

Pearls on a Branch: Arab Stories Told by Women in Lebanon Today

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Pearls on a Branch: Tales from the Arab World Told by Women is a collection of thirty stories curated by Najla Khoury, who spent years compiling, polishing, and editing these primarily oral works. Retold from generation to generation, the folktales originally represented a form of shared expression and entertainment for Lebanese women, as well as a creative rebellion against the limitations imposed by their culture.

As Khoury notes, for centuries women of the Middle East were kept from pursuing education and making their own choices. This domination began with fathers, grandfathers, brothers, and uncles, continued with husbands, and could even persist further through their own sons. Women were not free to challenge men's edicts; if they did, they could suffer severe consequences.

Pearls on a Branch includes several stories of women overcoming restrictive circumstances to triumph (or, secure a reasonably happy marriage)—using beauty and wiles, intelligence and goodness.

Kings may send their daughters to the “palace of isolation” for displeasing them, if they haven't already killed them at birth simply for being born female. In reality, this cruel authority was rarely questioned. In the invented tales told by actual women of Lebanon, magical elements and twists of fate intercede, and both poor girls and princesses find true love.

The stories of *Pearls on a Branch* vary from fairy tale-esque to curiously compelling or comic. Virgin pregnancies occur from eating peacock eggs or drinking cream left out in the moonlight. Talking roses offer their beauty to humans, mice have wedding banquets, and jewels sparkle amid a backdrop of a sultan's gardens, camels, and mysterious spirits. These fantastic tales are culturally intriguing, and particularly notable for acknowledging the unique voices of Lebanese women, past and present.

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