

**Anna Marin**

**“Considering Environment in the Multicultural Literature Classroom:  
Reading *Women of Sand and Myrrh* in the United States”**

We have an opportunity and responsibility in the milieu of university-level literature classes in the United States to expose students to multicultural curricula represented by diverse texts and reading lists. The potential responses to unfamiliar ideas and structures present in texts from other cultures can range from awe and enlightenment to disdain and utter confusion—even resentment. Such are the risks when entering what Mary Louise Pratt calls the “contact zone,” a place where cultures collide. She defines this as “the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations...in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices” (180). Although in a multicultural literature classroom, members of the differing cultures may not physically meet, the books act as personifying entities of the outside cultures and so do effectively communicate with the students. Since multiple voices are present within this classroom, a contact zone is indeed created.

However, merely to experience a wide variety of emotions over a culturally unfamiliar text is not enough. Stephen Greenblatt argues that texts have a far larger role within the social-epistemic environment. As cultural artifacts detailing the intricate behavioral codes of a specific culture, books not only instigate cultural exchange but alter the cultures within which they are being read. If culture lies on the continuum between opposite pulls of constraint and mobility, or conformity and exploration, texts can uniquely solidify previously established codes of constraint or push at the boundaries of mobility. In the multicultural literature classroom, the chances of boundary exploration are even greater because the codes of different, if not potentially opposing, cultures “that rarely have commerce with each other in the general economy...powerfully interact” (231). When one applies Greenblatt’s theories of culture to Pratt’s contact zone within the university classroom, the responsibility of the student is even greater because ultimately the other half of the conversation, the book, cannot learn or change. Hence, when a literature student, for instance, reads Hanan al-Shaykh’s *Women of Sand and Myrrh* in the contact zone of the classroom, she is forced to assess both the constraints and mobilities of the culture *about* which she is reading, and, more importantly, the culture *from* which she is reading: that of the United States.

Al-Shaykh, although writing in her native Arabic, is all too knowledgeable of her foreign audience and the presumptions they have about the Middle Eastern culture. She pointedly directs her characters to push against the notions held by us. She gives to her foreign readers the character Tamr, a strong, willful woman who is also keenly aware of her situation. She knows the cultural constraints against women in her home country but actively pushes against them so that she might carve out a niche for herself, first as a student, then as a single mother, and finally as the owner of a tailoring shop. From a perspective in the United States, her case might seem extraordinary. Tamr’s choices to remain in her country after returning from London with nothing more than her newly permed hair push against the notions of students in the United States who have mostly been bombarded with tales of those who ache to leave. Even Suha falls in place with our expectations of what women choose when faced with intense oppression. We are left to wonder why Tamr remains after comparing London to “the green expanses...that reminded me of the gardens they tell us are in Paradise,” and after she is overwhelmed by “the respect shown me by every man I met” (103). Tamr continually expresses nostalgia and

appreciation toward her interaction with foreign culture, the contact zones she has visited: “Whenever I went into Suha’s house, I felt as if I were boarding a plane and flying away,” and “The women teaching [at the Institute] made me feel as if I was abroad” (88). By entering a place where the cultural codes are different—in London where she is treated with respect by men and at the Institute where women display their colored clothing usually hidden by their abayas—Tamr more fully understands under what constraints she lives.

The horrors Tamr has encountered throughout her life doubly serve to fortify Tamr’s understandings and to solidify the foreign reader’s conception of the Middle Eastern culture. When Tamr is married off at a too-early age, she cries, “Mother, mother!...Are you marrying me off? I’m not even a woman yet!” (117). Her first sexual experience contradicts in every way the romanticized Western version of “first love”; in fact, al-Shaykh’s treatment of Tamr’s loss of virginity with her arranged husband seems pointedly directed at the foreign reader because the native one would already be familiar with the practice, and the shock would not exist. Tamr as witness to genital mutilation is perhaps the most horrifying scene in her past (121). Greenblatt reminds us that “Art is an important agent...in the transmission of culture” (228), and that seems al-Shaykh’s goal: to remind the reader of the cultural codes of the unnamed Middle Eastern country while also forcing a response. “[R]age, incomprehension, and pain” initially gurgles up from the reader in the United States because the codes of the two cultures clash so harshly (Pratt 193).

Our reactions are only increased at Tamr’s answer to Suha when asked if she wants to leave: “A person away from his country and his nearest and dearest isn’t worth a stick of incense. It’s true I was happy abroad...[But] what would they say about me? That I’d run away. For what reason?” (96). Tamr has chosen not to flee but to push against the constraints of her home culture and try to delineate new boundaries, for “it is only through improvisation, experiment, and exchange that cultural boundaries can be established” (Greenblatt 228). Furthermore, her actions are performed with care and consideration of the established constraints. She knows how and where to push, and with which weapons. Tamr evokes the Qur’an, pleading the education of the prophet’s daughter Fatima as reason for permission to pursue her own (88). She is constantly aware of what services she can render and those she cannot at her women’s shop, relegating forbidden facials and massages to the Filipino women. For her prudence and respect, and her unwavering drive, she is praised by aunt Nasab: “You’ve got a place of your own *and* you speak English? God is great, Tamr of Tamrs” (132). With her, al-Shaykh has effectively allowed the first step of alterations to occur within the contact zone of the university classroom in the United States. Students have hopefully taken on the responsibility to reassess the culture about which they are reading and to renegotiate the preconceptions they might have held: a hurdle to overcome but the easier of the two.

