

Scenes of a fight

Laila Al-Atrash

Sometimes, when critics pigeonhole me as a social or feminist writer, I ask myself: whom are they talking about? When my press articles and TV programs are attacked and accused of advocating women's liberty, I wonder if they are talking about me. When I discovered my name in the 2005 "Arab Human Development Report" on women Arab writer's who have made a difference and left some social impact, I wondered if we really deserved it.

For me, writing has always been an attempt to answer troubling, violent and urgent questions that are alleviated only on paper. It is difficult to be selected "a writer" by your destiny in a society constantly changing, intellectually, socially, politically, and economically in line with requirements of the world game. A life composed of a set of conflicting items and concepts; identity, Islam, the nation, orientalism, globalization, foreign occupation, alienation, fundamentalism, the crusades, colonialism, women's freedom, bridging gaps, dialogue, and all other paradoxes.

In the Arab mind, the "Other" was the West as an occupation civilized force, whereas in the 'invaders' eyes the East was the land of barbarian savages. This image was enhanced by the Orientalist representations that drew a portrait of the east based largely on Arabian Nights and the Turkish harem. This stereotype of the imagined East has aggravated the feeling of injustice felt by the Arabs and threatened their identity in a changing world in which they had no role in the sweeping political and economic transformations. This feeling was reflected in both culture and society by going back in history in search of identity and definition of self. The West became an enemy of the cultural, religious and national identity. Arab liberal thought, which had made gains from the 1950s to late 1980s, faced suspicion and even rejection and was accused of Westernization. The collapse of the Soviet Union also played a role in retreat to fundamentalist thought among socialist intellectuals. Narrative fiction is a complex composite of feeling, language, reality, hopes and sufferings in which the imagined literary text is merged into the socio- historical.

The Arab human development report for 2005 on the "Rise of Arab women" and in the section on women's creative writing, argues that "Arab societies suffer a series of contradictions that combine both inferior values and liberation values in the men-women relationship".

Do I write about these or about women within these transformations? I have chosen the latter, but with some reservations. I do not write a novel with a predetermined methodology. Articles, TV programs, and lectures are usually the vessels of ideas, theories and figures. Novels and fiction in

general are different zones, built in a world that is parallel to reality, which highlights all these contradictions through characters.

When I read something by other women writers, or review my articles, or start a new novel, I am amazed by the margin of freedom of expression and boldness in handling the taboos in terms of religion, politics and sex. The image of women has indeed changed drastically since the Arab renaissance at the beginning of the last century.

At other times, I tend to dilute my optimism when I view young girls wearing their veils, or refusing to shake hands with men, while believing in men's responsibility for their upkeep and superiority over them. Ironically, most of these young women are educated, and some are physicians, lawyers and engineers.

It's true that our societies are governed by certain religious and social characteristics. Social change is resisted and often obstructed by those who have monopolized religious authority and become its custodians against us. In their mind-set they believe that women's freedom threatens their identity, especially at a time when the West is trying to impose its understanding of democracy and women's liberation on our political regimes.

This kind of thinking identifies freedom as a conspiracy against the Arab Islamic identity. The growing Salafi and fundamentalist backlash in our societies has made great advantage of the bias in foreign western policies and the misunderstanding between East and West.

But the question remains... for whom, why? and what do I write? Writers cannot claim that they write for the sake of spiritual satisfaction or for the ecstasy of creation. They follow up on the impact of their writing on others. They enjoy the recipients' interest in what they write but are disappointed when readers and critics neglect their output.

So to whom do I write? And do I write to change my world and the world of women around me?! When my schoolteachers discovered that I could write, I thought I could change the world through my work, that my reputation as a writer would open up all opportunities and remove all obstacles and barriers before me. I thought that I would be an instrument for change like all the great writers who had influenced me after reading their translated works. The scene for such daydreaming was a small field that my family owned near the frontiers of Bethlehem. The mountains provided barriers for my town hiding everything beyond. Their heights motivated me to discover and to explore the world beyond; a different world I did not know. I started flying over their peaks. But never imagined that crossing the barriers could break my neck. Yet, when I practiced writing, I realized that my dreams of jumping over fortified barriers and prohibited fences were much easier than facing the reality.

Since childhood, I mastered the game of escape to the paper whenever pressing questions overwhelmed me. When I was seven or eight, I asked my religion teacher, "How could God be just

with all this misery and large numbers of refugees around us"?! She slapped me on the face for my blasphemy, my question unanswered. When I was ten, my father hit me because I joined a demonstration out of sheer curiosity. He feared that my actions would affect his job. However, after he closed up the windows to protect his job with the government, he would listen to anti-government political commentary on the radio. My mother would forbid any talk on sex in front of the girls, while my religion teacher emphasized daily that Eve was the original sin that tempted Adam into vice. Censorship would cover pictures of bare breasts and legs completely with black ink, and cut off political pages from newspapers and magazines. I REALISED THE TABOOS.

Do I write about taboos or women? Perhaps I have been haunted by the image of my mother whose father deprived her and her sisters from inheritance and passed it on to his son...the male! When she claimed her rights, she was outcast for years. Or was I troubled by the images of violence against women in our neighborhood?

With the crises of the occupation of Iraq and the recent developments in Palestine, the habit of reading is unfortunately fading out in the Arab world. The Arab readers' taste is now geared increasingly toward religious, direct political, horoscope, and cookbooks. The year 2008 was ushered in on Arab satellite channels with new media stars, a new year with reading and prediction from famous Arab zodiac readers and fortune-tellers to audience feeling insecure. The books of those new stars are best sellers, unfortunately more popular than those of distinguished novelists.

In spite of the great achievements of Arab women writers, after a long struggle, they are being threatened by the fanatic fundamentalist trends. On the other hand, while novel writing has scored many points beyond the taboos through publishing outside the native country or in foreign languages, it has moved quite a few steps backwards in terms of readership.

With poverty among Arab women being one of the highest in the world, owners and supporters of the Salafi thought are having their way with their resources, organizational skill, and funding and ability to provide social assistance to the needy.

Do I write for women? Or about them?!

Women characters in a novel cannot be separated from their circumstances, which are governed by traditions and conventions of a religious and social culture that defines roles for both sexes. In all my fiction works, I have defied and challenged the traditional taboos in modern Arab life: sex, religion and politics. This is what I have done so far in my five novels: "The Sun Rises From the West", "A Woman for Five Seasons", "Two Nights and a Woman's Shadow", "Neighing of Distances", "Illusive Anchors", and my short-story collection "A Day Like Any Other". Most of these novels are used as text books in –Arab- and Jordanian universities. I was very happy when a PhD student who is preparing her thesis on my works told me that the leading character in my latest novel looked very much like her, and she learned from her how to defend her rights. I was delighted

when a woman artist expressed her admiration for one of my novel by drawing a painting inspired by it. And I nearly cried when housewives in Ramallah studied it as part of some NGOs requirement and they said they learned some of their rights through the characters.

Such feedback makes me feel that I am not a voice in the wilderness. I am happy when fundamentalist writers condemn my articles. I'm also happy when they ask for my writings to be stopped. I was delighted when I was attacked in a mosque sermon after one of my TV programs. This is at least an indication that there are still those who read, listen and react. For me, still I have many explosive and burning questions. I believe the answers are always....

More writing.