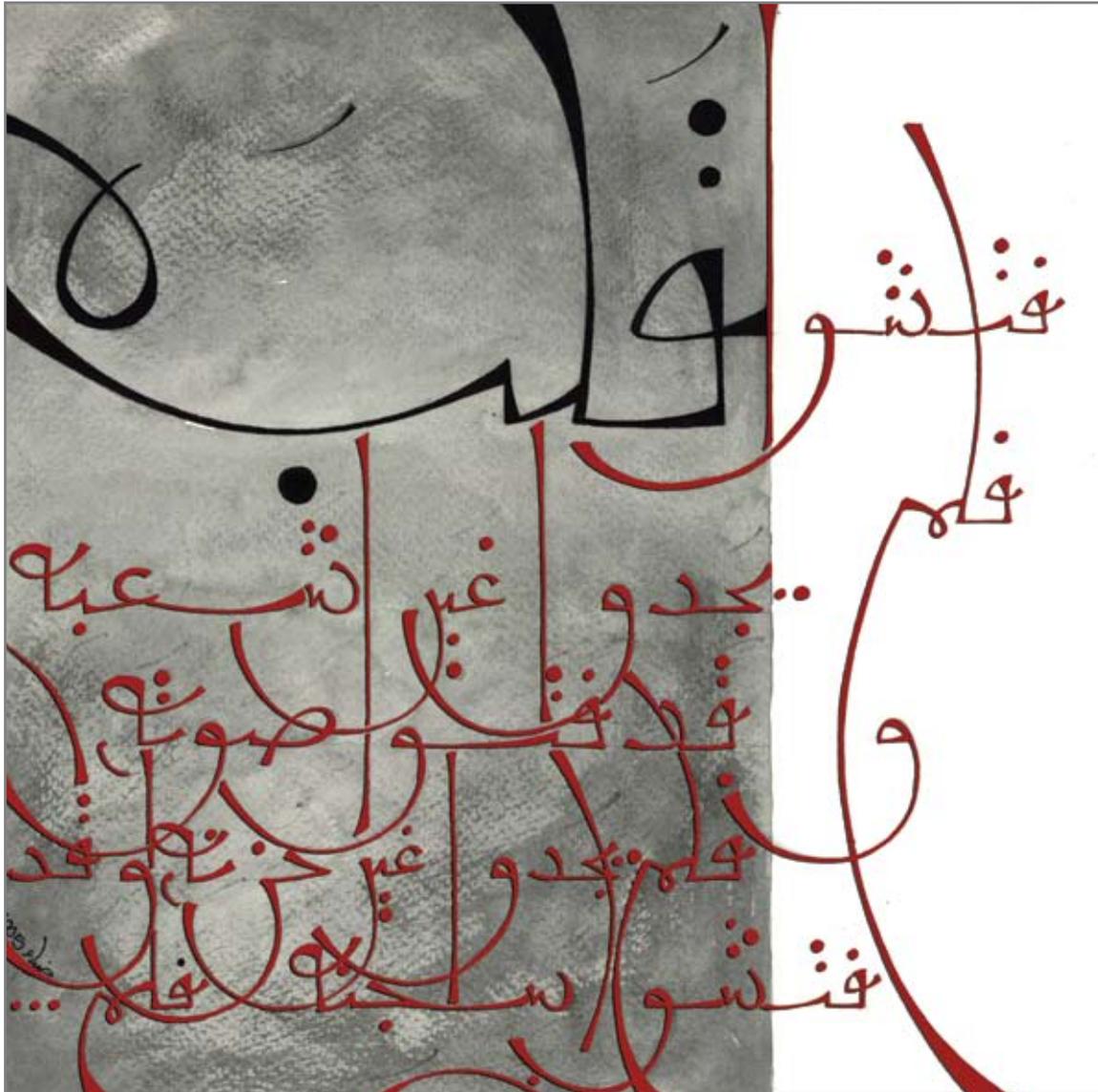


exiled ink!



Exiled Arab Writers and Literature
poetry . prose . articles . reviews

Spring - Summer 2008

ISSUE 9

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Editorial

The launch of our issue coincides with the London Book Fair special focus on the Arab World. This year, the London Book Fair Market Focus, which runs from 14 April till 16 April, intends to show the strong asset of Arabic literature in the world of publishing and translation. The Arab World is a vast and diverse entity: 22 Arab speaking countries and states, partly conglomerated in the Middle East, and partly diffused into a northern band in Africa. Such geographical and historical diversity puts into perspective the role of Arabic as global crossroads of ideas, and points at the importance of a wider readership of Arabic literature internationally.

Today, there is an increasing effort to place Arabic literature on the international translation market. The American University of Cairo Press (AUC) for instance, which published Naguib Mahfouz's novels, centre their attention on translating Arabic fiction into English. Similarly, The International Prize for Arabic Fiction, self-dubbed the 'Arabic Booker,' which secures an international recognition of fiction in Arabic, ensures translation and publication of the winning work in Western languages. But the market projects of translation and publication work also the other way round: in a bid to give a wider access to a larger readership, the translation

programme, called Kalima ("word" in Arabic), aims at translating a vast corpus of classic and contemporary Western writings into Arabic.

The effort to strengthen the international profile of literary fiction in Arabic involves Arab writers in exile. The voices of exiled in our special issue are diverse, they vary from Nawal el Saadawi's impassioned views, indefatigable in her fight for human rights, to Nesreen Melek's unassuming tone in 'Her Eid,' which challenges with considerable strength the role of woman in the traditional social structures of the Arab Middle East. Bashir al Ghamar's personification of Sudan in his poem "My Beloved" voices the exilic torment while Ghias al Jundi's anguish is channelled into his descriptive view of human incomprehensible behaviour. These examples highlight the important contribution of exiled Arab writers in the strengthening of global Arabic Literature. As Samir el Youssef, the recipient of the Tucholsky Award in 2005, comments: "It's important for writers who challenge received wisdom and conformity to receive certain acknowledgement and recognition so they wouldn't feel lonely and isolated".

We are indebted to Fathieh Saudi our chairwoman whose relentless networking has allowed Exiled Writers Ink to participate in the London Book Fair 2008.

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Front cover poem by Mahmoud Darwish:
And they searched his chest
But they could find only his heart
And they searched his heart
But they could find only his people
And they searched his voice
But they could only find his sadness
And they searched his sadness
But they could only find his prison

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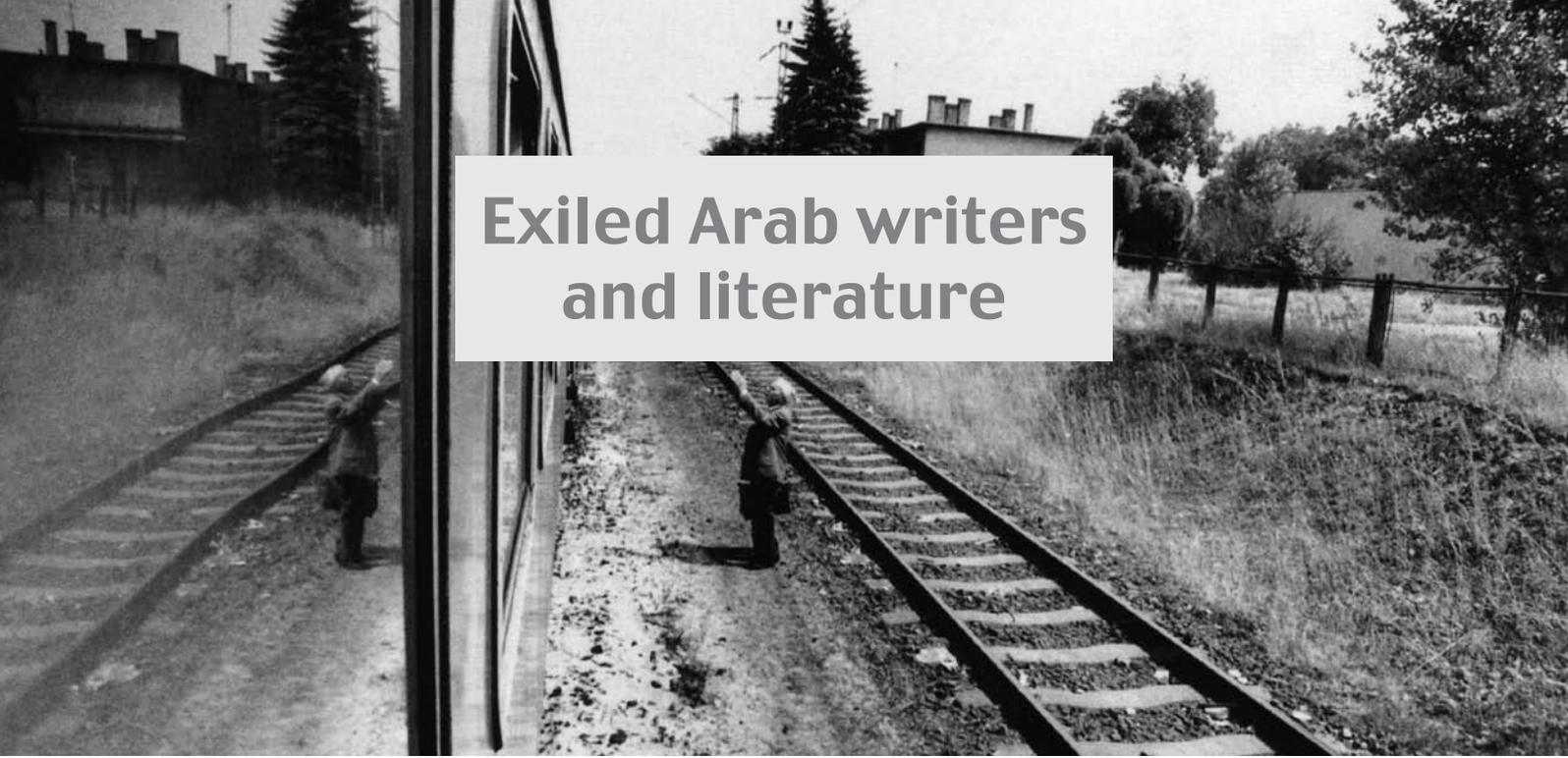
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Exiled Arab writers and literature

Photo: Koutaiba Al-Janabi

Who Am I Without Exile?

Mahmoud Darwish

Translated by Fady Joudah

A stranger on the river bank, like the river... water
binds me to your name. Nothing brings me back from
my faraway
to my palm tree: not peace and not war. Nothing
makes me enter the gospels. Not
a thing.... nothing sparkles from the shore of ebb
and flow between the Euphrates and the Nile.
Nothing
makes me descend from pharaoh's ships. Nothing
carries me or makes me carry an idea: not longing
and not promise. What will I do? What
will I do without exile, and a long night
that stares at the water?

Water
binds me
to your name...
Nothing takes me from the butterflies of my dreams.
To my reality: not dust and not fire. What
will I do without roses from Samarkand? What
will I do in a theatre that burnishes the singers with
its lunar
stones? Our weight has become light like our houses
in the faraway winds. We have become two friends
of the strange
creatures in the clouds...and we are now loosened
from the gravity of identity's land. What will we do...
will we do without exile, and a long night
that stares at the water?

Water
binds me
to your name...
there's nothing left of me but you, and nothing left
of you
but me, the stranger massaging his stranger's thighs:
O
stranger! what will we do with what is left to us
of calm... and a snooze between two myths?
And nothing carries us: not the road and not the
house.
Was this road always like this, from the start,
or did our dreams find a mare on a hill
among the Mongol horses and exchange us for it?
And what shall we do?
What
will we do
without
exile?

From: The Butterfly's Burden, Bloodaxe Books

Immigrant Song

In the kitchen in the afternoon, peeling oranges
and splitting cantaloupe gut,
All that is left is story telling.

The one-radio, one-coffee-shop village now an
almond field
And vacation-brochure ruins besieged by grass.

Everyday around noon a boy on a mule, the men
out in the fields,
Bread fresh out of brick-oven, wrist deep in olive oil,
elbows dripping.

The one-radio, one-coffee-shop village without an
ink-line on paper,
Now spilled like beads out of a rosary.

Not what they would have grown.

We the people in god we trust.

We the people in god we trust everyday around
noon a mule.

We the people dream the city: Oooh you give me
fever.

Oooh you give me fever so bad I shake like beads
out of a rosary.

Fever so bad it must've been malaria.

Hey doctor! You mule-ride away, you cost the rest of
harvest.

Hey doctor, the city's a medicine cabinet.

We plant tomatoes, okra, squash instead.

And a fig tree that won't grow in Tennessee frost.

Trees die standing.

One-cantaloupe, one-rosary kitchen.

Mother Hair

My hair, black now, was Achilles hair
When I was a child.
Or maybe Mamluk, maybe Crusader blood,

Though Napoleon could only throw
His hat at the walls of Acre
Or maybe the ischemic morning

I rode the school bus
Heading for the desert on a field trip
It doesn't matter. My mother intuited loss

And stroked my head before I waved goodbye.
In the desert
I ate the figs my father had left

By my shoes the night before.
In the desert
Camels are ships

Parting asphalt, and the school bus
Smashed into them and killed
So many children aboard.

When the bus returned
Mothers filled the schoolyard
With wailing,

Smacking their cheeks,
Pulling their hair,
Counting their children.

But there were none missing.
It was only rumour. There was only
Nightfall and my mother, ready,

Wearing black, my hair now,
Maybe Canaanite or Bedouin,
Maybe Fatemah or Zaineb.

Photo: Shahrokh Reisi



Hanan Al-Shaykh

Jennifer Langer



Photo: Miriam Frank



Imagine the Lebanese-born writer, Hanan Al-Shaykh, writing frenziedly at her long, paper-strewn table below the huge mirrored artwork on her wall, the mirrors reflecting her imagination and memory.

We are seated in a serene room in London with a large Dalmatian slumbering at our feet. I ask Hanan about exile, the influence of exile on her writing, about memory, gender issues in her work and about her current projects. Hanan is in self-exile in London having left Lebanon in 1975 because of the war and her fear. She now realises that by living away, she exiled herself from her language and culture and she gradually became more aware of the consequences of leaving home. Nevertheless, she does not regret leaving as she abhors violence. She became aware that she had changed when she first started writing about her exilic space of London, rather than setting her novels in the Arab world. This was her sixth novel *Only in London*, a comic novel which explores the Arab diaspora in London and was short-listed for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, 2002. It centres on four characters: an Iraqi

refugee who has an affair with an Englishman, a Moroccan prostitute posing as a princess in distress to exploit rich Gulf Arabs and a gay Lebanese. She also wrote a volume of short stories entitled *So Very English*. Even in Lebanon, she felt alienated because of her discomfort with the politics and culture and in fact this feeling began as a child given that her family fitted neither into Beirut nor into the south of Lebanon and this resulted in her leaving to study in Egypt when she was seventeen. She asserts that places change people and that new influences are absorbed "like a sponge and that they open pores". She believes that moving from one place to another caused her to recreate herself which she perceives not simply as loss but as an adventure: "You become another person, no matter how strong you are." In Cairo she recreated herself as she was without family and therefore had no baggage. Her stay in Saudi Arabia caused her to question religious Islamic practices and to make comparisons between Lebanon and Saudi.

I ask her about the effects on her writing of being in exile. She explains that living in England exposes her to Western influences but nevertheless she is aware she inhabits the space between, "swaying between cultures". She has been strongly influenced by Egypt which dominates the Arab world in terms of literature including film, plays and radio dramas and has been particularly inspired by Naguib Mahfouz, the 1988 Nobel Prize Winner, because he wrote about ordinary people and provided an insight beyond the external façade of a character. However, because she was influenced by the work of Jean-Paul Sartre and Françoise Sagan, she desired more existentialism in literary work. Her influences also include the Hadith (stories about Muhammad) learnt as a child, particularly one involving a winged horse, and she also reminisces about an awe-inspiring play about Ashura. In fact, memory plays an important role in her work with her books representing stages in her life, memory igniting her writing.

The traumatic memory of the civil war in Lebanon is a strong one constituting the first shock which turned her world upside down. Her total powerlessness was one of the most disturbing factors as well as her incomprehension about the random killing. The fear aroused by snipers resuscitated the fear of being discovered when her mother was committing adultery with her lover, having taken her children along to avoid suspicion. *Beirut Blues* (1992) was an act of remembrance for a city in transformation. She wrote of the city's descent into a 'demons' playground' and captured the atmosphere of life during the war. The book in a sense stressed the importance of not forgetting, against a background of collective, official amnesia. She was incredulous when bombing reoccurred two summers ago and articulated her anger and disappointment in the allegory 'No' which was included in *Lebanon, Lebanon*, published by Saqi (reviewed in issue Winter 2006).

.....

'No', bellowed the heart of the city. 'I do not want to hear the hooting of the owls.'

'No', roared the earth, 'I do not want the tanks to wrench out my guts.'

'No', howled Beirut, 'I do not want the sea to cry again.'

'No', wailed the South, 'I still want to trace my face on my country's map.'

'No', implored History, 'I do not want to be a parrot with no memory.'

.....

The theme of women is prevalent in her work. She declares that in Arab countries women are second-class citizens but in addition, that men are enslaved and that the liberation of men will liberate women. She suggests that in dictatorships citizens do not have individual power and so become oppressors and she exposes this in much of her writing. *The Story of Zahra*, (1994) is a narrative of the Lebanese Civil War which tells the story of a bewildered and directionless woman, Zahra, who finds in the war an opportunity to escape oppression. Rejected by nine Beirut publishers, it is about an anti-heroine who endures rape, incest, back-street abortions and electro-convulsive therapy. War frees Zahra, who finds sexual pleasure with a sniper. In *Only in London*, Lamis, a recently arrived divorcee from the Arab world, overcomes her fear and gradually finds herself. Hanan contends that Arab women react to western exile in different ways with some asserting their identity by becoming more devout wearing veils and scarves, some becoming more independent with less concern for appearance than in Lebanon, while some continue to rely entirely on men. However, it is a conflicted area as the norms are deeply internalised from a young age. Hanan considers her mother, although illiterate, as a role model of an independent woman. She was married to a devout Muslim man but divorced him to marry her lover which was highly unconventional, taboo behaviour at that time. Hanan has written her mother's biography entitled *My Life Story is a Long One*, a best-seller throughout the Arab world. Through listening to her mother's narrative and writing the biography, Hanan developed more understanding of herself and the sources of her writing.

