

Character-Driven Alawiyya Sobh

A novel inhabits me long before I start writing. The narrator, or the main protagonist, comes to me gradually. At first formless in my mind's eye, she gradually takes on familiar and intimate contours. I begin to discern her features and her smell, she incarnates in me or I in her. She speaks for me (as in *Mariam al-Hikaaya* or *Dunia*) and I begin the writing journey with her, intent on getting up close and personal to reveal the real flesh and blood features that animate her as I write. Writing about her gives me the feeling that I am excavating: I have to dig to uncover her, to find out who she is, to understand how she functions and to see what she looks like.

I do not start out with a fixed plan as I usually have only a very basic notion of my heroine. It is through the writing that she is revealed. Artistically speaking, each work/novel has its own unique logic and structure. I don't always write chapters consecutively, nor do I feel that I have to. There are times when I won't submit to the imperative of "beginnings": as I say in my latest novel, *Ismahul Gharam*, "beginnings can be wherever we decide to place them. What we consider a beginning may actually be the halfway point, or almost the end, of a story, for writing is not like speaking ... When speaking, we submit to the pleasure of talking ... when I write, I start by yielding to the act of writing, for it is in so doing that I am led to a beginning; writing itself leads to the beginning, just as it leads to the ending when it has spent itself."

While I subscribe to the notion that each craft has its secrets and entails specific techniques, I do not presume there is one pre-set technique or template, nor do I adhere to one. Techniques are not mere empty vessels into which we pour our words – they are intrinsic to the text. I feel that the text most closely resembles an embryo developing independently of the will and control of the writer/mother, and that the writing does not take place in isolation from the vision and angst of the writer.

Because I am not a partisan of certainty, either in life or in fiction, my bias in storytelling tends towards favoring artistic freedom: it is through the writing that I understand and uncover the characters' worlds. I favor what I may call "artistic unveiling," the stripping of these worlds to their barebones. Sketching the narratives of the women, drawing and filling out their faces and personalities, groping for their intimacies and delving into their thickets, I find my way into their secret places. I don't know why I am often drawn to characters that sometimes appear timid but I am sure that I write about what exercises me both in human and artistic terms. Violence and hardship pain me a great deal and it is they that goad my pen in pursuit of the flesh and blood of my characters' humanity.

The almost delirious power of the imagination alleviates the solitariness of writing, and artfulness liberates it, but I do not relish betraying the lives of my heroes with ideas I have not clearly pictured in my mind. To illustrate, the research I did for *Mariam al-Hikaaya* on the the early exodus from the South to Beirut was only relevant insofar as it illuminated the lives of the characters. It is in the same vein that I ask Mariam's father, mother and aunt how they viewed the city when they moved there in the 1940s, and that I question the generation of Mariam's children as well as her friends and all the other characters who were born in Beirut and who experienced its collapse during the war, along with their dreams of a more modern and secular city. I am driven, at all times, by the need for

my protagonists to be real flesh and blood people, as I indicated, so that they may live on independently, were they able to do so; once the writing is over, they no longer have the mantle of my protection, and the heroes and heroines of a new story gain hold of me, to whose inner lives I must turn my attention, in exactly the same way as I did when I was writing about Mariam and the characters in her story.

I am unable to write a word if the character does not inhabit me. It's as if I became her, as if I believe that I know her or that I really will meet her and get to know her one day. I cannot write otherwise. In the course of writing her story, Mariam, to me, went from being a ghost to a real person. Sometimes, I caught myself thinking of her as my friend, as someone I knew, and I would ask myself walking down the street whether among the passers-by I would see Mariam, or whether one day a woman would contact me and tell me that she was the Mariam I was writing about. And just as I lost my face in hers, so too did my face fuse with that of my twin, the theatre man, Zuhayr. At times I thought that my body, which Mariam likened to an antibiotic capsule, was lost in the body of the city, just as the body of the sick hero, Hammoudi, was lost in the diseased and destroyed body of the city. This identification really haunted me, making me think of myself as dispersed among all the characters. In writing them, I consider that I was looking to control the characters without imposing my language upon them or dominating them. I tried to understand the character and to discover and learn from him or her how to tell his/her story so as to gain the right to tell that story.

It is possible that this notion of a “right” is a writer's conceit. A better way of putting it would be that it is a delusion from which the writer can be rescued by actually telling the story. What I am sure of is that I write without a sense of linguistic superiority vis-à-vis the heroes, or that my language or consciousness is more elevated than theirs; naturally, this does not mean that the characters themselves don't embody the writer's point of view or his flaws and shortcomings.