Al-Shaykh gives us another gift, more poignant and potentially disturbing: the character Suzanne. With her, United States university students are not asked to reassess Middle Eastern culture but our own. Suzanne is the only character in the novel not from a West Asian country, and her representation of the United States is sharp criticism on the part of the author. Al-Shaykh creates a separate contact zone in her novel, where Suzanne interacts with the foreign culture. Unfortunately, Suzanne repeatedly exhibits arrogance and pride, naively believing that her position is above others because she comes from “the land of the oven that cleaned itself without spilling any water” (177). Her personal sense of status is elevated in the foreign country. Whereas before she was merely “an ordinary American housewife...washing my children’s nappies and enjoying folding them up neatly” (189), in this Arab country she is the “Marilyn

Monroe of the desert” (184). She believes that her new acquaintances “saw me as an important guest from Nixon’s land....My sense of my own importance began to increase, as if my yellow hair which hung lifelessly round my face had turned into shining gold, and my speech into pearls” (177). Within our own contact zone of the university classroom, we must pay attention to the depiction of our culture within this foreign text; we must heed the sting from al-Shaykh’s jab at us. To do otherwise would show extreme irresponsibility.

Furthermore, Al-Shaykh specifically criticizes the sexual freedom which has its place in the West, but which brashly stands out in contrast to the restrictions on women in the novel’s cultural home. Suzanne is guilty of never altering her conceptions of the constraints and mobilities that she brings with her from home to conform to those of her new country. She caricatures the sexual freedom of Western women, turning it into rampant promiscuity. Al-Shaykh gives the sex-starved men in the novel their role, but Suzanne’s ignorance and disregard for cultural mores hold her the more culpable. She is gratuitously and demonstratively sexual: “I seized the opportunity and flung my arms around [Maaz], crying violently and pressing my breast against him with every convulsive sob; I hissed like a snake in his ear” (165). She believes as a mistress and as an adulteress that she has real meaning in the men’s lives with whom she engages in sex: “I couldn’t help thinking about how much I’d seemed to mean to the men I’d spent the evening with, especially Ahmad, and how I didn’t mean anything to David” (195), her husband. Greenblatt warns us that “[a] life that fails to conform at all, that violates absolutely all the available patterns, will have to be dealt with as an emergency” (229). As readers, we are not privy to the end of Suzanne, who believes herself to be protected by Maaz’s “*naïveté* and ignorance” (211). However, her near misses—with the truck driver who picks her up shoeless and bleeding on the side of the road, with her husband who prostitutes her out to his coworkers while she is too drunk to barely remember, with the syphilis from which she escapes but which afflicts Maaz and his newborn child—can only lead to a self-destructive ending caused by her own *naïveté* and ignorance. Suzanne’s decision to stay in this country and further trample upon its mores without heed to the cultural constraints, however restrictive they might appear, elicits the same response as does women who stay to be trampled upon: “rage, incomprehension, and pain” (Pratt 193), not directed at the “other” within the contact zone but, in this instance, at ourselves.

For texts to have an important place within the larger context of culture, “a careful reading of a work of literature [must] lead to a heightened understanding of the culture in which it was produced” (Greenblatt 227). However, if we turn that demand upside down, a critical reading of literature also leads to a heightened understanding of the culture or cultures it addresses. Al-Shaykh’s novel doubly provides this opportunity to learn, and the multicultural literature classroom acts as an appropriate environment in which to do so. Her story is so resonant because she “take[s] symbolic materials from one zone...and move[s] them to another, augmenting their emotional force, altering their significance, linking them with other materials taken from a different zone” (Greenblatt 230). With the audience of literature students from the United States, al-Shaykh displaces cultural stereotypes and places them in settings new to us. She uses Tamr to push against our held preconceptions of Middle Eastern culture: that the freedom of women is completely restricted and that they have no cultural mobility at all. Tamr expresses her own form of women’s liberation through her pursuit of education, her strength in leaving her husband, and opening her own business. Suzanne, likewise, pushes against our held preconceptions of our own culture: that our freedoms and social mobility are unwaveringly correct and lead to the greatest possible results, giving us strength and power. Suzanne’s

expression of freedom, however, clearly depicts how weak she is. Her liberation destroys her self-esteem, her integrity, her marriage, and her relationship with Maaz, not to mention the health of his family. We have the responsibility to understand this and reassess ourselves. Pratt would applaud a multicultural pedagogical approach within the contact zone. Ultimately, through the rage and discomfort also comes “exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom—the joys of the contact zone” (193). For this we read our literature.

### **Works Cited**

- al-Shaykh, Hanan. Women of Sand and Myrrh. Trans. Catherine Cobham. New York: Doubleday, 1989.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. “Culture.” Critical Terms for Literary Study. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Frank Letricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995. 225-232.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. “Arts of the Contact Zone.” Profession 91 (1991): 33-40.