Finally I ask her about the current work in which she is engaged and am excited when she tells me about her play set against the Separation Wall between Israel and Palestine and consisting of a dialogue between a Russian immigrant working on the Wall, and a Palestinian Christian woman, who finally come to an understanding. She has been working on this play for three years and is writing in English for the first time. In addition, she is creating a collection of short stories and a novel.

Has Your Throat Gone Dry Shehrezad?

Tajia Al-Baghdadi

Translated by M T Ali



Drawing: Layaly S. Mohammed

The evening got tired, the guests yawned
They had come from every direction, asking
They came from every dark corner
The towers of Babylon couldn't accommodate them
All of them
I see them from every dark corner, streaming in
Oiling their swords and suspending their hearts
Lest they fly to the light,
Causing the homelands to shrink
Or the words and verses expand
They fix the daily schedules
Lest their past days belong to their present
And their present is an empty bed
They enquire and they ask about
The secret of beloved Ishtar
And her lovely songs
As she sings two charming verses
The dream begins when the impossible paths are closed
The evening got tired
The visitors fidgeted as Shehrezad groaned
With the bleeding of her heavy words
Their necks were suspended by two hands
Which open the country's dictionary
All the faces turned to try admiring those eyes
They turned in the dusty memories
Their necks dispersed in the vocabulary
And in the brightly lit headlines
And Shehrezad came with her strange husky voice

She stumbled to kindle their eagerness
She had hardly pronounced the names
When her voice gave up, overcome with dizziness
She departed without saying goodbye
The visitors got lost in the lineaments of
That silence of the calm night
She left, she could not speak, the wound on the lips
Midway through the tranquillity
The visitors exchanged their solitude
Singing "oh wounds that have made us dumb!"
Oh woman the veins of sound dried up
Fortune betrays her luck
The visitors shared their disappointment
They reiterated asking
Has Your Throat Gone Dry, Shehrezad?
O! She weaves a subdued tear from the ashes of her eyes
Oh! She departs as did our childhood
A withered evening caught up with her
Oh! she didn't say farewell
She drew across the screen and disappeared

Interview with Nawal al Saadawi

Fathieh Saudi

Nawal is a writer, activist, novelist and feminist of worldwide acclaim. She has written forty-four books and has been translated into more than thirty different languages. Nawal is like a warrior, her free voice, revolt and defence of human rights – in particular of women in the Arab world and elsewhere – make her one of the most read, controversial yet inspiring authors. She has travelled worldwide and lectured in several universities in Europe and the USA.

In this interview Fathieh Saudi travels with Nawal through her childhood, her first revolt, her contact with injustice, her family and through her exceptional rich human journey where she studied medicine, then moved to psychiatry, and finally became a writer and novelist.

In your book *My Papers, My Life*, you wrote that you started working on your memoirs while living in exile in the USA in 1993. Do you think the writing of memoirs is related to a feeling of being in danger? You wrote, ‘threatening me with death made my life important and worth writing about. My life became more valuable when coming closer to death.’

That’s absolutely true. When you feel that your life is threatened, that you can be killed at any moment and you are keen on life you don’t want to lose it. You want people to recognise your life. Also, writing my biography gave me the feeling that life is so precious, I want my life to be written, and I want people to know that I value my life. As humans we like to leave something eternal.

What is your experience of exile? How many times did you have to leave your country for exile?

I don’t feel exiled. What do we mean by exile? It’s when you feel alienated in your identity and in your country. I do feel at home anywhere when I am writing for my readers or meeting with them, when I am giving interviews, when I am teaching my students. I love people, so the concept of a country or a homeland is different in my own experience. I do feel that my homeland is the place where I feel human and free. For example, if when living in London you feel more justice, more freedom, then this is better than a homeland where you feel threatened. The experience of exile can be very dynamic.

Sometimes when I am in Egypt I feel like I am in a prison because my ideas go beyond what the majority are thinking about. Being a progressive writer you may feel alone, but this is the only way of being an authentic writer, when you express what others are afraid to write about. When I am in Egypt I feel that the government is everywhere, the media and the government criticise me continually. People in Egypt have no real power. I believe that when a writer expresses the unthinkable or the forbidden there is a price, but I never regret all my choices.

You wrote, ‘If there is a time, I create it through writing’. Today you seem to be timeless. You are defeating time with your energy, your writing and your inner resistance. From where you get your timeless and ageless strength?



Through creativity. Writing makes me feel at home. Writing is the desire to live for me. When I write a poem or a novel, I feel uplifted, younger and in ecstasy. Writing keeps me young. Through my writing I have the pleasure to reach TO new friends all over the world and I feel a lot of energy.

You talk often about the three taboos imposed on women: religion, sex and power. Do you still feel that these are taboos today? Or are there any changes that have taken place?

These are the three major taboos: sex, religion and politics. There are some others but those are three major taboos. There are changes because today we are going backward all over the world.

In politics, for example, we feel today in the Arab world that bush is a big dictator; there are also many smaller dictators. I think president bush is more dangerous than Saddam Hussein for our part of the world because bush is creating a lot of problems all over the world while Saddam was creating problems mainly in his country. The situation in Egypt is really sad today, where more than 60 per cent of the population live in poverty, where one loaf of bread in five comes from the USA as aid. We know that bush launched his war on Iraq based on lies; we see lies everywhere and I do feel depressed. We have to react and to do something, we can’t keep silent.

Do you remember why you studied medicine and what made you change your orientation towards psychiatry? Then why did you go on to become a writer and above all a novelist and a feminist?

My parents pushed me to study medicine. I never dreamt of being a doctor. I used to dream of becoming a dancer or a singer. Then my dream changed to becoming a writer. I don’t like being a doctor or being close to sick people. I prefer to be among healthy people. After finishing my medical degree I turned to psychiatry because I felt it was purer and without blood or bleeding.

What are your first memories of childhood? Does injustice drive you in your life?

My family was poor. I felt early that my parents treated me differently from my brother only because I was a girl. He was always privileged because he was a boy. He was even rewarded with freedom to go around even though he wasn’t doing well at school. I felt it was so unjust and unfair to treat me differently. My father used to say: but he is a boy. I wanted god to be just with me also as my grandmother used to tell me about god.

I do remember that I wrote my first letter to god when I was nine years old, asking him why he preferred my brother. But

I felt so frightened of going to hell because of this letter. So I have been a feminist since childhood. I wrote my first short story when I was thirteen years old.

I think we are born, live and die with fears. Fearing god is not a positive feeling. Fear and love don't go together. I stayed silenced for about twenty years. When you feel fear you can't criticize anything and above all you can't be creative.

I hate injustice in any form. When I feel injustice I revolt. I am deeply allergic to injustice. I am not ready to accept any form of oppression even in a dream. I kept that spirit of revolt all my life. I never stopped fighting against injustice in any place. I remember when I once travelled to the USA and I was delayed at the airport by security because I was born in Egypt. I rebelled immediately and said, 'you are creating terrorists by treating people this way.' we shouldn't be afraid to express our rebellion. We must use our power when we are facing oppression.

With regard to your short novel there is no place for my mother in paradise; do you think women have sufficient stature or space today?

I think women have no place either on earth or in heaven. All religions favour men who have all the privileges on earth and in paradise. They are promised virgins and a lot of privileges. My novel is about a woman in a village who lost her husband very young. Everyone around her advises her not to have any other man and to wait to join her husband in paradise. She worked hard and deprived herself of one until she died. In paradise she found her husband with virgins, so she decided to return to earth.

Have you ever worn a real veil over your face? How would you feel?

I have never used any make-up. Make-up for me is like a post-modern veil. I remember once Fatima Mernessi invited me to a lecture where I wore some make-up. I felt horrible, not myself any more. This was just for one night. When I went to Algeria I had to dye my hair black so as not to be recognized with my white hair. So yes, I was veiled twice.

From where in your own experience does the creativity process start?

Creativity is freedom. You need to feel free to write, so this is why men are more privileged than women in creativity. Also, I think you need to be open to others, to feel the suffering, the pain around you and the injustice. But you don't need an excess of suffering. I do remember that some of my friends collapsed when they were in prison and couldn't write any more. It's like a vaccine – we need just a small dose, any extra will make US SICK. I think all human beings are creative, but our creativity is imprisoned by oppression, fear and controlled education. Certainly women suffer more because the oppression of women is universal under the patriarchal and capitalist systems.

What about your book *god dies by the Nile*? Why was it so severely criticised?

I spent ten years reading and comparing the three holy monotheistic books, searching for the similarities. Sometimes we become religious without reading these holy books. Deeply I think today we need to reinterpret religions. For example, the veil is not only related to Islam, it was mentioned in the Old Testament and nuns in Christianity need to cover their heads. The revival of religions today is connected to economic and political power, not to real spirituality. For example, the USA supported the Taliban when they needed them against communism. Fundamentalisms exist today in other religions.

Your life and your books have brought you worldwide recognition today. What more do you dream of or wish to achieve in the future?

I still have more dreams. I haven't yet written the book I want to write. I don't have the time for it and maybe nobody will publish it. I have so much to say against many things, against all inherited ideas. I never stopped writing for long. I wrote forty-four books and yet I feel I wrote nothing because there is still an unwritten book in my mind. That book is in my mind, it's there so that's why I continue to write. My husband often asked to me why I don't rest now. I told him I hadn't yet written my book. It's time to say what I have held for so long. I think it needs to be my next novel, and then I can die.

What about your stolen novel in Belgium?

My last novel was stolen from me in a train in Belgium. My entire bag was stolen. The police found my passport. Fortunately I already had an advance contract with my publisher for that stolen novel. I don't have any other copy so I need to rewrite it. You know writing is a full time job and I am still travelling all over the world – my time is so precious now.

How do you continue to keep hopeful today given that the entire Arab world is going through difficult times politically, socially and culturally?

Hope is my saviour. We need to hold on to optimism about our future. We need to support changes and evolution. Creativity is a call for change. The sea is the symbol of change as it moves all the time.

You have faced many negative critics and reactions against your work and thoughts. Could you say few words about it?

I have to face so many challenges. The Arab solidarity association was closed down in 1991, the magazine noon as well. It was related to the gulf war and my position against it. Also I was sent to prison by Sadat because of my book 'the fall of imam'. Last year there was a case against me to strip me of my Egyptian passport and to confiscate all my books. In spite of that you know there is a publisher in Egypt who wants to reprint all my books again for the Cairo international book fair so my voice can't be silenced.

How do you decide in what style to write?

I don't make any decision. Writing is an urge for me. It's the same as falling in love or eating: it's natural. You feel the urge to express yourself. Writing is like speaking or playing music, it's very natural. We are all born with talent, we are all creative. Writing is like breathing, if I don't write I feel suffocated. Writing in a particular style depends on my mood and feelings. If something is emotional I then feel like writing a novel. Imagination lies between fiction and non-fiction. Everything has both at the same time. For me there is no separation between fact and fiction. There is also no separation between the body and the spirit. The human being is a complete unit. For example in medicine we study only the parts of the body. For all other fields of knowledge we get fragmented teaching. We need to combine different forms of knowledge, otherwise we become passive. It's so important to connect things, to connect the social, political, religious, gender issues, etc., in order to reach an open interesting vision.

Why do critics not write about you?

Again it's a political problem. Some leftist writers will never get the Nobel Prize. Kafka was ignored during his lifetime. This is the problem with all creative writers with a vision. Also critics are often employed by the government media so they feel afraid to write about me. Everything is political somewhere.

Flying Mountains

Ghazi Gheblawi

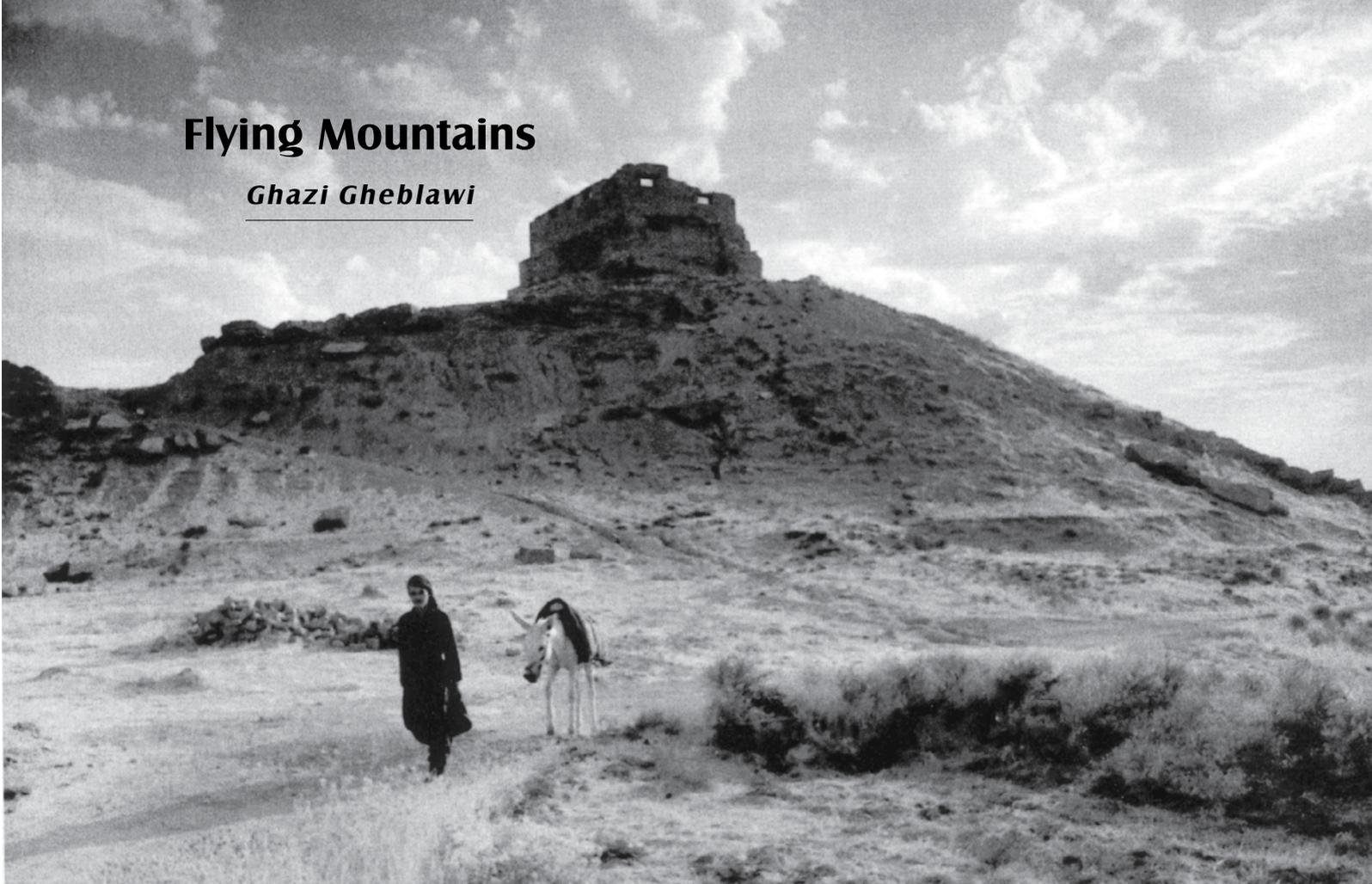


Photo: Koutaiba Al-Janabi

The old man was coming back
from other wars.
The year of famine approaching the shores,
black future and the last Jew

giving his last blessing to the Promised Land
Tamalult is no more white, and olives are frail.
The shepherd was coming home
to find his destiny sharpened.

Down we go, said Solomon,
no more clay to eat, no more locusts to spare.
The Shagrounies left with the Arbebes,
on the blue horizon they felt weak

Jesus took a fist of wild thyme,
Moses a fist of white sand.
Nothing to weep for...! cried out Solomon,
his wife fearing miscarriage hoping the city

would be less cruel on her children.
Singing an old Amazighi melody
Spring will be like red
Poppies in
Our land, above the skies
And onto the hands of God

**

*They never knew what
Thou showed them,
The son of man will rise
Above the hill
And call for them to bow*

**

Solomon still crying,
vowing not to return to his ruined temple cave.
Uncle Ali prayed for the rain
That never came,

spending evenings beside
The water stream of the Roman spring.
Waiting for the gush.
It dribbled and slowly died.

Uncle Ali is blind now,
still dreaming,
praying for rain.

**

*O, man if you came
with all the sins
in the world I'll forgive you,
and not care.*

30

Ghazi Gheblawi

It wasn't easy
reaching the far point of being me
she smiled and said:

why are you smiling?
I continued to draw sort of angles on my lips
a smile as she described

thus, I didn't know the exact word.
I blew my words:
today I become thirty

she looked amazed and said
thirteen!!! you look younger than that!!
I replied:

no, thirty, three zero, not one three
she ran away with her eyes and mumbled:
Oh, I see. Why have you lived so long?!!

I didn't want to answer
but meantime, she disappeared
leaving a scent of rotten jasmine flowers

her warmth on the leather seat
still radiated her presence
I didn't have any other choice but to leave

gathering my long age
wearing my charm
losing another part of my body to ants and worms

I couldn't find a place for my burial
so, continued to live
breathing in and out the cold morning sun

a fist of thyme and volcanic rocks promised me
mercy.
On my journey to the damous*
I occupied the corner and sat like a monk

breathed the smell of rotten heart
left by the last friend
at the sight of her smile, I released a sigh of joy

and stopped breathing...

.....
.....

Happy birthday!!
I heard a sweet voice say
realising with horror that I was still here

breathing fresh air
opened my eyes
approaching her eyes

finding the distance between three and zero
widening
my face blooming with her face
I waited for a moment

of silence and peace,
wrapped my love
and spoke the words:

Happy birthday to me.
Her face disappeared once again,
before me stood my naked body,

the mirror reflecting my one and only face,
stubble growing on my cheeks and chin
water running in the sink

this is reality....
I pretended to smile and slapped the face
in front of me and said: this is what you deserve!!

* *Damous: An old dwelling cave in the western mountain of Libya (Jabal Nafousa).*

Her Eid

Nesreen Melek



Photo: Koutaiba Al-Janabi

Canada, October 11, 2007

"Congratulations." It was her lawyer. "You are a free woman and tomorrow is the first day of Eid, so celebrate your freedom and remember you are a fine lady and you deserve a better life."

Beirut 1973

He was holding her; she moved his arm and turned to the other side. The pain was awful and she could no longer tolerate it. Tossing and turning in bed, she felt as if the pain was moving all over her body. She started shivering. She needed to do something about it. She went to the bathroom, sat on the cold floor in front of the toilet and started vomiting. She heard a knock on the door; it was his mother asking her if she was alright. She told the mother that she was fine.

