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Trajectories of Change in Omani Poetry

By Mara Revkin

Driving down a thoroughfare studded with beauty parlors and cell phone stores, it's hard to believe that less than 40 years ago, the city of Muscat was encircled by medieval stone walls, perforated by gateways barely wide enough to accommodate a camel, much less an automobile. Sections of the historic walls remain intact, but many of the sandstone fortifications have succumbed to the vicissitudes of economic and social development. When British and American missionaries arrived in the 1950s, they were dismayed to find that the narrow pedestrian corridors leading into the old city were not navigable by car. It soon became clear that Muscat would remain impenetrable to foreign investment and influence as long as these narrow gates restricted access to the city. However, change trumped tradition, and the walls were eventually partially dismantled to allow for the entry of vehicles like mine.

The occasion for my drive to Muscat was an interview with Dr. Sa'ida Khatir Bint al-Farsi, one of Oman's most respected poets. As a Fulbright Scholar in the Sultanate of Oman, I am spending a year collecting and translating the work of female poets in order to examine the impact of social, economic, and political changes on the public sphere in Oman. As I have learned over the course of my time here, poetry is much more than an obscure art form reserved for the literary elite; it is a vibrant expression of social and political life and a living record of the changes that have swept this country since 1970, when the current leader, Sultan Qaboos, replaced his father and implemented a massive development program that transformed the national landscape.



Muttrah. (All photos by Mara Revkin)

As a political scientist by training, I admit to being a little intimidated by the prospect of discussing poetry with a literary heavyweight like Sa'ida. Even in my native language of English, I have a hard time wrapping my head around

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rhyme schemes, so the knowledge that this interview will be conducted in Arabic makes my palms sweat against the steering wheel, as my car veers through the dizzying roundabout at the outskirts of Muttrah, Muscat's bustling port. Making grammatical errors in front of a poet feels a little like finger-painting in a room full of Renoirs, so I am feeling fairly self-conscious by the time I park in front of the café that Sa'ida has chosen for our meeting. For a split second, I question my commitment to the study of Arabic and feel a pang of nostalgia for my New England hometown, where the radio stations only come in one language and I always know how to pronounce the street names. But even as I indulge in a moment of cowardice, I know it's too late to turn around — perhaps because I have a high threshold for humiliation, but probably because I am convinced that poetry reveals truths about a society that can't be found in the *CIA World Fact Book*.



Sa'ida bint Khatir

To many Americans, poetry is a peripheral art form that will never penetrate our everyday lives. It is the tagline on a greeting card, the shortest shelf in the bookstore, or the sentimental nonsense we were forced to memorize in middle school. But in Oman, poetry is an extraordinarily powerful medium of expression that is impossible to ignore. On the radio, in online forums, and even in the Sultan's official speeches, poetry is used to disseminate powerful messages. My project for the next year is to extract these messages from the poems in which they are encrypted, and in doing so, access the powerful public discourse on development and social change. I will need more than a dictionary to accomplish this task; I need the guidance of poets like Sa'ida, who have lived through the changes they write about.

As I sit down at a table with a notebook full of questions and a stack of *dawawin* (poetry collections), Sa'ida strides through the door. In Oman, poets are as newsworthy as politicians, so I recognize her from a recent photo in the local paper. Wearing an *abaya* accented with snappy lapels, Sa'ida looks taller and more powerful than she did in her black-and-white headshot. We make eye contact and I nervously plow through an "elevator speech" in Arabic. Unfazed by my clumsy introduction, Sa'ida immediately envelops me in a maternal hug and peppers me with inquiries about my health and family. An hour passes before we even get to *my* questions, and I certainly have a lot of them. I tell Sa'ida that I'm on the lookout for poems that deal with recent societal changes in Oman. Born in 1956, Sa'ida is old enough to remember life before literacy and light bulbs, so she has plenty to say about change.

Before Sultan Qaboos came to power in 1970, Oman was an isolated backwater without industry or infrastructure. Sa'ida grew up in the coastal village of Sur, but moved to Kuwait when it became apparent that economic and educational opportunities in Oman were withering away under the repressive rule of the former Sultan, Sa'id bin Taymur. After Sultan Qaboos deposed his father in a 1970 coup, he urged the thousands of Omanis living in exile to return to the country and help rebuild the nation. Sa'ida answered the call and returned home to help educate a generation of illiterate youth. Later, she earned her PhD at Cairo University, where she wrote her doctoral dissertation on the psychological alienation of Arab women in the Gulf countries. Drawing on Karl Marx and other Western philosophers, Sa'ida argues that the sudden influx of oil wealth combined with rising religious conservatism in the 1990s left women with few opportunities beyond the household. Women were looking for self-fulfillment, but they lacked an outlet — other than the ever-proliferating malls — for their creative potential. Conspicuous consumption only can stave off boredom temporarily, and many women began to feel an acute sense of isolation, or as Sa'ida defines it, "alienation." The only upside to this alienation was that it motivated women to articulate their frustration in writing. Sa'ida's dissertation is based on an analysis of the poetry and fiction produced by these "alienated" women.

