

SAUDI ARABIA



FAWZIYYA ABU-KHALID

*Fawziyya Abu-Khalid was born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in 1955 to a Westernized upper-middle-class family. She was educated in Saudi Arabia but went on to study sociology at the American University in Beirut and at Lewis and Clark College in the United States. She began writing poetry as a young girl, and some of her early poems appeared in local newspapers. Her first collection, *Until When Will They Go on Raping You on Your Wedding Night?*, was published in Lebanon but was banned in Saudi Arabia. Her latest collection is entitled *Reading the Secret of the History of Arab Silence*. "Mother's Inheritance" is from Abu-Khalid's first volume of poetry and is indicative of her provocative style.*

Mother's Inheritance

Mother,
You did not leave me an inheritance of necklaces for a wedding
but a neck
 that towers above the guillotine
Not an embroidered veil for my face
but the eyes of a falcon
 that glitter like the daggers
 in the belts of our men.
Not a piece of land large enough
 to plant a single date palm
but the primal fruit of The Fertile Crescent:¹
My Womb.

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1. The Middle East, flanked by the Nile and the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers; historically and symbolically the cradle of civilization.

You let me sleep with all the children
 of our neighborhood
 that my agony may give birth
 to new rebels 15

In the bundle of your will
 I thought I could find
 a seed from The Garden of Eden
 that I may plant in my heart 20
 forsaken by the seasons

Instead
 You left me with a sheathless sword
 the name of an obscure child carved on its blade
 Every pore in me 25
 every crack
 opened up:

A sheath.

I plunged the sword into my heart
 but the wall could not contain it 30
 I thrust it into my lungs
 but the window could not box it
 I dipped it into my waist
 but the house was too small for it
 It lengthened into the streets 35
 defoliating the decorations
 of official holidays

Tilling asphalt
 Announcing the season of
 The Coming Feast. 40

Mother,
 Today, they came to confiscate the inheritance
 you left me.

They could not decipher the children's fingerprints
 They could not walk the road that stretches 45
 between the arteries of my heart
 and the cord that feeds the babe
 in every mother's womb.

They seized the children of the neighborhood
 for interrogation 50
 They could not convict the innocence in their eyes.
 They searched my pockets
 took off my clothes
 peeled my skin

But they failed to reach
the glistening silk that nestles
the twin doves
in my breast.

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Translated from the Arabic by Kamal Boullata

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In what ways is "Mother's Inheritance" a scathing attack on Arab society and an exposé of its effect on women?
2. How does the poet use imagery to convey the psychological state of mind of the narrator?