The next day she decided to see a doctor but she did not tell him. She was shy and did not want to describe her pain as he always claimed that she exaggerated things. She was scared he would tell her that she had to tolerate the pain. She did not want to hear it over and over from him that she was spoiled and had to grow up.

It was a humid day. She took a taxi as she was unable to walk. She sat in the front seat; Fairuz was singing a song about the harshness of exile. She missed home and wanted to be close to her family who would have taken care of her. She looked out of the window; she was a stranger in this beautiful city of Beirut. The taxi dropped her right outside the clinic. She could feel the pain still; she could barely walk. She entered the doctor's clinic and had to wait as the clinic was full.

It was her turn. She was a young woman in her early twenties and the doctor was in his late fifties. He asked her a few questions about her health history. She told him what had happened to her and while she was answering his questions she started crying. He looked at her and told her that he needed to examine her. After he had done so, they went back to his office. He sat opposite her and held her hands firmly. She looked down at the floor. He held her chin, raising it and asked her to look at him. Her eyes were full of tears. He said "Listen, no loving husband would do that to his wife."

She dropped her head lower. He raised his voice and said: "What is wrong with you? You are a beautiful young woman and you deserve better treatment. Leave this man and return to your country."

She left the doctor's office but did not want to go home. She sat on the edge of an empty bench facing the sea. She wondered what to do next and where to go. She and the sea were separated by fog, but she could still see the endless blue sea. She leaned on the arm of the bench thinking of home.

Baghdad 1955

She could feel her cold feet touching each other. She started shivering, her temperature was high and she felt as if she was on another planet. She called her mother "Mama, I am very sick"... she could not feel anything after that. She must have passed out. She could hear her mother's voice coming from a distance; she was reciting verses from the Koran and praying that she would recover. She could not tolerate the pain and started crying; she could feel the tears dropping on the pillow. Her mother placed a cold towel on her forehead, hot air emanated from her mouth... she heard her mother's voice telling her she would be fine and that it was just measles and all kids at school got it. She could barely open her eyes. She saw her father sitting on the chair opposite her bed. She called him and her mother told her that she was hallucinating and that her father was not home. She wanted him, wanted to rest her head on his shoulder and she would have felt better for sure. Her whole body was aching. Opening her eyes, she was surrounded by people who loved her and cared about her. She could see their puzzled faces. She felt as she was drowning in a deep sea. And she wondered where she would be next...

October 12, 2007

On the first day of Eid, she had friends over for dinner and they left late. She stretched her body on the couch and slept. She was walking beside Dijlah. She was not wearing shoes and could feel the softness of the solid earth. She took a long breath, the air reaching deep into her lungs. The tall palm trees lining both banks of the river were heavy with fresh dates resembling tall mothers holding their babies gently under their arms. Someone was walking ahead of her holding a branch of fresh dates. She stretched out her arm to reach the dates, but could not do so as the faster she walked the faster he walked. She wanted to reach the dates but could hear a voice saying: you will have them but not now and stop following me.

The phone was ringing. When she picked it up, the voice of an old friend wished her Happy Eid. "Just wanted to remind you over and over that you are a wonderful woman and we all love you. You are a free soul now and no one can hurt you physically or mentally anymore." She stood up and gazed at a new plant she had planted a month ago. A small violet flower was blooming. She brought a cup of water and watered the little flower. More flowers will bloom tomorrow, more water will be needed, and more love will be suffused over her loving heart and the heart of others.

THE ILLUSION OF RETURN

Interview with Samir el Youssef

By Miriam Frank

Q. You were born and grew up in the Palestinian refugee camp of Rashidia in South Lebanon and came to London where you live now since 1990, so you have experienced and understand displacement. Yet, unlike many of your fellow Palestinians, you have chosen to look at the subject from a rational and dispassionate viewpoint. You have also worked with an Israeli writer, Etgar Keret, to produce a joint publication, *Gaza Blues: the start of a friendship and further publications*. Would you elaborate on the processes you went through in order to reach this point, and the insights you gained through, what many would regard, “crossing the divide”?

A. It's not a matter of looking at the issue of Palestine/Israel “rationally” and “dispassionately”; on the contrary I'm very passionate about it. Rather it's a matter of choice: one either conforms to the received wisdom of one's community, and consequently adopts its rhetoric, or chooses to articulate unreported and unwritten experiences. Most people in most communities prefer - out of fear, either fear of prosecution or of rocking the boat, out of self-interest or moral and intellectual slackness - to go along with what's been commonly and repeatedly expressed. My collaboration with Etgar Keret in producing *Gaza Blues*, just like writing my novella in that book, is a matter of diverging from the received wisdom and rhetoric of my own side. I choose such a stance because I believe that only by challenging our own sides that eventually would we be able to get out of this absurd situation. I hope more Palestinians and Israelis would do the same.

Q. You have recently written a novel, *The Illusion of Return*, the title contrasting interestingly with the *Right of Return*. Would you comment on what prompted you to write it and communicate through it?

A. My novel *The Illusion of Return* refers to different kinds of return; return as it's figured in Palestinian's sloganisation or as it's in the Jewish idea of the return to the Promised Land, or indeed the metaphorical kind of recalling the past; the urgent motivation for such claims and calls. In the words of the hero of my story, such call or claim is made because of the lacking hospitality in the world. The land of origin is the place which we all feel that we can make claim for; we cannot say that we have the right to hospitality in other people's countries but we can say we have the right to return to our original home.

Q. In *The Illusion of Return*, you reveal the many splits, contradictions and ambivalence - usually swept aside or indeed ignored - which exist within both the Palestinian and Israeli or Jewish peoples. You also bring to the fore the selfsame concern of both Palestinians and Jews to return to their homeland when they find themselves in inhospitable circumstances, or worse, and without a nation. A maybe more objective reality is spoken by a character in your book, an old Jewish survivor from the Nazi era who has chosen a new life in an adoptive country in lieu of Israel, when he points out there is no such thing as return. Would you care to expand?

A. As I said before, writing as a form of articulating an experience, rather than parroting the rhetoric of the community, means acknowledging what have been left out, unreported, intentionally or otherwise; differences, contradictions, ambiguities or any other factors which reveal the richness and complexi-





ties of the articulated experience. Unlike the general image of Palestinian society, whether reported by the media or represented by either Palestinians or Israelis, *The Illusion of Return* tries to depict a society in a state of rapid and dangerous change, and like any society in such a state it is bound to be riddled with contradictions and splits. These are the things which the media ignores or excludes, because it makes the business of serving the viewer a digestible meal of news very hard if not impossible.

Q. *There are many ways of understanding Identity. There is the immediate state of Being, in which we are the core sum of our predispositions, experiences and memories, in contrast to the state of Nationhood, in which our identity relies on a national group, whether from the country of our forebears, our place of birth, or our passport which may have been issued by an adoptive country. Where do you fit into this scheme? What do you feel you are, or how would you describe as your identity?*

A. I don't think that one's identity can be determined solely on the basis of either individual or communal characteristics. Individuals do not live and work in vacuum; they are members of communities and the question, indeed the challenge, is how individuals relate to, or interact with, the community, as other members or as a collective entity. In certain conditions one needs to challenge one's own community. That, however, doesn't mean that one ought to abandon his people, because the aim is to challenge and change, not to escape and, secondly, I don't think one can escape one's communal or collective identity, especially in a world divided by all sorts of identities.

Q. *In 2005, you were granted the Tucholsky award by Swedish PEN. Would you describe your work which led to this, and what it means to you?*

A. Winning the Tucholsky Award has been a great help. It's important for writers who challenge received wisdom and conformity to receive certain acknowledgement and recognition so they wouldn't feel lonely and isolated. I wish other organisations would do what Swedish PEN has been doing, rewarding dissident writers, not only writers who are operating against the imminent risk of persecution by fanatic Islamic groups and tyrannical regimes, but also people who are doomed to work for corporate media in the West. There, thousands of people are doomed to work for commercial and corporate media and publishing houses producing nothing but rubbish, having to keep their heads down for fear of losing their jobs and career prospects. I must say the more I know about what goes on in the world of western media and publishing, the more I realise that the danger to free thinking and expression doesn't only come from religious fanatics and despotic political regimes. There should be more recognition and more rewards to encourage people against all forms of persecutions and fear.

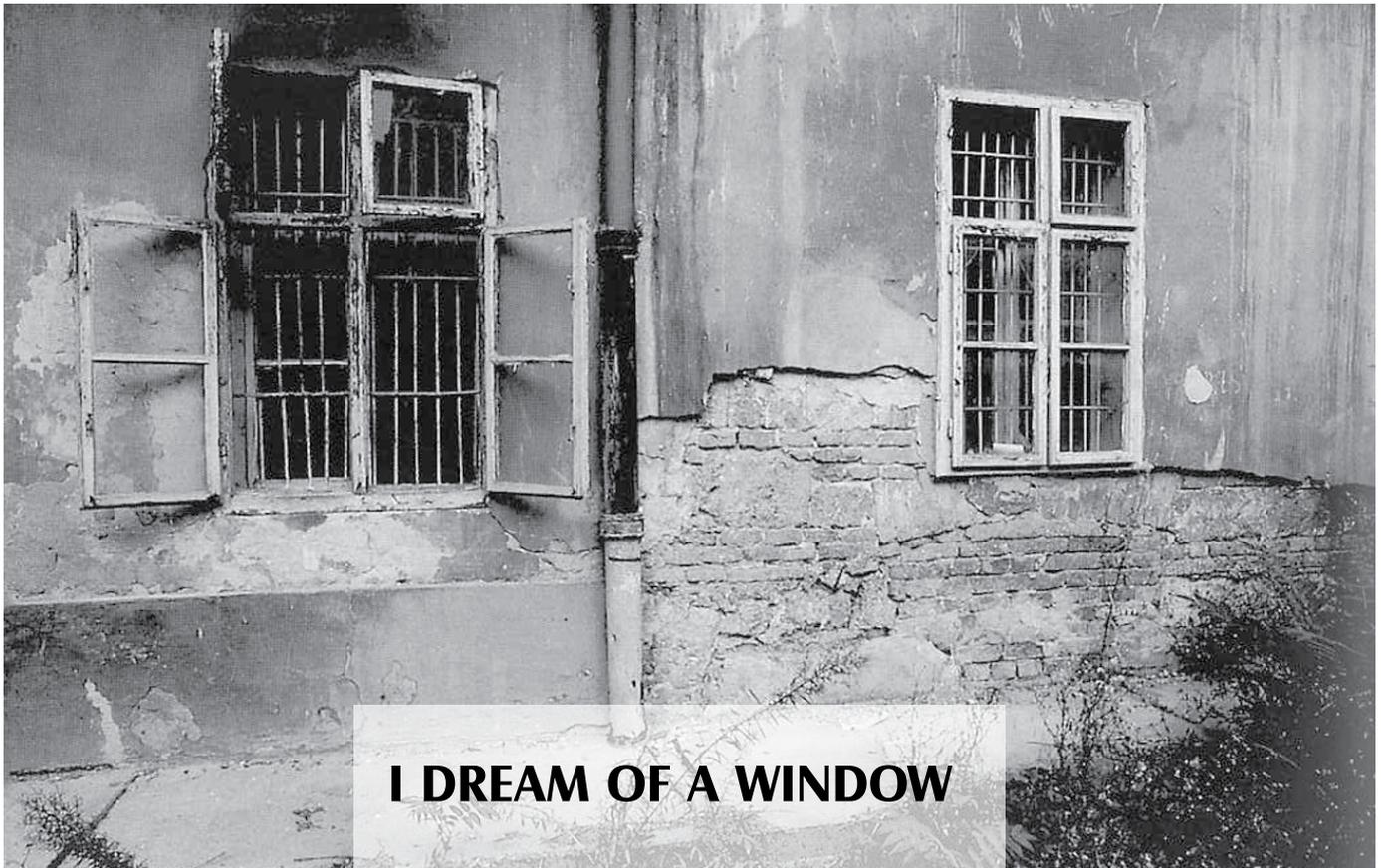


Photo: Koutaiba Al-Janabi

I DREAM OF A WINDOW

Interview with Ghias al Jundi

By Miriam Frank

Q. What were your origins? How would you describe your early years?

A. I was born by the sea near Tartus in Syria, in 1967. It was a beautiful olive producing village. I come from an educated family: my father and uncles were teachers at the local school and were politically aware. We wrote and read French in my family. Assad came to power in Syria in the seventies, and we witnessed many dramatic political changes and the spread of corruption. When I finished school, I left our village and went to university at the city of Latakia. My subject was English literature. As a student I became involved in human rights and became a political activist, joining the anti-Soviet Communist Action Party. When I finished university, I was detained for a period by Assad's government. I decided to leave Syria when I was released.

Q. Did you come to England then?

A. No. I went to Moscow. It was 1998, and Communism was over. What had replaced it was worse. I came to England in 1999. Here I have been working again in refugee community centres and human rights organisations, including PEN.

Q. When did you start writing and work on your play?

A. I started writing as a child in Syria. I wrote poetry and short stories, which were published in local newspapers and magazines. I created my own world with characters and places of my choice to show the social, economic, traditional and political difficulties in Syria. Now I write about Arabs living in London, about their *different* difficulties. My play is about a poet detained in his own country in harsh prison conditions, without pen or paper. He asks his cellmates to memorise his verses so his poems survive, and he writes them down after his release. The play is a comparison of life in prison in Syria, with the life of an asylum seeker in the UK. In prison, where there were no materials to write with, he finds inspiration to

make poetry. Here, he has paper and a pen and a desk, but no inspiration and his poems dry up inside him. The title of the play is *I Dream of a Window*. There were no windows in prison. Here, there are no windows to his heart. In prison, the hope to get out one day fired his creativity. Here there is also suffering, but no hope, no way out, the asylum seeker just moves from one difficulty to another without a sense that he is progressing. His top priority is to be able to survive.

Q. Where was your play performed?

A. At the Riverside Studios, in 2001. I am still working on it to perfect it. I wish to communicate my ideas. In prison in Syria, the poet knew what he was fighting for; there were principles and ideals to reach out for. Here, there are none. We go to war for petrol and call it liberation and the building of democracy; we kill a million people and bring chaos to a country, and "we are doing it for them". Then if you are against the occupation, you are a terrorist or mentally ill. This is freedom of speech, in the sphere of democracy.

Beyond the veil

My modest dress that you see
As a sign of oppression
Is for me the symbol of ultimate liberation

It urges you to look beyond the veil
To peel the skin
To peep through the physical
The limited... the confined
Straight into the essence
The infinite ... the boundless

It's a glaring statement
I am more than just a body
I am a mind... a heart
And a soul

Don't just stop there
At the door
Come in
Get to know me
For what I really am

It gives me contentment
And great satisfaction
With my femininity

It gives me dignity
As I refuse to be portrayed
As a sex object

It gives me freedom
To choose my dress
Not only wearing what men desire

It gives me protection
From all undesired attention
For my intimacy I only share
With the one I love
Does that make any sense to you?

Thank you

So, let me get this straight:
You tear my veil to free me
You jail me to rid me of my terror
You kill my beloved to liberate me
You shoot my baby to erase my misery
You starve me to show me how to vote
You threaten me to bring me to my senses
You wage war on me to help me find peace
You slay my people to teach me compassion
You humiliate me to aid me live with dignity
You insult me to illustrate freedom of speech
You crush my bones to save me from my evil
You demolish my home to elevate my morality
You uproot my tree to raise my ethical standard
You steal my resources to bring me social justice
You assassinate my leaders to bring me security
You bomb my town to train me into democracy
You destroy my history to educate me about progress
You dehumanise me to coach me into humanity
You wipe me out to push me to civilisation
You scorn my faith to bring me salvation

Thank you sir
How can I -ever- pay you back?

The Journey of Exiled Iraqi Writers

Haifa Zangana

In the 1960s and early 1970s, a period that most Iraqi writers, poets, and artists remember with nostalgia, experimental writing emerged. Young fiction writers sought new forms of expression and issued one manifesto after another on freedom and creativity. Heavily influenced by Western trends both in thought and style, they produced a mishmash of crude or comic imitations of Sartre, Camus, and Kafka, mixed with socio-realistic novels and the odd masterpiece.



Image: Siavash Maleki

Writers made the most of the last few years of relative freedom that Iraqis enjoyed before the rise to power of Saddam Hussein, which led to wars, thirteen years of the most comprehensive sanctions imposed by Western governments in modern history, invasion, and the present-day occupation. The consolidation in the late 1970s and during the 1980s of the Ba'ath regime resulted in tighter ideological control in the cultural sphere. The denial of freedom of expression led to a steady erosion of basic human rights. Iraqis, including writers, began to escape the country in the thousands, seeking refuge throughout the world.

Writers inside Iraq survived the wars and brutality of the regime either by resorting to silence, or by continuing to write but relying on allegory and mysticism. Their characters were extracted from ancient history. Gilgamesh could be found walking relentlessly in the narrow alleys of Baghdad; Nebuchadnezzar, the warrior-king of Babylon, returned from the ancient past to claim endless victories in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988); martyrs tore off their shrouds to recapture rare moments of heroism; and adventurous men and clever women from *The Thousand and One Nights* revisited war-torn Iraq.

During this period, dozens of second-rate novels, with ambiguous themes and meaningless historical symbols, were published. Yet a few remarkable literary works, such as *Basrayatha*, by Mohammed Khudair, also emerged. Additionally, the pain that women suffered—the loss of their loved ones, the harsh years of sanctions, and the political oppression—was conveyed by a new generation of women novelists: the late Nuha al-Radhi (*Baghdad Diary*), the late Hayat Sharara (*Idha al-ayamu aghsaqat*, or *When Darkness Falls*), and Betool al-Khudhari (*A Sky So Close*).

Beginning in the mid-1980s, a new generation of Iraqi writers, in addition to those who were already well-established, started publishing in exile. Encouraged by a new-found sense of freedom, individuality, security, and independence from both ideological slavery and state oppression, writers in exile have enjoyed the freedom to publish at will.

Writing in exile is characterised by the dominance of memory; uprooted from one's country, the writer relies on memory as a vital tool, enabling him or her to recreate everything that happened in the past and preserve it intact. Memory extends to the present and may overshadow the future. For some, memory becomes life itself. Other writers are happy merely to visit it, using it to reflect on their bitter experiences in Iraq. In their first novels, mostly based on memory, they depict their personal experiences, addressing themes such as serving in the army, wars, imprisonment, fear, and the struggle to escape the country.

