners in the past consumed what we cooked, partaking of our food, swallowing it, and transforming what was useful to their very being, the Easterners, at present, consume what the Westerners cook; they swallow their food, but it does not become part of their being.” For Gibran, Western imperialism is less the principal agent of Eastern submission than a beneficiary and facilitator of it.

The influence of Western political, economic and cultural hegemony on writers and poets in the modern Islamic world (or, as Aslan puzzlingly insists on calling it, the “Middle East”) is undeniable. But the sheer variety of Tablet and Pen makes one wonder whether that influence is the best prism through which this literature can be read.

Source URL: <http://www.thenation.com/article/1626...>

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### **Yasaman says**

So four stars = really liking it isn't quite true, since this is the kind of thing I don't so much enjoy as appreciate. This is like the broccoli of my literary diet: it is not enjoyable per se, but it's good for me and makes me feel virtuous. Anyway, this is well-edited and (mostly) well translated. The Persian selections were almost entirely new to me, so yay to more variety than I got in my classes.

My review on Dreamwidth:

Tablet and Pen covers Middle Eastern literature from 1910 to 2010, focusing on four regions: the Arabic-speaking world (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, etc.), Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan/India. This is a very well-edited anthology, with picks from both more famous and well-known Middle Eastern writers like Adonis, Naguib Mahfouz, and Orhan Pamuk to picks that are less well-known to most English-speaking readers like Sadegh Hedayat and Ismat Chughtai. Aslan puts the post-colonial experience at the core of the anthology, and as a result, most of the selections are focused on social criticism and the formation and questioning of national identities.

I noted on Goodreads that for me, Tablet and Pen is the literary equivalent of eating broccoli for me: it's not precisely enjoyable, but it feels good for me and makes me feel kind of virtuous. Because the fact remains, that I just do not enjoy literary short fiction of any kind. I can appreciate some of it, but I don't enjoy it, it doesn't engage me on a deep level. And with Tablet and Pen, I couldn't help but wish I was reading it in the context of a class, where the stories would be enriched by the kind of in-depth analysis that I just don't have the wherewithal or knowledge to do on my own. The brief intros to each section did offer context, but not in the kind of depth I became accustomed to in my classes.

Still, if you have any interest at all in Middle Eastern literature in translation, I recommend it. As far as I can tell, most of the translations are quite good. There were only a few places where the translation seemed really labored to me. I can especially recommend the translations of Forough Farrokhzad in here: they're lucid and lovely, as lovely as the Persian in fact, which is no small achievement. I also really appreciated the inclusion of an excerpt of Jalal Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxification), which I think is as crucial a post-colonial text as Said's *Orientalism* and Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*.

A note though: I read *Tablet and Pen* in Kindle format, and it was mostly well-formatted and easy to read, except some of the Turkish words looked wonky. Also, while it's very helpful to just click a link to check out a footnote as opposed to flipping through pages, it's kind of annoying that the author bios are in the back and unlinked to the authors' works.

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### **Sara says**

LOVED this book. It is a collection of poems, excerpts, and stories from the Islamic World arranged by date. Every new work was a little gift to read. The book is long, and heavy - beware when reading in bed :-)

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### **Katharine Holden says**

Boring, repetitive, and dreary. I felt like I could get stuck in this book and never be seen again. It's odd that a book that is supposed to represent many voices and points of view has such a sameness of tone about it. Women only appear in these stories to be raped or presented as stupid.

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### **Umar Shaikh says**

A really interesting book, that compiles voices from various regions of the "Middle East", from Morocco to Pakistan. The short-stories and passages are of great quality, although I think the poems are a bit lacking.

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### **Louai Roumani says**

A rich and fascinating book with selected literature from the Middle East spanning the last 110 years. This book is brilliantly structured. It comes in 3 parts, with each part referring to a particular historical era. Each part presents Arabic, Turkish, Persian and Urdu selected short stories and poems, with a brief comprehensive narration of the context of each era and the respective implications on the literature of the four different regions/languages. A common theme of repression, frustration and poverty cuts across most of the literature. I thoroughly enjoyed early 20th Turkish literature and will definitely read more for Aziz Nesin and Nazim Hikmet. The translations seem to be of high quality; I could tell as I have read the Arabic origins of some of the short stories. I found the Persian stories a bit difficult to follow through though; not sure if this is due to translation challenges or the seemingly exhaustingly detailed and highly charged nature of Persian writing. Though I was never big on poetry, I enjoyed some of the poems here; very emphatic and intense. This is a great book to tease your interest in 20th century Middle Eastern literature. I was surprised Maghout and Kabbani were not here, but even so I would strongly recommend this book.

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### **Ann Michael says**

An excellent introduction to a long and important literary tradition that is not well known in the USA. Poetry and fiction mostly, with some memoir and non-fiction.

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### **Yvette says**

I just heard Riza Aslan interviewed on The Diane Rehm show today (11/16/10). He has such a passion and fascination with the writing and poetry in this part of the world that he wanted to be able to share some of it with Americans those of us who do not speak Hebrew or Urdu or some of the other languages this book was translated from.

Riza talks about this book being a history book of the middle east from the perspective of writers and poets over the past century. It's also an anthology to be read like a book, from cover to cover. He has spent months and years putting this anthology together so it made sense like the storyline from a novel would.

Read or listen to the interview, Reza Aslan: "Tablet and Pen" on The Diane Rehm Show dot org (no spaces).

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### **David says**

Ever since reading Aslan's "Zealot" and hearing of this book I have wanted to read it, and having found and purchased a copy, finally have. Much of the literature within has been translated into English for the first time, and shatters the stereotype that the Middle East has become a world dominated by Shariah law and barbarism. Found within are the works of dissident authors, excerpts about political hopes and the failings of Middle Eastern states which slipped into despotism, feminist essays and poems, dissent, philosophy, and much more. An enlightening read that should serve to remind us that people within countries are not mindless drones who embrace extremism and violence. Since reading it, I have ordered the works of two poets features in this book, though translations in English are quite hard if not impossible to come by (one is coming from India), the other recently translated from Persian, the work of a well-respected female poet of Iran.

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