

Gardens of the Night

Gardens of the Night, Ahmad Faqih. Amin al-Ayouti and Suraya Allam trans. London: Quarter Books Limited, 1995. pp. 488.

Gardens of the Night, written by the Libyan writer Ahmad Al-Faqih, is a trilogy composed of the following parts: I shall offer another city, These are the Borders of my Kingdom and A Tunnel Lit by one Woman. The three parts published in a single volume correspond to the past, the present and the future of the protagonist. While the past has shaped the protagonist's personality and impacted his life, the present is divided between his waking state and his bouts with depression. The future remains unattainable and considered from a distance, like Moses overlooking the promised land .

The protagonist, Khalil al-Imam is poised, in Part I in the present, suffering from a nervous breakdown that makes him see black birds hovering over his head. He recalls the past when he was a doctoral student in London writing a dissertation on The Thousand and One Nights .

Part III tackles the solution to the protagonist's depression whereas the actual depression is related in Part II. His vagabond mind takes him to an ideal but imaginary city, a utopia that offers all forms of freedom lacking in his native city Tripoli, the Libyan Tripoli not the Lebanese Tripoli, as some tourists had thought.

It is obvious that the protagonist is in search of an elusive happiness symbolized by an ideal woman that he fails to keep. Both in reality and in the dreams of his delirious world, he succeeds in conquering the most sought-after woman but manages to lose her, driven by a tendency for self-destruction and a feeling of doom.

The novel is written against the backdrop of the well-known book The Thousand and One Nights. The main characters of the Nights, Scheherazade and Shahrayar serve as symbols and points of reference with which the protagonist and the people in his society are compared and contrasted. Moreover, the events of the folk stories of the Nights serve to feed the hallucinations of the protagonist's sick mind. In many ways, the reader feels as if The Thousand and One Nights never loses its actuality and is filled with lessons and hints that should help in the understanding of the human psyche.

Faqih seems extremely concerned with human nature, the capacity of people to lead a double life and the manifestations of hypocrisy in

public and private life. It is obvious that Khalil al-Imam seeks frank, open and sincere human relations where people practice what they preach, and defend their ideals and ideologies at any cost. Yet he reveals in Part I, the fate of those who apply this principle through the English student Sandra who paid a high price for her position.

The protagonist, however is able to live in an ideal world only in his imagination, and describes in great details, a model country called Coral City. Yet he does not achieve happiness. He searches in vain for an unattainable goal that remains elusive and undefinable. Overcome by this obsession, he opens the locked room (a must in most fairy tales) in the palace where he lived, in spite of all the recommendations to the contrary. This act marks the beginning of Khalil's destruction and that of his dream world. But the room is

nothing more than the invisible side of a person's nature, the one hidden from others to safeguard appearances.

A similar room is described in Part III, in the seaside resort where Khalil's friends from different walks of life, used to meet and show a side of themselves that was not known or even suspected by the public. Those who preached morality, faithfulness, family bonds, conducted themselves in total contradiction to their words. Through the protagonist's contacts with this group he discovers and reveals for the reader, the corruption of his society, particularly in the spheres of power'. with his efforts to escape from this hypocritical life and remain in the shadow of his fiance Sana, a double of Budur whom he met in Coral City, fail. He is defeated by his weaknesses and the satisfaction of a moment of pleasure as he tries to rape his fiance

The novel ends on a pessimistic note conveying a feeling that nothing

would change no matter how much a person tries. Happiness is short lived and consists of fleeting moments that slip through one's life like water through the fingers of one's hands. Creatures are in fact driven and optimism. The author stresses the fact that the future is a time that" ... has not yet begun" and that it "will never begin"

Gardens of the Night, is beautifully rendered in English. In spite of some spelling mistakes and missing articles, it reflects the assiduous efforts that the translators put into it. They particularly succeeded in conveying the emotions of the characters, the variety of sounds and intonations reflecting stresses and mood changes that only enlightened

translators, with a native speaker's knowledge of the language, can achieve.

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