The most important issue that has faced Iraqi writers in exile has been political involvement. The majority of them were either members of or ideologically allied to the Communist Party, and were involved in direct political action. They had spent their youth as communists, living and breathing the party; their friends were comrades; and their writings reflected the party line. Understandably, their sense of loss after the collapse of the Soviet Union was enormous, and leaving their country doubled their feelings of isolation. All of a sudden they found themselves in a complete ideological and social void.

The second problem for Iraqi fiction writers in exile is that almost all of them have continued to write in Arabic. This means that they have to rely on translation in order to reach their new readership and become recognized, something which has proven to be very difficult.

In this complicated panorama, where do I stand? What about my characters? In reply, I maintain that it is very difficult to separate the personal from the political when both are directed at the same immediate objectives. The same applies to both my fiction and non-fiction writing. I believe that writers should strive to find the right balance between the individual and society, creativity and moral responsibility, imagination and reality. While discovering new domains, they need to tread with great care within old territories—emphasizing through their writing the right of the other to be different. But, above all, I keep reminding myself to beware the trap of ideology.

The five women who are my main characters in my novel *Women on a Journey between Baghdad and London* are Iraqis, though they are from different ethnic, political, and social backgrounds. They are the carriers of Iraqi history, the storehouses of its collective memory; they represent the struggle, political and social commitment, and resilience of Iraqis, as well as having their own personal experiences, traumas, hopes, and ambitions. At the same time they are refugees. They live in London, stepping carefully in the streets of a new country, full of apprehension and a sense of longing for their families and country. They feel lonely in this strange place and new culture, whose only advantage for them is that it provides a sense of security, a feeling that proves to be false. They stand, metaphorically, on *al-at'aba* (the threshold), unable to return to their country but at the same time unable to settle in the new one. They are united by their fear of loneliness, despair, isolation, and lack of human contact. Most of the time they live in the past, unable to enjoy the present and not daring to think of the future.

Iqbal, being a single mother and unexpectedly pregnant as a result of her relationship with her English boyfriend, feels that she has to stop and examine her life. She contemplates her present and decides to break the pattern of her existence, which has been dominated by the past. Kurdish Um Mohammed is sheltered by her religious beliefs. Her common sense leads her to understand her son's anger toward all Iraqi Arabs and his refusal to speak Arabic at times of cri-

sis. (For months after the bombardment of my city, Baghdad, during the Persian Gulf War in 1991, I couldn't utter a word in English.) Adiba clings to the past, which overshadows every minute of her present. Asked by Dr. Hawkins in one of her sessions, "Do you and your friends talk about Iraq?" Adiba answers, "Do we talk about anything else?"

Sahira lives in the shadow of her husband, who lives in the shadow of a dying ideology. The three are inseparable. 'Abed Kadhim's character, his depression and disintegrating relationship with Sahira, can only be understood in the context of the history of the Iraqi Communist Party and its rapid decline, if not demise, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Losing the party was much more devastating for Kadhim than being forced to leave Iraq. The collapse of the party meant the loss of his life; it marked his own death. Sahira's obsession with 'Abed Kadhim is also an attempt to recapture her lost youth and love.

As I noted earlier, readers hardly mention or recognise Majda's existence. Despite her strong personality, they choose to ignore her, for one simple reason: she is a Ba'athist. Majda the Ba'athist is too painful to accept. For me, Majda was the most challenging character to write. Like many of my readers, I only met Ba'athists when they were in power. They were hated, feared, and despised. They were the secret police, interrogators, and torturers. They were the tools used by the dictatorship to create a climate of fear and control. It would have been much easier not to have had her as a character. But I felt I could not erase Majda's presence by looking sideways. She had to be dealt with. Perhaps, like Adiba, I felt that I should face my fears. Understanding Majda, looking at her life sympathetically, was an essential part of liberating my characters/myself from the complexities of hate and fear. As I wrote about her, watching her rise to power, then her slow decline into the abyss of death, loss, and finally madness, I had to learn to like her as a character in order to understand the Iraqis she symbolised. I had to understand her, and at certain moments be her, to convey her pain as a mother, as a human being.

Now, beyond my characters, in the reality of today's occupied Iraq, a sterile, dark silence extends its shadow over the imaginary. Like most Iraqi fiction writers, I have not written any fiction, not one word, since the war and occupation in 2003. The cruel reality of occupation has turned writing fiction into a meaningless act. Writers are surrounded by death, barbed-wire fences of hypocrisy, and threatened with the loss of their identity, culture, and the erasure of their memory. But, like many Iraqi writers, I miss literary writing. I miss words and the joy of living in the imaginary with my fictional characters. Sometimes, when not writing about the plight of Iraqis under occupation or attending the aza'a of friends and relatives who have been killed, slaughtered, or gone missing in Iraq, I dream of writing a sequel to this novel. Judging by our modern history, I know that Iqbal and Sahira would join in the national struggle against occupation and injustice, and for liberation and freedom.

From the introduction to the novel: Women on a Journey between Baghdad and London by Haifa Zangana, translated by Judy Cumberbatch, published Texas University Press, 2006: <http://www.utexas.edu/utpress/pops/popzanwoop.html>

My Beloved

Bashir Al Gamar

Translated by Fathieh Saudi

Ten years in exile
Waiting in the corridors of wounded time,
In the alleyway of wishes,
Suffering in exile.

A summer cloud
distant, no rain falling
my lips tire of smoking rolled tobacco

my beloved!
your breast is the shore of my departure
your clouds hold the tears of the destitute.

then your shore spewed me out
with no soul, no identity.

ten years travelling alone, in no man's land
one hundred and twenty months of sorrow
three thousand six hundred days;
each hour torment.

yet not satiated with my wounds,
the seconds must strike me down.

the earth shatters,
the lustre of mystery fades away
i cry for you, my beloved,
and for myself.

i mourn the people of my beloved
i carve out a silent tomb for them.

my beloved!

when words are distorted,
when the alphabet is in agony
when bodies give out the smell of death
and songs are displayed in the squares of freedom.

when love is crucified in the gardens of virgins,
when the very air is stolen from our breasts.

what remains for us, my beloved?

nothing but your love.

NB: The Beloved symbolises Sudan

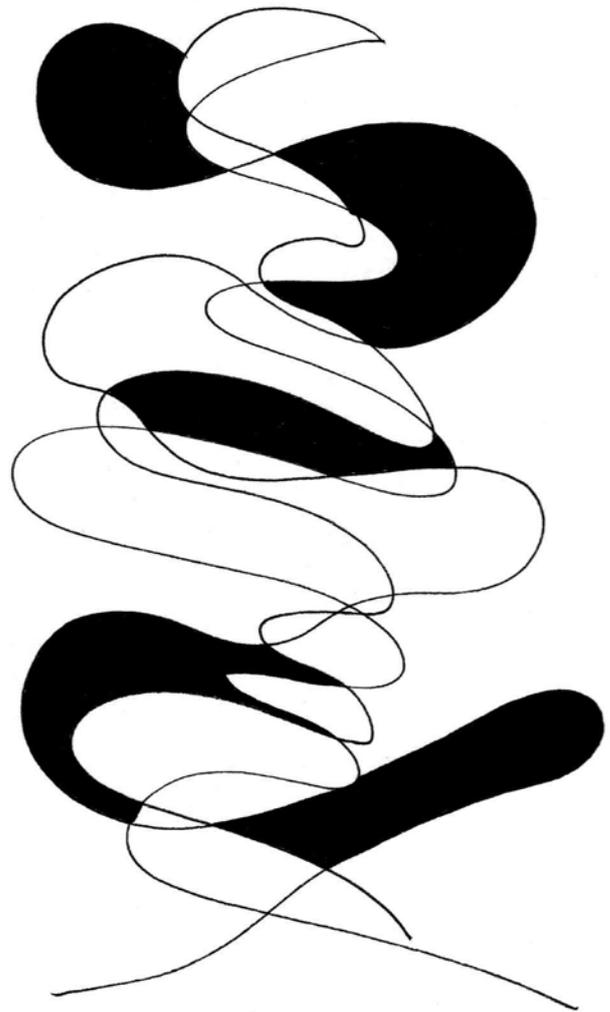


Image: Siavash Maleki

Mourid Barghouti: A Palestinian Poet Writing Exile

Ferial J. Ghazoul

While Palestinian poetry and fiction have documented in literary terms the plight of refugees and exiles, not much has been translated of such works except in the last decade or two (see Jarry among others), and what has been translated remains known mainly in academic circles.

About a decade ago, the autobiographical memoir of the Palestinian poet, Mourid Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, received the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for literature and was translated into English by the Anglophone Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif. By now, it has been translated into half a dozen other languages, has gone through several printings by the American University in Cairo Press, and appeared in a Random House edition. Barghouti, born in 1944 in Deir Ghassaneh, a village on the outskirts of Ramallah, and brought up in the town of Ramallah on the West Bank (Palestine), was studying English Literature at Cairo University when the 1967 War erupted. He was unable to return to Ramallah after the 1967 war. His return to Ramallah for a cursory visit in 1997, made possible by the Oslo agreement of 1993, proved to be an ironic return, an anti-homecoming. Crossing the bridge to enter the West Bank as a middle-aged man in his early fifties, he remembers crossing it to leave when he was in his early twenties, going to Cairo for his university studies. Thirty years of exile from his homeland and thirty years of being the “usual suspect” wherever he took residence are recalled in his autobiographical narrative. For seventeen years he was away from his Egyptian wife and child and could only meet them furtively since his residency permit in Egypt, where his wife, Radwa Ashour, a university professor and a well-known novelist resided, could not be granted. Barghouti compares these two moments of departing and returning: the change in the situation and the change in the person in touching and reflective prose:

“Last time no one argued my right to Ramallah, now I ask what I can do to preserve my son’s right to see it. Shall I have him taken off the registers of the Refugees and the Displaced?—he never moved and never sought refuge. All he did was get born outside the homeland.

And now I pass from my exile to their . . . homeland? My homeland? The West Bank and Gaza? The Occupied Territories? The Areas? Judea and Samaria? The Autonomous Government? Israel? Palestine? Is there any other country in the world that so perplexes you with its names? Last time I was clear and things were clear. Now I am ambiguous and vague. Everything is ambiguous and vague.

This soldier with the yarmulke is not vague. At least his gun is very shiny. His gun is my personal history. It is the history of my estrangement. His gun took from us the land of the poem and left us with the poem of the land. In his hand he holds earth, and in our hands we hold a mirage.”

From clarity to ambiguity, from certainty to vagueness, from stability to precariousness, is the progression of Barghouti: the sight of Ramallah offers him ambivalent feelings. It is certainly not the joyful homecoming of a prodigal son. The very contours of the place have changed. The block of cement has replaced the fig tree of bygone days. The Israeli settlements have changed the landscape and Barghouti was not allowed to have a glimpse of Jerusalem from a distance, let alone visit it:

“Even the road to Ramallah that used to go by Jerusalem they [the Israelis] changed via a complex of winding roads so that we [the Palestinians] may not see the city even from the car window.”

But Barghouti does not affirm his identity in the manner of the poet Mahmoud Darwish in one of his earlier poems, “Identity Card”, confidently insisting on the otherness of his identity in a defiant way to the usurpers.

In a most moving passage in the narrative, self-doubting Barghouti wonders about his authentic knowledge of his own country and whether he has not fictionalised it in his lyrics:

“How did I sing for my homeland when I did not know it? Should I be praised or blamed for my songs? Did I lie a little? A lot? Did I lie to myself? To others?”

What love is it that does not know the beloved? And why were we not able to hold on to the song? Because the dust of fact is more powerful than the mirage of an anthem? Or because the myth had to descend from its lofty peaks to this real alleyway?

Israel succeeded in tearing away the sacred aspect of the Palestinian cause, turning it into what it is now, a series of ‘procedures’ and ‘schedules’ that are usually respected only by the weaker party in the conflict.

But what remains for the exile except this kind of absentee love? What remains except clinging on to the song, however ridiculous or costly that might be? And what about entire generations, born in exile, not knowing even the little that my generation knows of Palestine?

It is over. The long Occupation that created Israeli generations born in Israel and not knowing another ‘homeland’ created at the same time generations of Palestinians strange to Palestine; born in exile and knowing nothing of the homeland except stories and news.”

Intellectual as he is, Barghouti, who comes from a country that has prided itself on its agriculture and farming, partakes of this tradition albeit in an urban setting. His hobby wherever he goes (Egypt, Kuwait, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Hungary, etc.) is to grow houseplants. He starts his day by caressing their verdure and tenderly takes care of them as if they were his babies. This metonymic substitution allows him to continue an elusive sense of rootedness denied to him as he leads a life of errantry often associated with the wandering Jew whose position he now paradoxically occupies:

“I am a child of mountains and stability. Since the Jews of the twentieth century remembered their Holy Book I have been afflicted by a Bedouin travelling, and I am not a Bedouin. I have never been able to collect my own library. I have moved between houses and furnished apartments, and become used to the passing and the temporary. I have tamed myself to the feeling that the coffeepot is not mine. My coffee cups belong to the owner or are left behind by the previous tenant. Even breaking a cup acquires another meaning. A coincidence of estate agents alone is what chooses the colour of my bed linen, the colour

of my curtains, the colour of my cooking pots. I do not choose. Chance chooses.”

The sense of randomness and lack of empowerment even over details of one’s intimate life and over daily objects is what made Barghouti in the 1980s develop a new poetics in the Palestinian arena. It was a poetics focusing on the little things in life, a passing gesture, a pot of tea, a knitted cardigan, over the grand themes of justice and liberation. A sense of loss pervades the descriptive mode shunning the prescriptive tone and the rhetoric of resistance, yet it is precisely in such understatements that the reader senses a pain beyond words, an unspeakable agony that dares not betray its profundity by verbal articulation. It shies away from the direct and confrontational adopting a more subtle approach, which is based on the poetics of the synecdoche: the part, even a small slice of the part, is able to relay the whole. It is a poetic economy that Palestinian writers have been developing. Based on condensation and celebration of the fleeting moment, their poems speak more powerfully than thousands of books and protests. Barghouti in *I Saw Ramallah* explains how he has packed a life into a concise lyric and how he transforms a scene into a poem. Barghouti’s memoir is as much about an exilic life as it is about poetics. Barghouti sheds light on the role of memory for the dislocated artist:

“Displacements are always multiple. Displacements that collect around you and close the circle. You run, but the circle surrounds you. When it happens you become a stranger in your place and to your places at the same time. The displaced person becomes a stranger to his memories and so he tries to cling to them. He places himself above the actual and the passing. He places himself above them without noticing his certain fragility. And so he appears to people fragile and proud at the same time. It is enough for a person to go through the first experience of uprooting, to become uprooted forever. It is like slipping on the first step of a staircase. You tumble down to the end. It is also like the driving wheel breaking off in the hands of the driver. All the movement of the car will be haphazard and directionless. But the paradox is that strange cities are then never completely strange. Life dictates that the stranger acclimatise every day. This might be difficult at the beginning, but it becomes less difficult with the passage of days and years. Life does not like the grumbling of the living. It bribes them with different degrees of contentment and of acceptance of exceptional circumstances. This happens to the exiled, the stranger, the prisoner, and something like it happens to the loser, the defeated, the abandoned.”

Nevertheless, Mahmoud Darwish, the displaced Palestinian poet, believes that the writing of refugees is not only a window into their state of mind and an out-

let for their repressed emotions, but also a cultural instrument that preserves their sense of human dignity. He has tried to paint the humanist face of 'the Israeli Other' in his poem "The Soldier Who Dreamt of White Lilies" depicting the inner and suppressed desires of an Israeli soldier who wants 'a good heart not a loaded rifle'; a soldier who simply wants to be at home 'sipping my mother's coffee/And coming back safe of an evening.' The poet suggests that the soldier does not genuinely feel connected to the land but has merely been taught to love it implying that the Palestinian has deeper roots in the land. The soldier's moral discomfort represents a kind of comfort for Darwish.

Perhaps it is appropriate to end with a poem by Darwish that has a hopeful finale. The poem "On Man," shows a certain progression away from his concern with the specificity of the Palestinian question, as in his poem "Identity Card", to a global sense of injustice that will be overcome:

The Confrontation

Ehab Y. Bessaiso

They gagged his mouth,
Bound his hands to the rock of the dead
And said: Murderer!

They took his food, clothes and banners
Cast him into the condemned cell
And said: Thief!
They drove him away from every port,
Took his young sweetheart,
Then said: Refugee!

O you with bloodshot eyes and bloody
hands,
Night is short-lived,
The detention room lasts not for ever,
Nor yet the links of chains.
Nero died, Rome did not:
With her very eyes she fights.
And seeds from a withered ear
With wheat shall fill the valley.

When we uncovered the names
That were hidden, submerged
Under the waves
We realised there and then
That we had been here
Forever ... for eons
Forever more ...
And that, long before Moses discovered
The way of the staff
Long before the sea was subjected
To God's parting
We were here
Clinging to time which grows wheat
Near the hills of skies.

Whenever the invaders' wind blew
We hurled at it oak, and wheat
And the sun that which sank in our veins
Ever since the Earth was made.

When death mounted the helm
Of wind
We were here, counting stars
Keeping a clean sky in jars of olive oil
And a close approaching time of
Harvest
We used to let our dreams stroll barefooted over the sea.
We were here
Waiting for the birth, the coming,
Of butterflies
Over the hill tops.

Those grannies of the Earth
On those downs and moors
Whose fingers are still weaving
Sand bags
And knitting woollen jumpers
For a thousand summers and winters
Their feet still know
The road to the spring amongst rocks
They still sing songs
For a lover who climbed the hills
The hills tops
Towards a far away wedding.

Monday 14 April 2008

- 09.30-10.30: Trends in Contemporary Arabic Fiction**
Representations of Place in Modern Arabic Literature
This seminar - particularly relevant to publishers and agents looking for new voices from the Arab World - will be chaired by Egyptian writer and academic *Samia Mehrez*, Professor of Arab and Islamic Civilizations at the *American University in Cairo*. Speakers include Saudi writer *Raja Al-sanea*, author of *The Girls of Riyadh*, as well as Egyptian writer *Ahmad Alaidy*, Algerian writer *Aziz Chouaki* and Lebanese writer *Hassan Daoud*.
- 11.00-12.00: International Prizes in the Arab World, in partnership with Banipal**
Chaired by *Boyd Tonkin*, Literary Editor, *The Independent*, this event will provide an overview for publishers, agents and writers of international prizes and the Arab World. Speakers include *Jonathon Taylor* from the *International Prize of Arabic Fiction*, *Omar Ghobash* from *Saif Ghobash-Banipal Prize for Literary Translation*, *Rashed Al Ureimi* from *Sheikh Zayed Award* and *Mark Linz* from the *Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature*.
- 12.30-13.30: Iraqi Literature and Publishing in partnership with Banipal**
Leading writers and publishers from Iraq including *Fadhil Thamir Abdulla*, *Khalid al-Maaly*, *Duna Ghali* and *Luay Hamzah Abbas* take a look at publishing scene, and writing, in Iraq today.

