

Authentic Narratives: Potential for internal debates and better understanding of the Arab world.

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In recent years, the Arab world has witnessed a surge in the publication of novels focused on Arab culture and religion; human rights; democracy; and the role of women in society. A number of factors have prevented these works from reaching their intended audiences on a large-scale, foremost among which are the censorship of Arab governments and a poorly developed pan-Arab marketing mechanism. Inadequate circulation of these works is blunting their impact on the long-stifled debate concerning social and political reform in the Arab world. Novels such as The Yacoubian Building, reprinted eight times due to popular demand, refute the often cited lack-of-readership argument that serves to maintain the status quo.

My presentation will offer an analysis of a small sampling of these provocative novels, including Hind wa al-Askar (Hind and the Soldiers) a poignant commentary on gender roles in Saudi culture; and Booker-Prize nominee Madeeh al-Karahiya (In Praise of Hatred), a sophisticated exposition of the complex power-struggle between the religious establishment and the state, and its debilitating effect on average citizens caught in between. The novel Irtitam Lam Yusma' Lahu Dawwi (Soundless Collision), written using a more popular, contemporary style, vents Arab frustrations with corrupt and feeble state-run institutions and gives voice to grassroots aspirations for a modern, effective infrastructure based on meritocracy.

In addition, my presentation will detail how widespread circulation of these works would stir constructive debate in the Arab world. It will also point out the valuable insights Western audiences can take away from these novels toward a better understanding of the Arab world. The discussion will note the obstacles standing in the way of a wider circulation of these works and articulate some policy recommendations aimed toward surmounting these obstacles, including the creation of the first international award for Arab fiction, the Booker Prize.