I cannot say why I am driven by this or that character, it is a complicated matter. Sometimes, I am led by a phrase I heard to sketch a character, at others I imagine a word, a sentence, an accent, or a point of view, or a situation any one of which might give rise to the emergence of a character.

If I ask myself “who is Mariam?” in *Mariam al-Hikaya* – how did she come about, how did she get to speak for me, who is Zuhayr, the theatre man, and why are Mariam and Zuhayr my twins, so to speak —I cannot come up with an adequate answer. I myself have wondered whatever happened for me to imagine a female protagonist who tells her stories and relates her memories, while throughout the novel she hounds me with questions about my disappearance and my silence, and about the stories which in her words, I was supposed to narrate with Dr. Zuhayr.

I really don't know the answer and can only offer up the questions that Mariam, my heroine, poses, for writing is a complex matter, made up of the interplay between artistic consciousness, and the existential, human and subjective unconscious. I only know that whenever I “bare” a character, I also expose my craft. And what I know is that just as Mariam engages in uncovering secrets, I too uncover techniques that make me question traditional novel structure and the unwritten. That is to say, Mariam resorts to the spoken word, while my writing and that of Zuhayr, are unspoken. And I don't know why!

The only thing I know for sure is that Mariam –both as a character and in the writing – was borne of the feelings I had. In the years that immediately followed the end of the war, I was completely silent,

and throughout this silence, I had the profound feeling that I was one of the “missing” of the war. It felt as if my memory had been erased, and that my very existence was mere illusion – unable to live life without writing, I doubted my very existence. This profound state of confusion and questioning, of both my life and my writing, all engendered by the war, resulted in my feeling that I had lost my memory.

The questions of how to write and find my voice in prose and storywriting exercised me for a long time. And I admit that I tore up and threw away far more than I kept. One day, someone tried to break into my car where I had some papers about the war in a leather case with. I was glad that they were lost, or erased or mud-covered, because the fate of the story which preceded *Mariam al-Hikaaya* was thus sealed at the hands of a robber. Had he tossed the papers in the muddy puddle? Or was it perhaps I who led the story (about the war) to its fate in the frenzy of imagination whose secrets I confess to here. What happened is that the robber broke my car window and that I lost all those papers to the wind and the rain that day. The secrets of the craft are thus yielded by both the imagination AND by reality. I believe neither what I write nor what I imagine. These days, I sometimes ask myself whether there really was a robber or whether I just imagined him.

In imagining Mariam, I needed to erase all that forgetting and to recover a writing memory that would reclaim my existence amongst the living, and restore my capacity for utterance. I had imagined her narrating on my behalf ever since my “disappearance”, just as I had imagined the theatre protagonist, Zuhayr, whom she turned into my writing twin. And when she narrated her memories, she took her words from me. As I wrote, I found myself having to choose between my death and that of Zuhayr’s: it pained me that his incomprehension of the war and how to write about it led to his loss and death. His fate was akin to what I had imagined in the story I wrote about the war, and the story’s erasure was akin to the fate of the characters and the society described therein.

Mariam saw the light of day as a result of the story that was lost to the mud and the water, and there had to be another story (the one narrated by Mariam) because you cannot tell the same story twice. What with the doubtful existence of Alawiyyah in the beginning of the story, and the Alawiyyah that Mariam finds at the end of the story, Zuhayr’s disappearance or painful death at my hands was inevitable. For Mariam finds me at the end of the story and discovers Alawiyyah preparing to write while suffering from pain in her writing hand, a symbol perhaps of being barely alive after writing.

The need for change, alongside other issues associated with written memory, the Lebanese war, and the experiences and destinies of the protagonists, gave rise to Mariam, who is also the “midwife” of the story, artistically and aesthetically speaking. My identification with her and with Zuhayr, and subsequently with all the characters, as well as with the city and the village, and with different generations of women built up inside me to bursting and drove the dramatic thread of the narrative with its intertwined, multi-layered and overlapping stories. The freedom to choose my narrative techniques allowed me to move easily and fluidly from one story to the next, hopping back and forth in time, fusing the story with life, accompanying the characters, blending *fus’ha* (literary Arabic) with *‘amiab* (spoken Arabic or dialect), and mixing the personal realm with the public one within a creative structure without which these stories could not be told.

Alawiyya Sobh is a novelist, writer, and journalist. Her works include *Mariam al-Hikaaya* (2002), *Dunia* (2006), and *Ismahul Gharam* (2009).