



BOOK
REVIEW

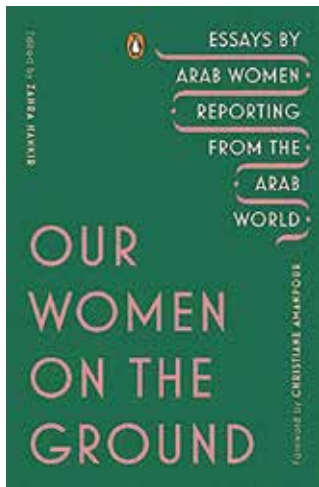
The Women of War
By Noor-E-Nawaal Bhuiyan

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Hankir's collection of portraits sheds light on the unique contribution of female Arab correspondents to their craft, including the integral role of their identity in giving voice to otherwise untellable stories from the Arab World

Our Women on the Ground: Essays by Arab Women Reporting from the Arab World. Ed. By Zahra Hankir, Penguin, 2019, 304 pp.



Our Women on the Ground: Essays by Arab Women Reporting from the Arab World, edited by Lebanese-British journalist Zahra Hankir, is a poignant collection of nineteen journalistic anecdotes. CNN's Chief International Anchor Christiane Amanpour provides a brief but succinct foreword as an opener to the anthology. Her account of her own journey into the world of correspondence, as well as her mention of the formidable women she has come across in that time, provide the perfect backdrop onto which Hankir builds her own introduction.

Female journalists of Arab origin, known locally as *sahafiyat*, are “twice burdened,” Hankir explains in her introduction. Not only does their status as women in Iraq, Egypt, Syria, or Lebanon often denote little access to the sociopolitical rights and freedoms their fathers and brothers enjoy, but they are also grossly under- and misrepresented within the field of journalism itself. Their desire to report regularly stems from their own traumatic, first-hand experiences with corruption and violence in Arab countries, leading to an unquenchable thirst for justice. Despite the dangerous, and often deadly, nature of their work, little is known or said of these *sahafiyat* beyond their localities. Their bravery is not perceived or celebrated in the same manner as male and/or white reporters. As Hankir articulates, “Arab and Middle Eastern women aren’t heard enough in this space. But they’re living and breathing the region, reporting on it from the front lines.”

Divided into five distinct sections—“Remembrances,” “Crossfire,” “Resilience,” “Exile,” and “Transition”—*Our Women on the Ground* reflects the

tenuous state not only of those affected by conflict in the region, but also of the women who are brave enough to pursue and tell their truths. Despite its varied authorship, a thread of selflessness and sacrifice runs through each essay, resulting in a cohesive, and intensely human, narrative.

Our Women on the Ground is the first essay collection of its kind because it aims to shift this skewed reality, as well as shake the stereotypes of meekness and oppression that plague Arab women. Despite the hardships they face as they rise into journalism, Hankir highlights the curious privilege that comes with being a *sahafiya*. The very fact of their womanhood is central to the journalistic craft; victimized women will often only talk to other women, so female reporters can reach these and other places, asking questions that men simply cannot. *Sahafiyat* are, therefore, integral to Middle Eastern journalism, because, without their contribution, “the full picture simply cannot be painted.” For the thousands of families that “rely on journalists for updates on the calamitous situation” in their countries, a woman’s perspective fills in the remaining gaps, providing a more holistic image of what is unfolding around them.

All nineteen essays are approachable and engaging, even for readers with little knowledge of the historical contexts underpinning each catastrophe. As each essay is written by a *sahafiya* with first-hand and intimate knowledge of each conflict, the texts come across as genuine, informed, and heartbreaking. What truly stands out about *Our Women on the Ground*, and what may be missing from

other accounts of political situations in the Arab World, is that it reflects the stories of ordinary people. *Sahafiyat* are dedicated to telling the raw experiences of citizens, rather than focusing on vague political entities, because it is the truest way to measure the devastating effect of a conflict on a nation.

The first essay is “The Woman Question” by Hannah Allam, a national security reporter at NPR, who decided to write about her experience reporting on the Iraq War. Her account sets the tone for the rest of the collection; her heartfelt depiction of the resourceful, resilient women of Iraq, who have had war thrust upon them, yet maintain their strength and spirit, is notable. *Our Women on the Ground* is not just about the women at the frontlines; it is about the mothers, the sisters, and the caretakers who have had to hold together their communities in the face of atrocity. This is Iraq as Allam knows it, not the image painted by the media, but one she has felt and breathed.

Lina Sinjab—foreign correspondent for the BBC—does something similar in her essay “Breathing Fear.” Syria, in her words, and from her experience, seldom resembles the Syria the Western world sees on television. The heart of the civil war, and its causes, are far more nuanced than most realize, and she makes it her mission to articulate her truth. She lived it, and now others can, too, through her account.

Lina Attalah, co-founder of Egyptian news website *Mada Masr*, provides a more internal view of her struggle as a female journalist. She begins “On a

Belated Encounter with Gender” with a flashback—her, as a child, nurtured by the “tender softness [of] a loving, gift-carrying father”. She then contrasts this image of her father with that of “the strictness of a man, a patriarch, and a policeman once [she] became a young woman, journalist, and activist”. By leaving behind the traditional feminine sphere, and choosing for herself a career in journalism, she feels a sense of “estrangement” from her father. As a woman and as a daughter, her emergent values work in stark opposition to her father’s, a man’s. Alongside the struggles and dangers of working as a *sahafiya*, Attalah has to grapple with the familial pain her profession entails. Whether these female journalists face adversaries within their homes and/or beyond, their dedication to their mission never wavers. Such are the beautifully diverse accounts of our *Women on the Ground*.

Allam, Sinjab, and Attalah are just three of the nineteen perspectives that populate the anthology. *Our Women on the Ground* sweeps the reader across much of the Arab World, through several nations, and unravels the lives and tragedies of a host of men, women, and children. Each *sahafiya* has her own unique background and experience—whether she is a citizen of the country she is reporting from, has family there, or has faced violence herself—that informs and authenticates her account. As such, Hankir’s placement of each essay, in the order that they are in, makes intuitive sense; they build on one another, despite the differences in tone, authorship, and subject matter. *Our Women on the Ground* is, therefore, a wonderfully arranged mosaic of loss, determination, and hope.

Although the *sahafiya* above often provide acute details and extensive information regarding the conflicts they have reported on and are now, with hindsight, writing about, more context is often necessary. While readers will have no issues grasping the severity of war in the Middle East, or the human aspect of each story, more background information and context would have provided a more holistic reading experience. Without adequate information of the atrocities committed in the region, readers, especially those with little to no knowledge of politics in the Middle East, may miss valuable insight that would bolster and inform each account. The narratives themselves do not need to accommodate this suggestion; simply expanding the glossary would allow readers to seek and absorb additional context.

Our Women on the Ground is the nineteen *sahafiya*’s attempt to inject humanity into crises where the people involved are often overlooked or forgotten. This grounded, humanistic approach which “brings attention to underreported tales and the women who tell them” is rarely seen, yet so important. This anthology thus contains all the tools to overturn how the West perceives Arab women, societies, and conflicts, as well as pave the way for further marginalized voices to speak. Arab women are the glue that binds together their nations, and their unshakeable morale, coupled with each journalist’s courage and heart, forms a timely and unforgettable narrative. ®