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Like me, Sa'ida uses literature as a window into society and the forces — economic, political, and religious — that transform it. Writing poetry, Sa'ida says, has helped her make sense of the dramatic changes that have been underway in Oman since the 1970s. Women are among the primary beneficiaries of these changes, as Sultan Qaboos' massive development program prioritized the education of all citizens, female as well as male. Sa'ida quotes one of the Sultan's most famous public statements: "We will educate our children, even if we have to do it under the shade of trees." And the Sultan stood behind every word. As Sa'ida tells me, "The first classes really were conducted under trees, until the schools were built." When Sa'ida came home, she was armed with a college degree and became a teacher in one of those first, open-air classrooms. During this period, the Sultan ordered the integration of schools, so girls and boys learned side by side for the first time. At that time, the educational system was suffering from a severe deficit of teachers. According to Sa'ida, "All of us were doing at least ten jobs with one hand. But by the grace of God, we made it through this period and our female students learned to read and write."



The coexistence of modern and traditional ways of life is readily apparent in Muscat.

Although the new educational system elevated Omani women to unprecedented levels of professional and financial success, Sa'ida emphasizes that they always had possessed the potential for great achievement, even under the repressive rule of former Sultan Sa'id bin Taymur. "Oman is not like the other Gulf countries," Sa'ida explains proudly. "Before the time of Sultan Qaboos, women were working side by side with men, plowing fields and herding goats. Then, men started leaving the country in great numbers to work abroad because at that time, Oman had no jobs, no economy, and no education," she says. When the men left, the women stepped in to fill the jobs they had vacated — in the workforce and in the home. "The woman had to be the mother and the father of the household, and so she developed a very strong character," Sa'ida explains.

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Now, the Omani government has thrown its full support behind the movement for women's empowerment. But despite the government's commitment to gender equality, Sa'ida is becoming increasingly concerned about the status of women because of recent ideological trends that reinforce their subordination. An inevitable consequence of the Sultan's national development strategy was the opening of Oman to foreign influences, some of them pernicious. "For many years we saw positive changes, but now we are starting to see negative ones," Sa'ida says. These changes did not originate within Omani society; they were introduced by way of Saudi Arabia and other conservative Gulf countries. When I ask her about the source of rising religious conservatism in Oman, Sa'ida responds with certainty, "It comes from a false interpretation of Islam." When I press her for more details, Sa'ida launches into an impassioned critique of gender relations in the Muslim world. "The result of this false interpretation is that men have a purely biological understanding of women. Her job is biological, and she is seen as a wife and a mother only. Her sole purpose is to raise children and sit in the house of her husband. This male viewpoint rejects the participation of women in society," Sa'ida says.

Rising religious conservatism is evident in the outward appearance of women. Sa'ida herself wears the *abaya*, but only because cultural norms require it. She speaks nostalgically of a time when Omani women expressed their individualism through their vibrant wardrobes. "When I returned from Kuwait in the 1970s, there wasn't a single woman wearing the *abaya*. Omani women were famous for wearing the most brilliant colors. They were like butterflies,"

Sa'ida says.

Now, everything is different. Sa'ida believes that the recent introduction of the *abaya* reflects a dangerous regression in the progress achieved by women over the last 40 years. "Women are now less free. They participate less in the national development project, and they don't contribute to society like they used to," she says.

But when I ask her about the future, Sa'ida reveals herself to be an optimist at heart. "I am hopeful that the situation will improve because the government is beginning to recognize that the trend toward religious conservatism is constraining the potential of women. The government is starting to give women more space in which to participate and express their concerns. In the beginning, there were no women in the Majlis al-Dawla (State Council) or the Majlis al-Shura (People's Council), nor were there any female ministers or deputies. Now there are at least a dozen women in these different institutions," Sa'ida says. Opportunities are available to women, but they are sometimes reluctant to seize those opportunities, according to Sa'ida. In her poetry, she urges women to claim the rights that are legally theirs. "The doors are open now!" Sa'ida says. "Nothing is stopping women from making progress except themselves. It's up to them to participate."

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Poetry like Sa'ida Khatir's is more than art. It is part of a broader national dialogue struggling to make sense of two contradictory imperatives: development and preservation. Without Sultan Qaboos' institutional and educational reforms, Oman might still be languishing in a state of economic paralysis, isolated from global trade networks and cut off from potential political allies. No one can deny the extraordinary successes of the Qaboos state: job creation, higher standards of living, political stability, and a cultural renaissance. But at the same time, development requires the revision of traditional norms, structures, and belief systems that might obstruct the course of "progress." When medieval walls interfere with new modes of transport, they will be modified to accommodate modernity. When a country opens its borders to foreign products, people, and beliefs, it exposes itself to ideologies that have the power to transform gender relations, for better or for worse. Poetry, more than any other creative medium in Oman, expresses the tension between these contradictory forces of development.

Mara Revkin was recently awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to Oman, where she is researching poetry and its role in the public sphere. Mara is a 2009 graduate of Swarthmore College, where she was Editor-in-Chief of the campus newspaper, and a former MEI Publications Intern. She has lived in Egypt and Jordan, and hopes to return to the Middle East to study the relationship between independent media and political development.