

Excerpt from:

“The Pen Wielded by Women: Six New Works by Arab and Arab-American Writers”

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By Lynne Rogers

“Since 9/11, I have found two novels and one anthology that stand out in the growing body of literature by Arab Americans, a field dominated by women writers. In a realistic and experimental prose, **Kim Jensen’s** hip and updated East meets West love story, **The Woman I Left Behind**, centers on the relationship between Khalid, a married Palestinian who falls for Irene, the emotionally lost student activist. While Khalid’s personal odyssey reflects the turmoil of Palestine, Irene’s emotional wounds offer a cutting criticism of the privileged American adolescent rebellion. Set in Southern California in the 80’s, the two aggrieved and uprooted lovers painfully negotiate their own damaging manipulation of sex and emotion to come to terms with their pasts.

After his parents and grandfather are shot by the occupying forces in a Palestinian village, Israeli soldiers deport the 13 year old Khalid to Jordan. With the help of other refugees, Khalid manages to find an extended family in Lebanon. As the 1975 war breaks out, Khalid once again runs from bloodshed and

loss, arriving world weary in the United States. Larger than the usual poetry sprouting dark hair lover, the quiet Khalid must reconcile his victimization with his survival guilt and failure to ‘take arms to defend the innocents being slaughtered.’”

In narrative layers of loss and rediscovery, the novel’s title poetically refers to his country embodied by his loving aunt left behind, and more pragmatically to his first wife whom he marries for a green card and leaves for Irene. Yet, surprisingly, Irene also offers her own shocking ‘woman I left behind’ as she rises above the emotional vacuousness and subtle violence of America’s middle class to discover herself. While respectfully preserving Palestinian history and folklore, which Jensen treats with a knowledgeable dignity rather than as a decoration of local color, *The Woman I Left Behind*, as an Arab American novel, provocatively hints at a shared culture of humiliation and passivity offset only by the regeneration of love.”