Tuesday 15 April 2008

- 09.30-10.30: Focus on Women's Writing from the Arab World**
An introduction to issues surrounding women's writing in the Arab World, the seminar will discuss the interest shown by western publishing industries to their work, and what it means for women writers. Each writer will place herself in the triple context of Arab women writing; the achievements of her male counterparts; and world literature. This will demonstrate how Arab women writers position themselves in relation to world literature. The seminar will be chaired by Egyptian novelist and academic *Radwa Ashour*, with the following speakers taking part - Moroccan writer *Leila Abouzeid*; Tunisian writer *Aroussia Naluti* and Saudi writer *Raja Alem*.
- 11.00-12.00: 'The Latest Lingo': Young Writers Setting the Trend**
An introduction to the new phenomenon in North Africa and Magreb, where slang and rap are being translated out of Arabic, and into French and English. A must see for translators, writers and publishers, the seminar will be chaired by British translator *Sarah Ardizzzone*, with Moroccan writer *Faize Guene*, author of *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* and British journalist *Cleo Sozandry*, who was editor of *Live Magazine* and is producer of hip hop musical *'Ignorance is Bliss'*.

- 12.30-13.30: Poetry in the Arab World: A cultural and intellectual phenomenon**
Poetry is central to Arab intellectual and cultural thought. While the media in the Arab World speaks of the *'death of the poet'*, Palestinian poet *Mahmoud Darwish* attracts audiences of thousands. How do we translate this culturally? The seminar is chaired by British writer and Editor of *Poetry Review*, *Fiona Sampson*, and speakers taking part include Jordanian poet *Amjad Nasser*, Emirate poetess *Nujum al-Ghanim*, Lebanese poet *Abbas Beydoun* and Syrian poet *Monzer Masri*.
- 16.30-17.30: An Audience with the Nominees of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction**
The seminar is chaired by Palestinian critic and International Prize for Arabic Fiction jury member *Faisal Darraj*, and will be a chance to meet Lebanese writers *May Menassa* and *Jabbour Douaily*, Syrian writer *Khaled Khalifeh*, Jordanian writer *Elias Farkouh*, and Egyptian writers *Mekkaoui Said* and *Bahaa Taher*. Their novels were short-listed from over 130 titles for this prestigious new literary prize, in association with the *UK Booker Prize Foundation*, which aims to reward excellence in contemporary Arabic creative writing and to encourage wider readership of quality Arabic literature internationally. Egyptian writer *Baha Taher* won the prize.

Wednesday 16 April 2008

- 11.00-12.00: Palestinian Writers and Their Writing**
Chaired by Palestinian critic *Fakhri Saleh*, who is based in Jordan, the panel will discuss present Palestinian publishing and writing. Speakers include Palestinian critic and International Prize for Arabic Fiction jury member *Faisal Darraj* and acclaimed Palestinian critic *Adania Shibli*, one of the most talked about young writers in Palestine. The seminar is not to be missed for anyone interests in contemporary trends in Palestinian writing today, what it means to be a displaced writer, memory and memoir as integral part of Palestinian writing from diaspora.
- 11.00-12.00: Contemporary Arabic Readership: Challenges and Chances in Partnership with the Next Page Foundation**
Given that access to ideas, information and knowledge are paramount to the development of healthy, sustainable civil societies, books continue to act as one of the greatest tools for development. Perhaps nowhere is this more relevant than in the Arab world where the call for dialogue is more urgent than ever. Regrettably, it is within this very region that reading and production of books is exceedingly low. While there are multiple and complex reasons for the low levels of readership, Next Page Foundation will present the controversial results of the Pan-Arab Readership Survey that took place in 2006-2007 in 9 countries. Speakers include *James Wile*, Director of International Development, *International Reading Association*, *Hani Hanafi*, Professor of Literature at the *AUC Cairo* and *Ramy Habeeb*, Director of *Kotorabia*, an e-books publishing house in Egypt.



14.30-15.30: Memory and Memoir in Contemporary Arabic Writing

The last twenty years have seen a boom in memoir writing. This is a close look at how increasing numbers of testimonies, memoirs and autobiographies record Arab nationalism, socialism, Islam and religious conservatism and their effects on the Arab World. The event will be chaired by Moroccan critic and writer *Mohammed Barrada*. Speakers include Egyptian writer, academic and economist *Galal Amin*, author of the acclaimed biography *Whatever Happened to the Egyptians?* that depicts the social history of Egypt 1945-1995; Lebanese/Palestinian writer *Jean Makdisi*, author of *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir and Teta Mother and Me: Three Generations of Arab Women* and the sister of Palestinian writer *Edward Said*, Syrian writer *M Jamal Al Barout*, author of a number of books on memoir writing.

LITERARY CAFÉ INTERVIEWS BY MAYA JAGGI

Tuesday 15 April 2008

13.45-14.15: Mourid Barghouti interview

The Palestinian poet *Mourid Barghouti* was born in the mountainous village of Deir Ghassaneh near Ramallah in 1944 and later studied English literature at *Cairo University*. He graduated in 1967 - only to become a refugee as a result of the Israeli occupation. He has spent much of his life in exile and currently lives in Cairo. In addition to his writing, he has worked as a teacher in Kuwait and Egypt, and in Budapest as representative of the PLO, and in Cairo for Palestine Radio. He has published 13 books of poetry in Arabic, including a *Collected Works* (1997), and has read his poems in many Arab and European countries. In 2000 he received the *Palestine Award for Poetry*. In 1996 he was allowed to return to Palestine and the result was *I saw Ramallah*, an autobiographical memoir about the ironies of homecoming, which won the *Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature*.

Wednesday 16 April 2008

09.15-10.15: Breakfast with the winner of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction Baha Taher

At its inaugural awards ceremony on 10 March 2008 in Abu Dhabi, the *International Prize for Arabic Fiction* (IPAF) presented its \$50,000 first prize to Egyptian writer *Baha Taher* for his novel *Sunset Oasis*. Published by *Cairo's Al-Shorouk Press*, Taher's novel explores one man's existential crisis. Born in 1936 in a family originally from Karnak, in Upper Egypt, *Baha Taher* is one of the most famous men of letters of the new generations. He represents an illuminated Egyptian and Arabic nationalism, which draws inspiration from the principles of freedom and social justice. In the difficult climate of the 70s, he moved to Switzerland where he now lives and

works at the United Nations. Here, as an immigrant, he created his best works – almost invariably set in Egypt – that were published in Egypt and abroad and translated in the major European languages. He wrote a few novels including *Love in Exile*, and a few collections of stories such as the famous *L'altra notte ti ho sognato*. His style is direct, concise and highly poetic.

12.30-13.00: Khaled Al Khamissi interview

Khaled Al Khamissi was born in Cairo Egypt in November 1962. He holds a Masters Degree Graduate in Political Science from the *Sorbonne University*. *Khaled* worked for *The National Institute for Social Studies*, and then *Al Ahram Newspaper*. He is now the owner and the CEO of Nile Production Company. He has produced a number of Drama, feature series and documentary films. He has also hosted many films and art forums and symposiums. He is the Writer of *Taxi Stories* published by *Dar El Shorouk* (2007). *El Khamisy* participated as a political science researcher in a study about the assassination of the late Egyptian President *Mohamed Anwar El Sadat* and he has written various researches in the field of political sciences. He writes weekly articles in a number of daily Egyptian newspapers: *Al Ahram*, *El Masry El Yom* and *the Daily News*. He has co-scripted the Egyptian television series *Noffel Prize* produced by the Egyptian Television. He has written several scripts for several documentaries.

FOYLES EVENT

Monday 14 April 2008

18.30-21.00: Arab Authors Evening at Foyles Bookshop, Charing Cross Road, London

Chaired by *Dedi Feldman* from *Words Without Borders*, speakers include Egyptian writer *Alaa Al Aswany* author of the *Yacoubian Building*, Libyan poet and Professor of English and Creative Writing at *California State University*, and writers *Khaled Mattawa* and *Hisham Matar*, whose debut novel *In the Country of Men* was short-listed for the 2006 Man Booker Prize. This will be followed by a Q&A with the public.



Exiled Playwrights interviewed

The Two Sides of Darkness

Isabelle Romaine



T

wo plays by Jean-Louis Ntadi, written successively in Congo and England, form the appendices of five years of imprisonment, humiliation and detention. Playwright Jean-Louis Ntadi was born in The Republic of Congo, also known as Congo Brazzaville. From June 1997 to December 1999, the civil war fought between government forces and armed opposition, damaged most of southern Brazzaville and caused losses to life in many regions such as Pool; hundreds of thousands of people were displaced. A keen supporter of the main opposition party, Le Mouvement Congolais pour la Démocratie et le Développement Intégral (MCDDI), and a Red Cross humanitarian worker, Ntadi was charged with defamation and trafficking information, and imprisoned in 2002 for fourteen months in Brazzaville. After his imprisonment, during which he was tortured, he went into hiding until he obtained a visa for the UK. Upon his arrival in England in 2004, he was refused asylum and held in five detention centres before he was released on bail in 2005.

Ntadi wrote two plays that are directly linked to his personal experiences, albeit in different political and geographical contexts. *Le Chef de l'État*, (*Head of State*) was written and performed in 2000, in Brazzaville, and addresses the issues of despotism and political instability in the Republic of Congo, concerns which are only too well-known in postcolonial Africa. *The Cries of the Crickets* was written in 2005, in England when Ntadi was still in detention hoping to be granted asylum. The play reflects on questions of power and ethics at play around the issue of asylum seekers in the UK legal system

Le Chef de l'État, (*Head of State*) is said to be a parable highly critical of the regime in Congo Brazzaville. Although the state is not named in the play, the parallels with the Republic of Congo regime are evident. *Head of State* tells in three acts the story of Batela, the head of a postcolonial African republic, whose dictatorial power is challenged by his son, Babela. Following the advice of traditional priests and his influential wife Badila, Batela has his son imprisoned and sentenced to death. The play consists of long debates on constitutional law between the state's Grand Councillors who oppose the sentence, and Batela and his wife who under the pretext of national unity, encourage repression and killings by the state security apparatus. Thus Batela argues:

...we are a great council governed by the law... One does not cooperate with the law, one submits to the law because it is impersonal. When one does not obey the law, it punishes one. It is therefore necessary to be dutiful, not only for fear of a punishment such as prison and death, but also because of one's conscience. [Act 2, Scene1]

Batela justifies his right to over-rule the Grand Councillors. He is the state decision maker: the Republic for instance, is about to become a monarchy, and Moutombo, his daughter is appointed heiress to the throne. Batela is the law, the 'Providential Guide', and when it transpires that his son Babela has gained the overwhelming support of the population, he shoots him.

The parallels between the play and the Congolese regime reside in the violent and oppressive role of the authoritarian regime, and the omnipresence of its apparatus in the life of the individual. The end of the play does not coincide with real life though: in the last scene Batela is imprisoned, then brought to justice by the Grand Councillors for the murder of his son. In the Republic of Congo, the overthrow of the 'Head' of the state must have baffled the security services. When Ntadi was arrested and imprisoned in 2002, he was interrogated on the meaning of his play, while the security services went to his house and questioned his wife.

Ntadi dedicated his play to two writers who have dominated the history of Congolese fiction, Sylvain Bemba and Sony Labou Tansi. In 1988 Sylvain Bemba wrote an African adaptation of the ancient Antigone myth, a play called *Noces posthumes de Santigone* translated into English as *Black Wedding Candles for Blessed Antigone*. This is a postcolonial engagement with the myth, in which Bemba explores the political and social problems in West Africa. Could Ntadi's

declamatory style in *Head of State* as well as the chorus of the traditional priests and Councillors chanting "Your Excellency, President," be suggestive of an African adaptation of Greek tragedy?

As for Sony Labou Tansi, he is known for distorting western literary models. His stories are political satires written with little apparent logic. They have a carnival-like exaggeration, chaos and dismembered language which point at the folly of an unfathomable world. There is no trace of Sony Labou Tansi's vivid style in Ntadi's play, but the homage to the novelist and playwright is indicative of his revolutionary impact on Congolese literature.

The Cries of the Cricket was performed in the London Eye on 21 June 2005 as part of the UK cultural celebration of Africa 05. The whole concept of the London Eye experience was interesting, as it constituted an example of entertainment linked with the issues of debt relief, aid and fair trade for Africa. Sponsored by Café Direct, the importers of fair trade coffee and tea, the idea was to raise awareness of African fair trade goods in advance of the G8 summit in Scotland in July. The idea was that several celebrities from the world of entertainment would be performing in the giant wheel along with various unknown African performers. Many people bought their tickets as much for the novelty of being crammed into a glass capsule with a famous artist as for the opportunity to make a political statement. Of course, no one had any idea which artist they would be seeing until they boarded their pod. Those who got encapsulated with Ntadi were treated to concerns about refugee status.

The Cries of the Cricket consists of an interview between an asylum seeker and a man representative of the British Rules. During the half hour imparted – the length of the wheel single revolution – the impromptu audience learns about the asylum seeker's wanderings from Brazzaville to Benin, Central African Republic, Ivory Coast then Kinshasa to get a British visa. The audience witnesses a dialogue marred by misunderstandings, misquotes and contradictory statements, which eventually leads to a refusal of asylum. The interview takes the form of a trial, where the accused, the asylum seeker seems condemned from the start. There is something vaguely Kafkaesque about the play, especially as, at times, the asylum seeker's wife appears in dreams passing on words of wisdom but with a voice of resignation. One must remember that at the time, Ntadi had still not been granted the status as a legitimate writer persecuted in his country.

Five years apart, these two plays put forward the impact of postcolonial legacy: at home, in Africa, through the depiction of tyrannical leaders and the danger of more civil unrest, and in the West, namely the UK where (although the right to seek asylum from persecution is a fundamental and universal right) the unprecedented movements of people across borders, seeking refuge, has left the West struggling with these overwhelming changes. Both plays bring to mind that wearing the mantel of 'African writer' means to be engaged in a relentless political and cultural struggle.

Interview with Bart Wolffe

Interviewed by Lynette Craig

Bart Wolffe was born in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1952 and left in 2002 for exile in Germany via London. He has recently arrived in London.

Please tell us something about your family and childhood in Zimbabwe.

How did your family come to be there and what did they do?

My father was from Lithuanian extraction. His family came to Africa in his parents' generation. He was a doctor, a gynaecologist, my mother, a Scottish teacher. I was adopted by them as a baby; I was the result of an affair my birth mother had which was not acceptable to her Jewish family.

How did you come to be a writer? Have you worked in any other areas?

Over the years, I have been involved in the media, working on newspapers, in radio, film and television. I was a former Creative Director of two advertising agencies. I have always been a wordsmith. Theatre was also a first love. My other interests were nature-based. As a herpetologist, I was even responsible for the discovery of a new sub genus of snake. I wanted to write fully, not just commercially, thus I entered the field and developed a reputation as a leading playwright in the African sub-continent and ran many theatre workshops in neighbouring countries. I also brought a team of actors over to London and Edinburgh to perform 6 of my plays.

Were you encouraged as a writer? What was the writing 'scene' like in Zimbabwe when you were starting out and what is it like now?

I helped found the Zimbabwe Writers Union and worked alongside many successful black authors there. Tsitsi Dangaremba, Charles Mungoshi and Shimmer Chinodya, to mention a few names. As a white writer, it was perhaps more difficult to achieve a reputation in the wider world as mostly, black writers from Africa were being feted as the "true voice of Africa". I was already in the minority from the beginning as well as not being in agreement with the white minority rule of Rhodesia and was only too happy when Independence came to Zimbabwe along with the promise of a multi-cultural society which never evolved in the end, with Mugabe's renunciation of the validity of the white African as a non-sequitur. Today, with the total suppression of press freedom and freedom of speech, I would not have been able to continue to work. Indeed, before I left in 2003, I was already subject to several interrogations regarding my work, particularly in theatre.

I have left friends behind, of all races. Many more are scattered and separated as a result of the politics of suppression.

Which writers did you read up to now and who has most influenced you, if anyone?

I have always been inspired by the fact the English language has been so enriched by the organic exoticism of writers in the English language in the wider world: Brodsky, Naipul, Gordimer, Walcott, Soyinka, to mention a few, all Nobel laureates.

Why did you choose to go and live in Germany?

For fourteen years, I was with a German woman, my ex-wife. She lectured in modern languages at the University of Zimbabwe and I was with her in Germany before the end of our marriage, then returning to England.

Who are the contemporary writers you admire?

I do not find writers like Alexander McCall Smith particularly deep. So of the white writers who have written of Africa, I enjoy playwrights like Fugard. Also, any form of writing that reaches into the internal psyche with sensitivity and the reflections on the under-the-skin ethos and inner workings of characters. "The God of Small Things" is one of the favourite texts that comes to mind with its ability to explore the soul of a land as well as its people. Again, a book in English from a place that is somewhat warm and exotic similar to the Zimbabwean home I have left behind, where atmospheres are conveyed of wonder at every turn of the page, not just commonplace familiarity. I enjoy literature that transports me.

Tell us about your work

I would say the main themes in my work are very often defence of the indefensible. That is to say, I fight for the private and intimate stories of individuals and minorities, sometimes, even the white protestant male who is not exactly the most politically acceptable of animals!

When Mugabe elected to call gays worse than dogs and turned against this minority, I produced a play I had written called "The Man in the Cupboard" on the subject, a satirical dark comedy on homosexuality. Similarly, when the dispossession of white farmers took place, I wrote my play "Killing Rats", another comedy noire on the subject of invasion of rights and privacy. POSA, the Public Order and Security Act, passed through parliament in Zimbabwe, even allows the government access to ALL forms of private communications including e-mails and phone conversations! Hence, "Two Men on a Bench" talks about two dispossessed individuals, a white and a black tramp, who comment freely on the politics of suppression in another comedy of mine.

