

**Cacophony, Harmony, Unison:  
Middle Eastern Women's Voices Heard in the West**

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In December, 2008, Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, known to her friends as BJ, died in La Jolla, California, leaving a legacy filled with the voices of Middle Eastern women, collected during her many years of living, writing, and raising a family in Iraq, Egypt, and Morocco over a more than 40 year period. Her research took her to many other countries in the Middle East in her desire to gather the voices of women so they could be heard in the West. Her pivotal work in comparative Women's Studies, East and West, laid the groundwork for the many women she mentored in scholarship and teaching and for the studies that flowed from that mentoring. In the first part of this paper, I will review the books and documentary films that comprise the parts of her extensive scholarship that deal with women, attempting to identify the major themes that emerge from the collected voices.

In the second part of the paper, I will move on to review of some of the various voices of Middle Eastern women that are being heard in the West today, some in fiction, some in essays, and some in memoirs; some counteracting old stereotypes, some reinforcing them. Again, I will identify the major themes that emerge from this selected body of work and then compare them with those in the Fernea collections, noting also responses and reviews for both sets of works. In this way, I hope to discover not only what the voices are saying but also how they were and are being heard, especially by women in the West.

Finally, I hope to link these voices to other aspects of women's movements toward equality in the Middle East: the election of the first four women to the Kuwaiti parliament, demonstrations in the streets of the women of Afghanistan, women students forming the majority in many universities in the Middle East and in many majors within those universities, the growing interest in Arabic women's writing both in the East and in the West, the establishment of Women's Studies Centers in Middle Eastern universities or as national centers, etc.

The purpose of this study is to add to the impetus to break down the still-existing stereotypes of Middle Eastern women, still held even by some educated women in the West. Print and visual mainstream media in the US help to reinforce these stereotypes. The ultimate goal of equality for women has not yet been reached in the West or in the East, but movements have been in progress for many years in each sector and the force of those movements is producing events newsworthy enough (e.g., the Kuwaiti elections, the Afghani demonstrations) to make their way into US mainstream media to counteract inaccurate negative perceptions.