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## **Gender and Creativity in Iraq**

Literature is directly linked to culture, and in Iraq, women are just coming to the field. There are reasons for this, especially how men think about writing and how they think about women as human beings.

Often, cultures distinguish men's written works from women's written works, and the American feminist Angela Davis saw this as just another form of discrimination. But we should not forget that an individual's writing comes from their specific time and place, and writings with a feminine flavor come from a feminine place.

Gender discrimination in Iraq starts from very young childhood, even birth, with the images in childhood literature--a girl plays with dolls and a boy plays with electronic games. A girl runs while a boy rides a bicycle, as a symbol that women are not allowed to ride bicycles. At home a father watches football on TV while a mother mops the floor or cooks. From the moment an Iraqi woman opens her eyes in the morning, she must bear in mind that she is female. Women in Iraq are constantly reminded that they are less than men. This feeling is difficult to challenge and has a negative effect on the psychology of the writer.

Some people in my country might believe that literature and creativity cannot be gendered because these days many women are involved in building their communities, and work not only in the home, raising children and solving family problems, but also outside the home, in businesses and offices. They have more experiences and work even harder than men. Even so, women's literature, an indisputable reality in Iraq, remains writing by women on the problems of women. If we delete the author's name we can still easily guess that the author is female. I believe, though, that the world of women is rich and important to talk about. I support these women who write about the needs of the female mind and body, despite the limitations of discrimination in Iraq.

The six years I lived outside Iraq, in the Ukraine, changed my writing style. I became more open to both worlds--the world of men and the world of women--and began to write from both viewpoints. But women writers who lack this kind of freedom to travel and access to higher education turn their focus on their own domain.

These women and the power of their words should not be underestimated. Iraqi, and Arab men in general, have had a lot to say in literature about women and their lives, but they do not express "Woman" as she understands herself. It would be a very rare man that could do that because in our culture much of the woman's world is hidden from men. Female writers are able to reveal the world of women in a new way. But writing is a public confrontation, an open challenge and a loud voice expressing the thoughts of hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people, and free women are not often able to present this type of confrontation. Men--brothers, fathers, partners--still hold the keys.

In my writing, I take experiences from my own life--exile, the wars, trauma--and use them in my created worlds, as many writers do. But I also have written about the front lines, though I was not a soldier in the war. Using the stories of my male writer friends, as I can and could spend time with and travel with men, I am able to inhabit a man's feelings in some of my poems.

On the other hand, there are those who criticize women who have bypassed the issue of gender, using the male perspective. A female journalist once asked me why some women writers insist on speaking as a male--why not get rid of him, why use his language, why borrow a man's personality in writing to express female concerns? Is her own woman's language unworthy?

I responded: in the Koran, God addresses the people in divine masculine speech—the male form of speech, as opposed to the female form—and the Koran is the reference for grammar and expression in the Arabic language. For example, in English when we address others with the word “you” we use the same word for both men and women, while in Arabic we have two words: “ante” for women and “anta” for men. If God used the masculine address for both sexes so what should stop a woman from composing in the tongue of men, especially when the writing is intended for both men and women to read?

I feel writing functions outside gender if we pay attention to the technical aspects and building of poetic images. If it is original, coming from the unique intellectual life and philosophy of each writer then gender does not matter. Our focus should be how writing demonstrates unique creativity, even if women the language of cats or the thoughts of a horse! To get beyond gender in writing we need greater freedom for Iraqi women and allow them space to address any human issue.