A lot of my work has a very dark side. Even a comedy about addiction, or prostitution, has a bit of a kick in the tail, so to speak. There are also serious works about displacement, alienation and loss of innocence. A good example is "The Sisyphus Road," about a white traveller from Africa coming to Edinburgh, where the play takes place in the round, carrying the burden of a heavy stone carving he has promised to sell, for a black stone sculptor, back home. He gets to learn about the heavy burden the "hewers of wood and drawers of water" bear. He gets to share the guilt of a colonial history first-hand.

My novels and short stories are very organic, under-the-skin studies of lives, trying to get to the inner workings of emotions and the soul, very often troubled souls, at that.

My poetry varies. Most recently, "The Stones of SomeWhere" explores loss and exile. It is a result of my having left my home and family behind.

How do you find living in London?

I have not found my place or peace, yet, In London.

NO-MAN'S LAND

Pin-prick of dull hope, smallest coal
Clutched in such cold night;
African, the soul, sucks out his prayer
From a tobacco-stub's comfort zone
Whose hands cup a memory about the glow
Of an old fire of home;
But it is not warm in his chill soul
Where this ill of other worlds is now.

That other place where huts circle
And swells the sweet smell of woodsmoke
Round roasted maize's warm cob in the hand
Is very far away, history, another day,
A perfume of acacia pollen and rain kissing dust
And the lost pounding of a distant drum...

It is something the wind blows through hollow bones,
A dead man's flute, a broken reed,
Gone, in a far-off land, from the dream of another room
With an open-always door unlike here
Whose strangers know not his ways nor he theirs

For no horizon beckons the low of his boyhood cattle
Beneath the blanket stars and other-way moon.
No frog familiars nor fruit bat songs
Fulfil these dead walls where wild buffalo-horns bellow
Their electrical blaze of London or beyond.

Understand how simply he wishes,
How he wishes without words,
Without his own tongue even,
How he only wishes he could go home

But there is no now return to the life-joy stolen
And he knows no here belonging
Neither beckoning back.

Instead he cramps, coughs, gasps his last straw
Clutching for ancestors in a cancer of limbo
In the country we all call - *No-Man's Land*.



Image: Siavash Maleki

Alfredo Cordal

Interview by David Clark

Alfredo Cordal, a Chilean playwright living in Britain since 1974, remains haunted by the violence and oppression his country suffered under military dictatorship. He writes about suffering and persecution, not only in recent times, but also under the Spanish conquistadors and the damage they caused to Latin America and its indigenous culture. Yet, he always maintains the hope that we can transcend such brutality and reach towards a better world.

His formative years, studying at first in a seminary and then at the Catholic University in Santiago, were shaped by the emerging philosophy of Liberation Theology, preaching the need for more action to be taken to ensure social justice and a more equitable redistribution of wealth. Cordal says: "I saw my city Santiago like an effervescent place of disquiet, among young people in the university especially; so I had to convey lyrically in my poetry that disquiet among young people, my friends and my teachers. This was very popular with the policy of the student organisation at the time, who also organised a festival of poetry."

This encouraged him to write further and in 1965 he won a prestigious national poetry prize, for a poem about working class communities and their struggle for self-built homes. He told me proudly that one of the first recipients of the prize had been Pablo Neruda, in 1923, and that it had meant so much to him to have met Neruda himself and later interviewed him for a weekly literary TV show he ran for five years. Other writers he interviewed at the time included Jorge Luis Borges, Auclair, Cortazar and many others as they passed through Santiago, and this formative experience as a young journalist subsequently led to his publishing a bilingual anthology of Latin American poetry, in 1988.

Meanwhile, however, he came to the attention of the newly formed socialist government under Allende and in 1971 was appointed as head of PR for the Ministry of Seas and Fishery. When the military coup overthrew the government, Cordal was placed under house arrest and suffered continuous interrogations. On his release three months later he managed to flee to Buenos Aires.

It was here that the next phase of his artistic development began to take shape. Whilst recovering from the trauma of arrest and interrogation he was able to benefit from the care and assistance of psychiatrists and psychologists from Buenos Aires University, who treated him and others fleeing Chilean dictatorship. Cordal says that they had developed techniques of helping people suffering from trauma and acute paranoia, it was fantastic and in five to six months he had basically overcome his fears and paranoid symptoms resulting from the suffering and oppression in Chile. This had a profound impact on him. Firstly, part of his recovery involved acting out his fears and confronting himself as a person as if he were an actor on stage performing his own life, presenting himself, and realising that what you did in life was actually alright. This kind of technique inspired his playwriting style, where actors present their character's life story and inner struggles on stage. Secondly, it led him later on to encourage the creative process amongst more recent asylum seekers arriving in Britain, and hence his involvement with The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, as well as for Amnesty International.

And yet, when Cordal first arrived in Britain in 1974, he found it hard to pursue his creative writing career. At the time, Chilean refugees were warmly received, officially welcomed at the airport by the Home Office, and allowed to work. Some 3000 Chilean refugees settled in this country between 1973 and 1979. Yet, it took him a while, almost seven years, before he felt at ease and sufficiently at home with his new environment to have the confi-

dence to start writing again, in 1981. Two years later his first play was performed in London, *The Last Judgement*, followed by *The Investiture of Eldorado* in 1984 and *Smoking Mirror* in 1986.

Cordal explains that "I learnt something very important in London. If you want to do things, to have things staged, a drama if you are a playwright, you just go to your local theatre. I did it when I was living in South Kensington and the nearest theatre was the Finborough Theatre and I went there. I talked to the director and in three days I read the play to him, he was fascinated by the subject and he did it, so that is the thing, visit your local theatre and start to get to know the actors, the director, know the seasons, what kind of plays that they bring, and just be involved. Soon after moving to Kennington where I now live, I was made Poet in Residence for the local theatre, the White Bear Theatre Club and having readings of my plays and even putting on a performance of my latest play. So my advice to all writer refugees in general, is just go to your local theatre and then you will learn the type of thing that they put on, and improve your knowledge of the country and the people, little by little. It worked well for me, for my English, and for my creative work, and most important, it gave me a sense of continuity, continuity in my own creative writing".

Over the years there has also been a subtle shift in his writing. Whilst in the 1980s his plays focused mainly on conveying the plight of persecuted individuals and groups in Latin America to an English audience, his latest play focuses on the tragic life and death of the English playwright Joe Orton, killed by his literary mentor and friend Kenneth Halliwell. Yet, even in his latest play there is still a Chilean dimension, with the retelling of the life story of the Chilean director and songwriter Victor Jara, who had directed one of Orton's plays in 1968, but who suffered a tragic death at the hands of military dictators. Cordal writes: "I couldn't help thinking of the life of two exceptional artists cut short for completely different reasons, one personal, the other political, but both under the common denominator of a BRUTAL HATE against their brilliant creation". This play is due to be performed in London in July. Another one of his plays, *Our Lady of Buenos Aires*, will be performed in Santa Fe, New Mexico in March this year, about the life of a successful French actress of the silent movies who travelled extensively in South America and set up her own acting school in Buenos Aires.

The theme of brutality, humiliation and persecution, runs through many of his plays. In *The Last Judgement*, we see on stage a re-enactment of the interrogation and torture of a Anglo Chilean priest in the 1970s, but retold as a medieval Passion play, with the priest blindfolded on stage and imagining that he is being visited by the Inquisition. Cordal wished to convey not only the brutality of torture, but also the very medieval spirit of Latin America that still persisted in the late 20th century, with rich landlords and the mass of poor peasantry, and the sense of oppression by rulers and by the principles of the Church, oppressing the indigenous culture. This theme of the oppression of Aztec and Mayan culture is explored further in his subsequent plays, *The Investiture of Eldorado* and in *Smoking Mirror*. The way the Spanish conquerors and the Christian officials encouraged the spread of Christianity in order to dominate the continent, the land and the resources, but in the process oppressed and sought to eliminate the indigenous culture. Yet, Cordal explains: "There is continuity. Part of the indigenous culture is still there, this notion that humanity is still being created, still in the process of evolving, is not fully formed yet. Despite our own destructive nature, creating bombs and persecution, there is still hope for a better future. All my plays have a happy ending, even where people are killed, at the end of the play, they practically are re-arisen, they are not really dead, but appear to be alive. Indigenous culture reappears as the Zapatista, among the poor; Joe Orton, killed by his friend and mentor, reappears at the end as a ghost, speaking to an American friend; there is always hope, life, a vision of a better future.

E' Tutto Sporco nel Paese delle Meraviglie: All is Foul in Wonderland

Ana Candida Carneiro

This play was born because it had to be. Being a foreigner in Italy for so many years – almost eight now – three of them as a clandestine, had its consequences. “All is Foul in Wonderland” almost constitutes revenge for the violent shouting and abuse that I personally observed. I also observed the subjugation of the dignity of many immigrants, most with minimal knowledge of Italian, at the *Questura*, the Federal Police Offices in Milan. Every day at seven in the morning or earlier, thousands of immigrants would wait outside the Main Office – summer or winter, rain or shine – with the faint hope of finally returning home with papers in their hands. I was one of those. Fortunately my Italian was good which was significant.



And if you are a woman it is another matter. You can go out with the officer in charge to accomplish things fast. Not even a trace of embarrassment is revealed in his face when he asks you out, in front of other colleagues, wedding ring on his ring finger. If you are astute, you smile and thank him because what else could you do? Wait years for your turn, without a job, maybe on the streets? My play is about this situation and the sensation it arouses. This sensation that corrodes the guts.

The action takes place in a detention centre. Detention centres for immigrants exist almost all over Europe and are a sort of “waiting chamber” for expulsion. Once caught by the police, they throw you in there until papers are ready to “defecate” you out of the country. Here in Italy they are like prisons, where people are mistreated and humiliated.

The two main characters are Brazilian citizens who have left their country in search of better conditions, pursuing their dreams. Usually immigrants idealise the place to which they eagerly want to migrate. However, once there, they inevitably have to cope with the harsh reality, very different from their preconceptions. “All is foul in Wonderland” is about this confrontation with the overwhelming wall of xenophobia, exclusion and loss of faith that follows. It was important for my characters to be Brazilian because I wanted to write about things of which I had personal knowledge.

Sonia (in Portuguese and Italian, the name recalls the verb “sognare”/“sonhar”, to dream) is violently thrown into a detention centre cell after a dawn raid. She will have to share it with Regina (in Italian, the name means “queen”), a trans-sexual who has very good knowledge of the “rules” of the centre and seems to be “very close” to the director. Because of this she has many privileges including having her own cell (before the arrival of Sonia) instead of sharing it with twenty or thirty other immigrants as usually happens. She also is able to keep her own personal effects: her dresses, wigs and fake jewellery which are the instruments of her profession. She declares herself a singer, an artist and Art is her reason for living. Sonia is very different from Regina, but if at the beginning there is rivalry and hostility, at the end they are almost like sisters - complementary sides of the same coin. Sonia is bewitched by Regina’s Art. As they get closer to each other, Regina guides her to “initiate” the friend into the marvels of Art, into this world where the false becomes real, where what is dreamed can change reality. Sonia, initially very naive, learns how to lie. She lies to her family in Brazil, unbridling her imagination, because she does not want to tell them she has failed: being caught and sent home without a euro is tantamount to death for an immigrant. It is the Great Defeat. There is no way out by lying: a small lie leads to a larger one. Her family believe that she is rich and married, and this falsehood stimulates other co-nationals to emigrate, in search of the Wonderland. A vicious circle. The story could not have a happy end...

The text was originally written in Italian, but Sonia does not speak Italian. She is newly arrived from Brazil and still has to learn it. Regina has been living in Italy many years and will not speak Portuguese because she wants to completely obliterate her “third world” roots and prefers the glamour of the Italian language and culture. The use of the foreign language has a very important dramaturgical function because the audience will identify with Sonia. It will taste the desperation an immigrant feels when mistreated in a foreign country, without the instrument of language as a defence. Regina will never reveal her past to Sonia, as she has created a character for herself and invented an identity which has become truth. After 60 days

of detention, Sonia will be able to read the Detention Centre Rules perfectly. Scene 6, Act II, is her farewell, her homage to Regina, who so much loved Italy and its language, despite the treatment she has received.

Unfortunately I was unable to visit any detention centres because at the time they were not open to visitors. A journalist for *L'Espresso* – a renowned Italian magazine – succeeded in gaining access to Lampedusa Island detention centre by pretending to be a refugee. His two shocking articles, describing in detail the living conditions and abuses, were helpful in writing the play.

"All is Foul in Wonderland" will be produced this summer by Giorgio Barberio Corsetti, staged by the young director Fabio Cherstich.

Veronica Needa talks to Janna Eliot

Director and actor Veronica Needa works with True Heart Theatre, a group founded to serve the Chinese Community in Britain. Performing in Cantonese, Mandarin and English, Veronica is an exponent of Playback Theatre, a technique which uses improvisation to recreate oral history. Born in Hong Kong, Veronica studied acting at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. She now lives in London and leads workshops throughout the world.

I've seen several works in which you've performed, and been very impressed by the techniques you use. What is your acting background?

I started off in stage management in the bilingual Chung Ying Theatre Company in Hong Kong in 1981. As there was no proper training available in Hong Kong at that time, I went to the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School and did further training in Beijing Opera, dance, puppetry and so on. I completed Playback Theatre training, and am now teaching it myself.

What led you to found Theatre?

During the 80s and 90s, I did work in connection with my Chinese/English/Eurasian heritage – storytelling, community theatre work, artist-in-residency placements. I co-founded Yellow Earth Theatre with four other British East Asian theatre professionals in 1995. As my interest in playback theatre grew, I developed a team to serve the UK Chinese community. True Heart began rehearsing in 2006, and we are growing and learning, looking to the future.

How hard is it to act in different languages? Do you always translate on stage, or do you expect the audience to understand unknown languages through visual clues? Do you find some aspects of a play lend themselves more easily to a particular language?

As I am bilingual English Cantonese, I feel able to mix and match comfortably and to communicate with an audience. And I am training my True Heart team to do this tri-lingually

in English, Cantonese, and Mandarin. There is such beauty in the sounds of the different languages, and of course, worlds of meaning. I am very, very interested in supporting multilingualism around the world. I feel we need to do this as a matter of urgency so we can truly use our playback work to enable peace-making across languages and cultures.

What kind of audiences do you attract?

Often people connected in one way or another to the Chinese community, or with an interest in things Chinese. But we are up for performing and working with anybody.

Your play, FACE, is a monologue full of loss and yearning, about cultural baggage. I presume this refers to childhood feelings of alienation. Can you explain a little about your family background?

My heritage is primarily colonial Hong Kong British and Chinese. I felt it was important to honour the experience faced by people of mixed-race parentage, especially those from a generation when prejudice and shaming was subtle and normal. I suspect that intolerance and unkindness still exist towards children of mixed-race, making it a challenging and painful journey to selfhood and self-acceptance.

I'd like to know more about the techniques of playback theatre. I've read this type of drama relies on improvisation.

The process invites stories from the audience, which the cast immediately transform into theatre. No rehearsal, no script, just spontaneous improvisation. But in our training sessions, the playback team rehearse ritual structures, improvise stories, developing a sense of ensemble and artistic vocabulary. Once in front of an audience, however, we listen carefully to whatever the audience will share in this public context - moments from their lives, everyday experiences or memories from their past. Our challenge is to create a welcoming atmosphere so that people will be willing to speak up.

Do you see True Heart Theatre as a means of preserving and transmitting legends, or a vehicle for creating new stories?

Both. We have created a show based on traditional legends for Chinese Supplementary School audiences. We work with middle-aged people from the Chinese community, developing scripted performances. We are interested in making the stories of the UK Chinese community visible, whether these are myths, real life experiences, or imaginative creations.

Do you have to be Chinese or of Chinese origin to join True Heart Theatre?

No. We welcome people of all cultures to come and play with us. But the current membership of those committed to on-going training and practice is primarily of Chinese origin or Eurasian like myself. We are open to invitations from any community to perform playback theatre, run workshops, or do storytelling, especially in connection to Chinese Festivals. We have open rehearsals once a month. Come and visit us.

More information available from www.trueheart.org.uk

Details about Yellow Earth Theatre from www.yellowearth.org

Zimbabwean Poets

The Book Café of Harare

Biko Mutsaurwa

*Translated by Brian Chikwava
and Eugene Ulman.*



Photo: Eugene Ulman

Take and smoke the wisdom herb
The way of integrity will lead to suffering
Deep down in the caves of the spirit world
Whoever misses the path will lose the way
In the belly of the earth
Only the true believers will survive.

Greetings, O Great Medicine Man
With the razor that heals the face...
I have a problem I cannot solve
I keep scratching my hives
But they won't go away
So instead I'll now talk.

You have the weapon that usurped power,
That scars us when we protest in peace.
Peaceful protest was tried, but we see it has
failed...
Now you lead us, I dare you.
This is the sound of rebellion.

The arts have been affected by the dire political and economic situation in Zimbabwe but the Book Café in Harare provides a space for writers, poets and musicians to perform and speak out. Comrade Fatso is a protest poet who is aware of the dangers and comments "That's the joke in Zimbabwe – you've got freedom of expression but you don't have freedom after expression."



Photo: Eugene Ulman

Juvenile Heaven

Hot sun burning
Dust lingers in the mid morning sun
Patiently shaping the coming of the rain
Not much pain when the news was preached
Instead, a deep empty gap
Blues lingered in the air
Life is unfair
Thought I
Is there a juvenile heaven up in the sky?

Lonesome breezes washed away footprints
Where we used to play
Gently, the grass sways, come let's play
It seems to say
Like you said, when the morning greeted us
with nothing but play
Play Play

Is there a heaven for kids, I ask the grass?
For if there is none,
Where shall he be when I too walk the broken
glass?
Is there
A juvenile heaven

2003

This Cage is me

That some day you will see my face
Upon that day my prayer
Innocence lost without trace
Another day no answers more questions

That some day you will see my face
Walk through the paths I walked
And feel the thorn in flesh a second time
Pain loses definition without pleasure
One without the other
Is another day no answers more questions?

That some day you will wipe away the tear
From my eye gently caress my fear
This cage I rattle

This cage that holds me prisoner
Its bars stand unbroken
None have nerve to set me free
For this deep dark prison from which I have
spoken
Is not theirs but mine, is me

Prisoner I have become to self with none to
blame
Habit and character form this formidable wall
Upon which none hear my call
For as an echo it bounces back to me
You see
I grow weary of echoes for they bear truth
That being this deep dark prison from which I
speak is me
None can turn the key and set me free
For I am this deep dark prison
This deep dark prison is me
This cage I rattle
This cage is me
Another day no answers
More questions
You see?

