



The American University in Cairo Press

Judges' Citations

The 2017 Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature

presented to

Huzama Habayeb

for her work

Velvet

Velvet beautifully evokes women in the Palestinian camps in Jordan. It abounds with poetic evocations of sumptuous velvet and women's artistry amid the violence in the refugee camp. Huzama Habayeb's descriptions exalt the most exquisite thing for the women against the mundane and the ordinary, the softness of velvet contrasted with the harshness of the camp. Habayeb is an original voice who brings vividly to life Palestinian camps with extraordinary beauty and lyricism. — **Tahia Abdel Nasser**

Just as Hoda Barakat created in her novel, *The Tiller of Waters*, a world of threads and fabrics as the dividing line between East and West Beirut during the war, Hawwa makes from the texture of velvet a motif colored with several connotations to protect her from falling into the abyss of despair and madness. So velvet becomes a goal, a dream, a means, a vision, a history, and a place to live, dream, and hope. It is a place to hide from the ugliness of life like the Palestinian fighter who takes refuge in Qamar's house during the events of Black September. — **Shereen Abouelnaga**

Habayeb's text is as sensuous, smooth, and strong as the fabric that gives it its title. *Velvet* is distinguished by the richness of its language and its empathy with its subject. Together, these produce a finely-textured description of a life lived in hardship but overflowing with sensibility and grace. — **Humphrey Davies**

Huzama Habayeb writes about the human condition through her portrayal of women and Palestinian camp life in all its dehumanizing harshness with distinctive originality, empathy, and craft. Set in the Palestinian camp of al-Baq'a in Amman in the 1960s/70s, this is a new kind of Palestinian novel. It is not about the political cause, the resistance, the dream of return. It is rather about ordinary Palestinians, whose life goes on meanwhile, unnoticed and unrecorded, in the background, while the high dramas of politics occupy center-stage. And more particularly, it is about the life of the brutally repressed women in the camps, and the heroic life and savage death of one particular woman, in what society would label a 'crime of honor.' The fabric of her life was made of the coarsest material imaginable, but she always hankered for the soft touch of 'velvet', the *Mukhmal* of the title. — **Rasheed El-Enany**

The protagonist of this novel is the poetic narration, the skillful words, the flowing images, and the measured prose. You read *Velvet* as though you are seeing your beautiful language dance and flutter. Thus Huzama Habayeb joins a list of Arab novelists — Radwa Ashour, Samiha Khreis, Ahlam Mostaghanmi — in their love of language, creating its fascinating beauty and enfolding within it their velvet secrets. Habayeb presents the question of occupied Palestine, not through the traditional resistance to the occupier, but through the reflection of the abhorrent occupation in the everyday life of a Palestinian family living in a camp. — **Mona Tolba**