2007

The Last Chimurenga

William G. Mbwembe

The last Chimurenga, the final war
Will it be won, will it be lost
The war of liberty, the freedom war
It's not terrorism but brings in terror
It's not tyranny, that's Mugabe's war
Dictatorship is Mugabe's first born baby
Even the C.I.O. will not come as close

It's unlike the first chimurenga, the Nehanda war
Or unlike the second against the Smith regime
This is the third world war, the final war
The last Chimurenga, the war of all wars
It don't need guns, it don't need bombs

The last Chimurenga is that thing called fear
Mankind faint because of fear
Fear of the known and fear of the unknown
The fear of war, the fear of death
Fear upon fear, will Mugabe ever go
How long will he terrorise us for

Fear of the future after Mugabe is gone
Trusting the MDC to make things bon
Will there be food or much more hunger
Will we be better of continue to suffer
Will jobs be available or worse unemployment
Will there be fuel, will there be water

Which is better, the Mugabe you know
Or the Tsvangirai you don't know

Christians go to church for fear of judgement day
America goes to war for fear of terrorism
Mugabe goes on a rampage for fear of losing power
The fear of fear will it ever be conquered
Fear...the last Chimurenga, the final war.

In Memory of the poet who died in Wales in late 2007.



Image: Siavash Maleki

Connecting with England

Ayar Ata

Reconnecting

When I visited the room again
I saw the same flowers red, yellow, white, pink and
purple
flying around the room like wild butterflies and crossing
the afternoon sunshine rushing through the window
kissing the empty hospice bed.

For a moment
I was frozen in front of the bed
I stood in silence for a moment

I reconnected with my happy memories
I felt peace and I felt love again
I played with the butterflies
smiling and crying

17 February 2006

Photo: Mona Kalashi



From Stanstead Airport

From Stanstead airport the seemingly endless line of
red-brick houses
and open green fields danced in front of my eyes.

Then London
busy, vibrant, glowing shop windows and the red
buses..
and the woman driver!

In a moment of reflection and soul searching thoughts
I paused in front of a gorgeous tree in Hyde Park

I touched her, hugged her, stood in silence yet talking
to her
remembering my mum once told me.
If you ever feel lonely, talk to a tree

I felt deserted but not exactly homesick
full of anticipation
I hugged the handsome tree again

English Moon

Driving a long the narrow country lane in Essex
I see cyclists, walkers and joggers
wearing green and yellow shining jackets

As the dark sets in
slowly the moon shows her face
the place changes and I start my journey back in time
and I am swept away
My imagination is flying leaving me behind in the car
I see and feel another village another school

I see the landscape reshaping itself to fit my lost world
which is now has embedded in my new world
this is an English moon
this is my new moon

The Stones of Somewhere

by *Bart Wolfe*

Lulu, London, 2007

Reviewed by David Clark

Playfulness next to seriousness, the juxtaposition of the familiar with the unexpected, Wolfe's poems catch the reader unawares, revealing an inner world surrounded by constant allusions to the external world. They speak of exile and the longing for home, another continent, where huts circle and mingle with the sweet smell of woodsmoke and roasted maize, of being stuck in a no-man's land, coughing, gasping for breath, desperately lonely, a stranger who does not belong. But all is not well back at home either, in Africa, where it is written in yesterday's ink of the pavement suicides, where a dictator's pen lasts for many homeless histories. The poet casts a stone at the idolatry of hope, hoping that sometimes Jericho and Berlin meet at the defeat of walls, hoping that dictators will fall, just as those walls did fall. Meanwhile he is homeless and stateless, visiting the soul-less industrial heritage of Europe's oldest intact steelworks, imagining the clash of cultures between the cultured world of classical music and the brutality imposed on industrial workers, making implements of war, marching labourers turning into marching soldiers. But all is not doom and gloom. The first poem, *gambler is a seeker*, is a skilful play on children's games and nursery rhymes that gradually moves into the adult world, into the mysteries of human existence, of the interweaving of the childlike and the adult, the human and the divine, whilst retaining a playful element throughout. There is the juxtaposition of:

'Heads

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BLACK/WHITE', for instance, that conveys both playfulness and chance, on the one hand, but also the deadly seriousness of the adult world, on the other hand, where chance is sometimes a matter of life or death, or simply exploitation. 'Left RIGHT' combines the element of chance again, with the emphasis on right in capital letters suggesting the double meaning of right, the greater weight this might give the word and maybe just the hint that might is right. Some of it is just playful, with intertextual references, such as:

'tic-toc
clock strikes one
and then another
(We
...all
... ..fall
... .. down)'

Later on the poem seeks a more pragmatic tone:

'Look, dammit***,
it's just a social contract
context is everything'

But then there is yet another voice, suggesting some mystery and awe:

'Chapter X versus 4
Book of Precedentz
Said the Priest'
This too may be playful, or maybe not. The last verse reads:
'Hello
Drift and sough, high and low
Of all the oceans that I know
Echo-ecce-echo'

The poems speak not only of exile, but also of the human condition, between child and adult, between high and low, between belonging and non-belonging, and longing, always longing for a long remembered past and for a more humane future, where black and white, male and female, can truly meet. Meanwhile we are caught up in this crazy world:

'I gave her an orchid
And a love poem
And she gave me notice to leave'

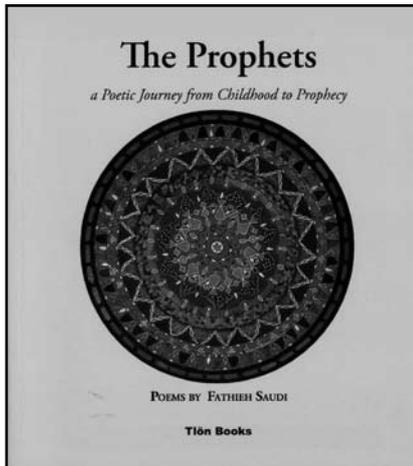
Here are their voices. Read this book. It will sadden and inspire you.

The Prophets: A Poetic Journey from Childhood to Prophecy

by *Fathieh Saudi*

The Lotus Foundation, 2007

Reviewed by Lynette Craig



In these three narrative poems, Fathieh Saudi explores the innermost feelings of the prophets of 'the three main monotheistic and Abrahamic faiths,' Moses, Jesus and Mohammed. In doing so she highlights the similarities between them. And on another level she is exploring her own feelings of displacement from the time she would go as a young girl, with her father to Jerusalem and be exposed to the power and physical presence of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. She had to leave her native Jordan and suffer the pain of exile. She has been seeking a home, both actually and spiritually and the poems certainly allow us to feel this longing expressed by the prophets too.

We begin at a dramatic point in the story of Moses: he is about to be born. But instead of joy at the event, the baby senses fear. Here, the poet is at her strongest. She describes everything from the point of view of the newborn as in 'she breastfed me her anxious milk'. Unsure as to whether her readers know the story, the poet adds some lines of narrative explanation. These are not really necessary, I feel, for the audience she has would be familiar with the outline of the Biblical events, both the Old and New Testament. The Koran and Mohammed's life, less familiar to me is just as forceful, especially as she has presented him last of the three and so established the context and her theme.

Moses is rescued out of the womblike protection of the water by the daughter of Pharaoh of whom he says,

'Oh, she wasn't my mother
Yet she gave me my name-
Moses, the one drawn out of water.'

As a modern observer might expect, Moses begins to doubt the love of his birth mother in 'Did she want to save my life or still her fears/ Did she condemn me to death or to life?'

This is a powerful realisation of the point of view of the prophet. We are more used to the idea that his mother saved him, his sister

watched over him and so on. The account he gives of his upbringing is convincing – 'I excelled in all.' But his security is undermined by doubt and here Fathieh Saudi expresses the heartfelt theme of exile in the lines,

'I felt exiled from myself...' and
'I never overcame my first exile
I excelled in self exile.'

The story continues with the meeting with Jethro, the rejection of the Egyptian gods, finding the one true God and seeing the land of Canaan and finally the understanding that 'homeland is the sanctuary of the heart.'

Fathieh Saudi follows the same pattern with Jesus and Mohammed and in each narrative, she dwells on the dramatic birth and the circumstances surrounding the birth, capturing our imagination.

Touchingly Jesus is aware of his mother praying and that she 'cradles her abdomen many times a day' though she does not yet know of his conception. And again, fear dominates the birth; baby boys are to be killed [the Old Testament story of course foreshadows the one of Herod in the New] and here, Joseph is hostile at first and Mary reluctant. The poet says that she didn't give the baby 'space to flow' by bending her body inwards, 'like a bended bow'. The poet is not only observant of physical behaviour but also of psychological turmoil.

Again, the poet concentrates on the birth; Jesus 'felt so happy to be born' and his mother's milk 'was like nourishing tears'. The journey into Egypt is one of peace for the holy family and the poet expresses this in an unusual way: she says that he feels 'free'. This, I think, brings out some of the ambiguity of exile that the poet herself must feel: to be free of persecution on the one hand but full of longing for a homeland on the other. Jesus is free and safe and will continue on his ministry but of course the reader is well aware of his suffering and death.

The poet uses repetition to good effect here and throughout the three poems. As Jesus grows up he finds connection with nature:

'I saw the tears in the eyes of a lamb,
I listened to the alphabet of the wind,
I learned the language of birds,
I felt the mountains silent whispers..'

But there is so much in the life of Jesus that the poet cannot cover in the space she has allowed herself. The birth is all important

and perhaps reflects the importance of this event to the faith. However, as a reader, I feel that I would like to have the poet's own highly developed imaginative 'take' on other events and characters in the story. What we do find most clearly expressed is the parallel between Moses and Jesus, both born into fear and mistrust, both with an unpromising beginning.

The same is true of Mohammed: I would love to read even more about his eventful and momentous life.

Mohammed is born into a 'flow of continual tears'. He suffers the loss of his father before he is born, then he loses his mother, his uncle and his grandfather, describing himself as an 'orphan.' His wet nurse, Halima, teaches him 'to listen/To the words of the sand/The sounds of the wind.' There is a link then to the upbringing of Jesus who was also close to the land and nature. He is then taught by Bouhira amid a general mistrust of prophecies. Again, this prophet has to face the reluctance of those nearest to him and their anxiety just as Moses did and Jesus.

The revelation comes, he finds the words which come down to us as The Koran and he also finds his first follower, Khadija. Gradually there are more followers and as he says most poignantly, 'I wasn't alone anymore.' The poet again uses repetition, almost incantation, to good effect. Mohammed tells us that

'Life is giving and receiving
Life is receiving and giving

Life is miraculous...' For Mohammed, 'the illiterate', as he calls himself, the miracle is that his words will 'remain eternal' and he will lie in peace.

Fathieh concludes the three poems, therefore, very positively. I would have enjoyed I am sure, more of Mohammed's teachings and his experiences in the voice that the poet has created for him. Perhaps the voice of each of the prophets is not quite individualised enough but we are given plenty of drama and deep emotion and psychological insights. Fathieh Saudi has emphasised the humanity of each man; they all feel anxiety, rejection, frustration but also love and communion with their fellow men. This brave and imaginative bringing together of such huge iconic figures in our cultures helps us to see that we are all connected in this humanity.

Silent Voices: An Anthology of Writings

by Contemporary British Somalis

edited by Rabina Khan - Monsoon Press, London, 2007

Reviewed by Isabelle Romaine

The result of a project "Unearthing the Somali Voice," funded by the Arts Council, *Silent Voices* is a collection of Somali experiences by five people from the Somali community. Each writer in their own personal way portrays what it means today to be Somali - Muslim - African and part of the immigrant community in Britain.

Zahrah Awaleh sets the record straight from the start: "I am a Black British-born Muslim woman living in London." She explains that English is her first language, and that she has always lived among the Somali community while enjoying close and lasting friendship with people outside the community. She also stresses feeling passionately about establishing solid Muslim communities in Britain. Yet it is as a woman that she condemns female genital mutilation (FGM), a practice still accepted among Somali women. Zahrah Awaleh associates the mutilation to

a loss of self-identity and demonstrates that such ablation is antithetical to Islam. Awaleh's overall wish is for Muslims to become active citizens and to adapt Islam to modern living, while respecting its original intent.

Adam Idir, Founder of 'Somali Eye Media' and editor of 'Somali Eye Magazine' is equally concerned with establishing a positive image of the British Somali. His interviews feature the experiences of hardworking Somali who feel part of the diverse British society.

25 year-old Shafi Said goes for the soft touch using the poignant story of a young homeless boy (Dwayne) as a device to handle violent Islamic militancy. In his next story, he describes in the same heart-rending manner, the return home from England of a young Somali woman (Ayan) and the apprehensions on both cultural sides.

Laila Ali Egge's contribution reads like a poetic piece; her letter addressed to her native land - "letter to the Horn" - is partly an homage to her uncle who taught her the history of Somalia before the civil war, and partly a way to regain her self confidence which had crumbled under the avalanche of negative reports depicted on the news.

18-year-old Abi Bahdon is the youngest contributor. He provides us with a string of poems, the themes of which overlap one another: dreams, mirrors, ghosts, and loss relate to the sounds of reflection, affection, attention and question. His poems should be read aloud in order to feel the anger at personal losses, death and devastation, and also to detect his hunger for life.

Far from being silent or unheard, the voices in this anthology give powerful and passionate records of what it means to be Somali and British today.

Beyond the Horizon

by Esmail Khoi

Translated from the Persian by Lotfali Khonji, the Esmail Khoi Foundation, Atlanta, 2008

Reviewed by Lotfali Khonji

Although Esmail Khoi has been away from his homeland, Iran, for more than two decades, he is indisputably one of the shining stars of modern Persian poetry. His poetry can be likened to an old tree of numerous branches, each having grown in a different direction and with a different shape. This diversity applies as much to the content as to the form. On the one hand, he is a great master of traditional poetry, with many of his works being excellent examples of lyrics, elegies and quatrains. His mastery of Persian language and literature is manifest in these works. It is, in fact, this mastery of classical moulds of Persian poetry that has enabled

Khoi to enrich his modern works. On the other hand, when we observe the new moulds used in Khoi's modern poetry, we see a great poet originally following the lead of great forerunners such as Mehdi Akhavan-Sles but soon finding his own style. From the point of view of contents, Khoi's poems are reflections of his time. In his works, many social and political upheavals are reflected and put forward with a philosophical approach. They are overflowing with ifs and whys. They are sometimes as ferocious as a river rushing down a ravine and sometimes as soft and calm as the same river flowing through open, peaceful countryside. There is yet another

category in Khoi's poetry: that of his love poems composed in the classical mould but also with a view to modern styles of expression. These works are likely to pass the test of time, never age and remain among the best of Persian love poems.

Many of Khoi's works have already been translated into and published in English. The present anthology is but a humble addition to them. It consists mainly of the poet's modern works, but some of his quatrains are also included. Quatrains and other poems with rhyme and rhythm have been translated with rhyme and rhythm. The anthology begins on an auspicious note, with *An Ode to Love*.

Jaleh Esfahani - Iranian poet, born 1921, died November 29, 2007.

An Iranian poet and activist whose rich and prolific output across sixty years of exile told of veils, walls and the unheard voices of women.

State of Emergency

by *Soleïman Adel Guémar*

Translated by Tom Cheesman & John Goodby, published Arc Publications, Oldham, 2007

Reviewed by Esther Lipton

This collection of 57 poems by the Algerian writer Soleïman Adel Guémar is dedicated to his family and 'to all those whose dreams have survived the scourge of human stupidity.' It is presented in the original French and in English translation.

Though my French is limited I felt compelled again and again to turn to it, particularly when reciting. English seems almost prosaic and unworthy to convey the depth and nuances of Guémar's feelings and ideas. However this does not, in any way, detract from the merits of the translation, which stands proudly on its own as a work of great power impacting on the sensitivities of the reader. The translators, one a linguist and the other a poet, worked closely with Guémar and in the Preface they outline and explain some of the difficult choices they made in carrying out their task. Every poem 'called out for inventiveness.'

In her introduction, Lisa Appignanesi, gives a brief historical account of the political background, which permeates this collection of poems. Algeria's bloody War of Independence from France in 1962 to the present day with particular reference to the Civil War (1991-2001). It was a war against civilians where human rights violations were perpetrated and free expression curtailed. In this continuing 'State of Emergency' journalists investigating disappearances and injustices prior to the 2004 'Charter for Peace and Reconciliation' are liable to imprisonment and torture. Guémar, writer, poet, political journalist and dissident, is framed within this historical picture. Though not subjected to torture he was assaulted and was imprisoned. He came to England in 2002, and in 2004 was granted asylum and given indefinite leave to stay. He now lives in Wales with his family.

One of Guémar's great strengths is his economy with words. His poems tell of the pain and suffering of his compatriots, the political lies and complicity, the senseless

cruelty, the fervent yearning and hope for a true peace in his beloved homeland. He cries out against the brutality indicting the perpetrators and those who, by their silence, are complicit in the terror.

There are three themes which I wish to explore, namely, his utter disdain for the military dictators and their lackeys, the suffering of ordinary Algerian citizens and his feelings as an exile towards Algeria. He describes the military; uniformed automatons, sinister and cold who act on command, firing indiscriminately into the demonstration. His anger and contempt for the military is very apparent. He sees them as uncouth buffoons, beer swilling, lying, military tyrants, 'conquerors on chocolate thrones.' Yet with a few chosen words he swiftly, wittily and with dramatic effect, destroys their pomposity and arrogance.

The theme of suffering of ordinary citizens and of the individual, the tortured prisoner, is graphically expressed in many of the poems. He captures both the physical appearance and the mental anguish of a persecuted people. Ordinary citizens walking with spines bent, ears pricked, mouths hanging open, haggard eyes, the look of suicides, heart stinking of fear, led by the muzzle to the pit. The themes of oppression, of repression are pictured giving a heavy feeling that is both lethargic and despairing. The value of life is expressed in the bald statement that 'here a man is worth less than a glass of whisky'. Guémar paints a stark, dark, picture. He describes the remains of bodies swollen by heat eaten by animals and walls, whitewashed with the powder of human bones. He points the accusatory finger at the monsters and hopes that the deaths will be revenged. Without explicit telling and with few words, we can see, hear and feel the despair and pain of the prisoner. Guémar convincingly identifies with the plight of others in such a situation and reaches out to the reader who, in turn, feels empathy for the victim. In

'Interrogatory' the prisoner, shares recollections, thoughts of escape and revenge through his own death, the ultimate escape. 'Monologue' expresses the inner torment of one who is unable to share his suffering with his beloved. Survival lies in the dream world of love and hope not in the real world of the prison cell. 'State of Emergency' encompasses the themes of torture and repression and the guilt felt at one's inability and failure to prevent such atrocities. The telling lines 'Algiers betrayed/ruled by the electrodes/adopts a posture/which is foetal' present a very powerful image. Guémar neither forgives his torturers nor closes his eyes to their actions.

The thought of exile is tinged with sadness. He yearns for Algeria which he dreamed and wished, when a child, to be 'the loveliest of all the brides.' The memories are bitter for a childhood which has been snatched away. A similar leitmotiv is in 'An Original Summer' where the strong rhythm invokes carefree days of youth, of dancing, of forbidden love, of happiness. Gone, shattered by 'the bursts of machinegun fire'. The yearning is keenly felt, 'my country/gives off a scent/ which calls you back'. However there is also guilt. The guilt at abandoning his country, that he is playing at forgetfulness, playing at life, but in reality his heart lies with the suffering of his fellow countrymen, 'slaughtered to a beating drum'. Though tinged with memories of persecution and hardship, love flies from the soaring rhythms of 'Anniversary'. The poem ends on a personal revelation, a realisation that 'the rockiest roads lead up towards heavens'. 'Fire of Joy' concludes with a question but no question mark. It is a heartfelt cry of hope for peace; a cry which echoes in many places of conflict today.

I agree with Lisa Appignanesi that Guémar is a political poet of stature, whose language sings whether he is attacking the face of grim authority or dreaming of an Algeria at peace.



The Butterfly's Burden

by *Mahmoud Darwish*

*Translated by Fady Joudah.
Bloodaxe, Northumberland, 2008*

Reviewed by Fathieh Saudi

This ambitious poetry collection consists of three volumes of poetry which originally appeared in Arabic in three separate publications. The desire of the translator to introduce Mahmoud Darwish to the English reader, compelled him to undertake this extensive translation. The collections included are *The Stranger's Bed* published in 1998, *A State of Siege* published in 2002 and *Don't apologise for what you haven't done* published 2003.

Darwish was born in 1941 in Al Birweh, a village in the Galilee. In 1948 he and his family fled to Lebanon during the war following the creation of Israel. The family returned the following year when they were given the status 'Present Absent Alien'. The loss of his homeland and the return as a stranger marked his whole life and his creativity. He experienced an identity crisis which, in his early twenties, compelled him to leave Israel and to proclaim his Palestinian identity. Darwish began writing poetry in the early 1950s and his poetry expressed his personal feelings as an Arab and as a Palestinian. In 1970 he went to Moscow and since then has lived in many countries. He continues to search for a homeland and, for him, language itself has become his homeland in his permanent state of exile

The Butterfly's Burden is translated by Fady Joudah who is a Palestinian American, a physi-

cian and a published poet. In this meticulous translation he has combined his sense of precision, possibly deriving from his medical background, with a sensibility born of being a poet. Remarkably, he has preserved the punctuation and lineation of all the poems as in Arabic. The poems appear in the original Arabic as well as in English translation. The notes explain some verses, names, events or quotations. This is the first translation of Darwish in the UK although more than ten books have been translated into French. He has also been published in the United States.

The Stranger's Bed is dedicated to the theme of love. It appeared in 1998 when he returned to visit his native village in Galilee after about thirty-seven years of exile. In this collection the beloved, the real and the imagined, blends with the scents of Palestine and a deep feeling of longing and desire. There is a complex dialogue between masculine and feminine, between prose and poetry, and between the self and other. The "I" mingles with the "You" of others reminding us of a universal sense of love.

*'Nothing takes me from the butterflies of my dreams
To my reality'
In Sonnet V he writes:
I am the son of what you do in the earth, son
of my wounds
that have lit up the pomegranate blossoms in
your closed-up gardens.*

A State of Siege is the second collection, written after his return to Palestine in 2002 which was during the uprising. This one long poem describes the state of siege in Ramallah, where he lived, and in the occupied territories. He recalls the absurdity, reality, complexity of occupation, daily life and suffering and the meaning of peace. He enquires as to

the means of obtaining freedom, the possibilities of political, philosophical or lyrical escapes. He recalls myths, lyrics and dialogues with many cultures, religions and civilisations in language which can only be described as musical.

In siege, life becomes the time between remembering life's beginning and forgetting its end...

Don't Apologise For What You Haven't Done is the third collection in which the poet takes a journey to revisit the past since childhood, remembering different times, scents and moments. He travels back to many different cities, meeting with people who impressed him including Ritsos and Pablo Neruda, dedicating poems to those who touched his heart. He often uses a form of dialogue between two or three persons.

And every poem is a dream:
"I dreamt that I have a dream"
that will carry me and that I will carry
until I write the final line
on the grave's marble:

Darwish is a poet who surprises the reader as he is constantly evolving. Each of his collections mirrors a period of his life, vision, feeling, political aspiration and pain. In the Arab world he is regarded as the greatest living poet, a universal poet who expresses universal human feelings and humanity beyond the confines of nationality, religion and conflict. His poetry reveals the pure human condition.

He is the recipient of many international literary awards, including the Lotus prize in 1969, the Lenin prize in 1983, France's highest award: Knight of Arts and Belles Lettres in 1997, the Moroccan Award of Intellectual Merit and the Lannan prize for cultural freedom.

London Book Fair Arab Focus event:

The British Council and Exiled Writers Ink
7.30 pm on Wednesday 16th April 2008

An evening of poetry to celebrate writing from the Arab World, featuring poets from London, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria at The Tournament, 344/346 Old Brompton Road, London SW5 9JU

Biographies

Tajia Al-Baghdadi was headmistress of a girls' secondary school in Iraq. Her poetry is published in the Middle East and in London based newspapers such as Asharq Al Awsat. She has spent 18 years of her exiled life teaching Arabic, Art and Islamic Studies in London.

Bashir Al Gamar was born in Sudan in 1955. He came to England as a political refugee in 1991 after being imprisoned for his poem: 'Patience on a Beach'. Since then he has lived in Brighton. Bashir is a poet, songwriter and composer. His first short collection Lost Time will be published this year by Exiled Writers Ink.

Ayar Ata was born in Saqqiz, in the eastern part of Kurdistan in 1957. After living in many countries, in 1989 he moved to London where he studied at SOAS and Middlesex University. "Poetry is my passport to honest and sweet freedom of expression about my world."

Ehab y. Bessasio is a Palestinian poet and writer born in Gaza and currently lives in Cardiff. He has contributed to a number of literary events and publications in the UK, Lebanon, Egypt and Palestine. His first poetry book *The Albatross of the Blurred Sky line* was published in Beirut, 2004, and his new book *Happenings in the Sand-glass* will be published this summer.

Ana Cândida de Carvalho Carneiro was born in São Paulo, Brazil in 1977. In 2001 she emigrated to Italy and obtained a degree in Dramatic Writing. In 2007 her play "All is Foul in Wonderland" was finalist at the prestigious Italian playwriting award 'Premio Riccione'. She has translated into Italian some plays by the Brazilian playwright Nelson Rodrigues for the Publishing House Ubulibri.

David Clark is the child of refugees fleeing Nazi Germany. He grew up in Australia, Italy and Austria. He studied in Canada and East Africa and now teaches tourism studies and contributes to various cultural magazines in London.

Lynette Craig holds an MPhil in Writing, leads poetry workshops with refugee groups and mentors and edits their work. Her poetry collection is entitled *Burning Palaces*, (Flarestack).

Janna Eliot Novelist and translator, Janna Eliot lives in London and comes from an immigrant family.

Miriam Frank Her articles, translations and original works have been published by the Guardian Review, Index on Censorship, Buenos Aires Herald, Quartet Books, Serpent's Tail and Rodopi, and she has been interviewed for BBC Radio 4 and World Service programmes.

Ferial J. Ghazoul is an Iraqi critic, translator, and professor of English and Comparative Literature at the American University in Cairo. She has published extensively on Medieval literature and Postcolonial studies. She is the Editor of *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*.

Ghazi Gheblawi Born 1975 in Tripoli, Libya. His first collection of short stories in Arabic (Till when..?) was published in 2001 and his second collection of short stories (A face knows no sadness) was published in 2007. Ghazi translates literary works from and into both English and Arabic languages. He resides in London where he works as a doctor.

Fady Joudah is a Palestinian-American physician and translator of Mahmoud Darwish's recent poetry collection, *The Butterfly's Burden*. His first book of poetry *The Earth in the Attic* was the winner of the Yale Series for Younger Poets of 2007.

Lotfali Khonji lives in London. His translation work includes *Closed Circuit* by Shadab Vajdi and *A Manifesto for an International Front* (Dr. M.A. Khonji). His works in Persian include *A Grammar of the Larestani Language* and Persian translations of Denis Wright's *The English amongst the Persians* and *Edward Said's Orientalism*.

Jennifer Langer writes poetry and is editor of four anthologies of exiled literature (Five Leaves), the latest being *If Salt Has Memory: Jewish Exiled Writers*, 2008. She has an MA in Cultural Memory.

Esther Lipton is a retired lawyer and has an MA in Jewish Ethics. She writes poetry and short stories.

Victor Mavedzenge was a Harare based visual artist, comedian, poet and actor who appeared in the play *Territory* which was featured at the 2006 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. He arrived in London in late 2007.

Biko Mutsaurwa is a Zimbabwean poet and political activist. He studied Shona language and literature at the University of Zimbabwe, where he became involved in student politics and became Secretary for Research and Education of the Zimbabwe National Students' Union. He is a founding member of the Uhuru Network, a network of community youth in Harare struggling for social justice, and was the co-creator of the monthly Poetry Slam at the Book Café.

William Mbwembe came to the UK in 2003 as a refugee from Zimbabwe, where he was a manager in a small company in Harare. He settled in Swansea where he worked in the voluntary sector and helped to establish the African Community Centre, becoming its first manager in 2005. He died after a long illness in January 2007 and is buried in Zimbabwe.

Nesreen Melek left Baghdad in 1978 where she worked as a teacher of Zoology and Microbiology in a Medical institute. She lived in England, Syria and Egypt before emigrating to Canada. She writes both poetry and prose.

Isabelle Romaine a French Cameroonian, graduated in Geography at Lyon II University. She taught at a lycée in Dakar, Senegal. She has an M.Phil. in English Literature and an MA in Cultural Memory. She writes short stories.

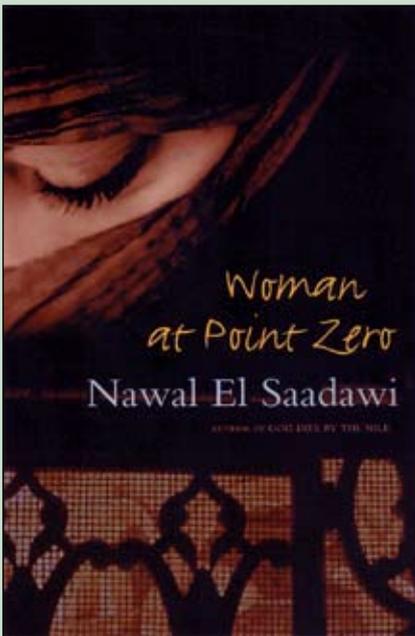
Fathieh Saudi born in Jordan, completed her medical studies in France. Her books include *L'oubli Rebel* in French and *Days of Amber* in Arabic. Her first poetry collection is entitled: *The Prophets*.

Eugene Ulman is a documentary film-maker, writer and translator. Born in St Petersburg, Russia, most of his recent work has been around Africa. His current film, a city portrait of Zimbabwe's capital Harare, is currently in production.

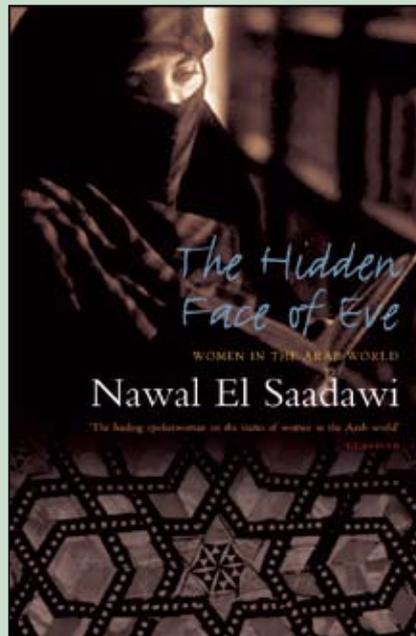
Nahida Yasin was born in Jerusalem and left Palestine as a refugee in 1967 at the age of seven during the Six-Day-War. After living in several different countries, she settled in the UK in 1985 and currently lives in Liverpool. Her poetry collection is entitled *I Believe in Miracles: a Collection of Palestinian Poems*.

Haifa Zangana is a novelist and former prisoner of Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime. She is a weekly columnist for al-Quds newspaper and an occasional commentator for the Guardian, Red Pepper and al-Ahram Weekly. *Through the Vast Halls of Memory*, her biographical novel was published in 1990 in English and in 1995 Arabic. Three collections of short stories followed: *The Ant's Nest* (1996), *Beyond What the Eye Sees* (1997) and *The Presence of Others* (1999). She has since published two more novels: *Keys to a City* in 2000 and *Women on a Journey* in 2001. She edited and published *Halabja*.

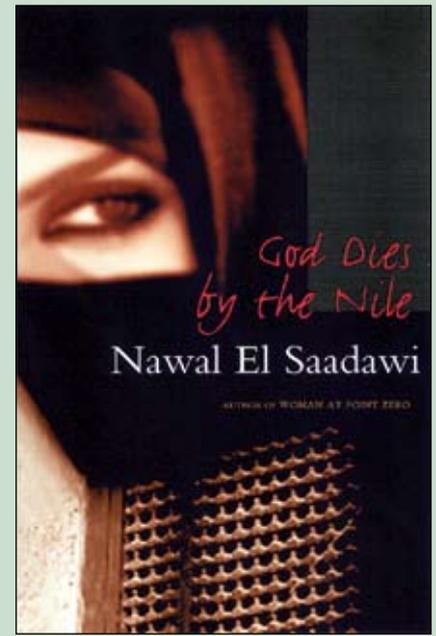
NAWAL EL SAADAWI



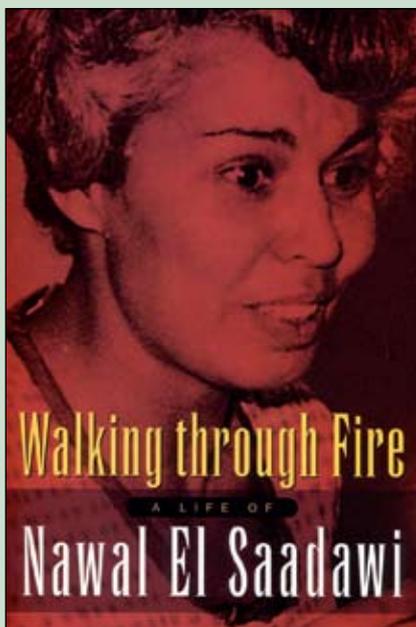
'Quietly formidable ... its understated evocation of tragedy and strength in the face of victimization make it a graceful classic'
Women's Review



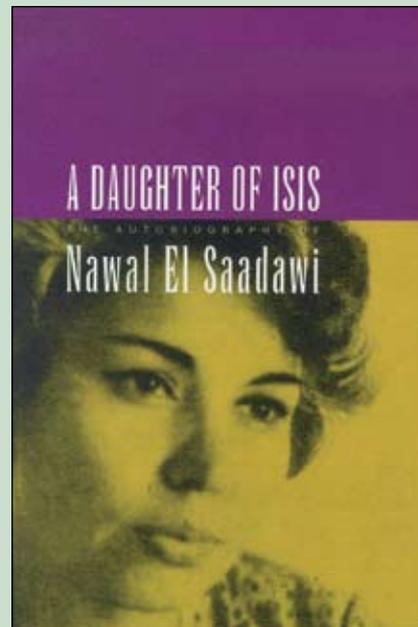
'Nawal el Saadawi writes with directness and passion, transforming the systematic brutalisation of peasants and of women into powerful allegory'
The New York Times Book Review



'A harrowing expose of the abuse of women in the Arab world'
The London Review of Books



'El Saadawi's poetic prose and searing details keep the pages alive with stories of triumph, dissent, death and disappointment'
San Francisco Chronicle



'Texts which are as subversive as they are moving...'
Modern African Studies



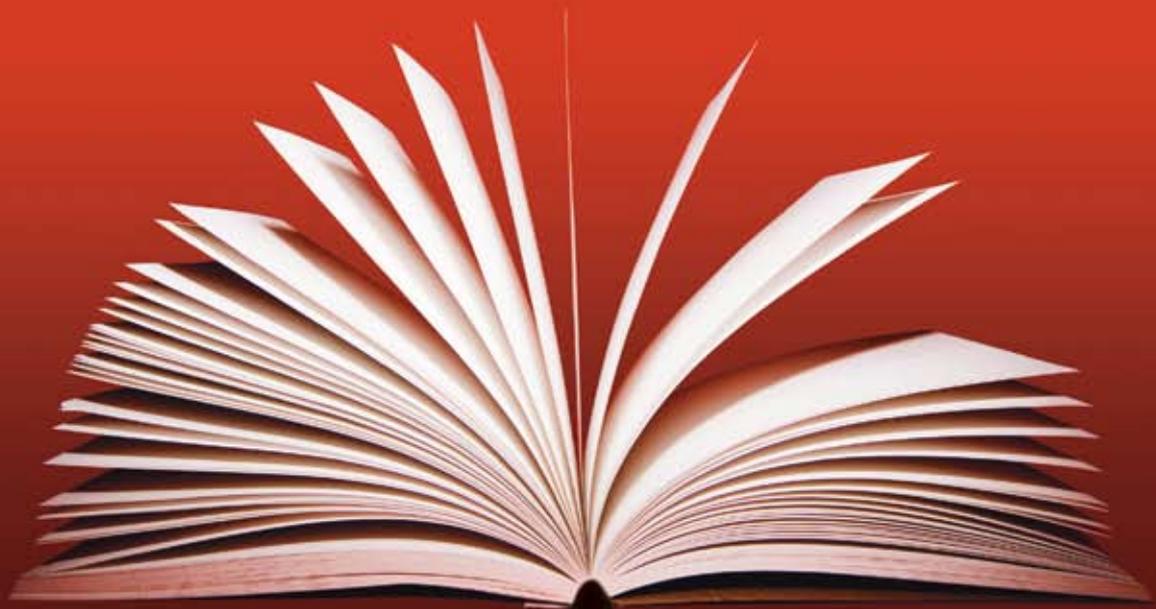
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