

Contemporary Lebanese Women Writers[☆]



by Dr. Nazik Saba Yared

This lecture, says Dr. Yared, does not deal with Lebanese women poets, nor with Lebanese women who write in French and English, nor with women who write children's books. It discusses women writers most representative of the different genres, subjects and trends in contemporary Lebanese feminine literature and two outstanding female critics:

Rose Ghorayyeb and Khalida Said.

[☆] This article is an abridged and edited version of a lecture given by Dr. Nazek Saba Yared at the Goethe Institute in Beirut on 24/1/85. Dr. Yared is a lecturer in Arabic at Beirut University College. (see *Al-Raida*, No. 30, p. 10).

Rose Ghrayyeb, older of the two, known through such works as *«Aesthetic Criticism and its Role in Arabic Criticism»* (1952) *«Introduction to Modern Criticism»* (1971), has introduced Arab readers and students to subjects little covered by others.

Rose Ghorayyeb has also written some very valuable studies on Gibran Khalil Gibran and May Ziadeh - whose works had not been previously analysed - with scrupulous objectivity and intelligence.

In addition to these studies is her *«Breezes and Storms in Contemporary Arab Women's Poetry»* (1980), which is the first book that analyzes the poetry of female Arab poets, pointing out its flaws, beauty and innovation.

Another outstanding literary critic is **Khalida Said** whose articles are published in literary journals such as *«Shi'r»* (Poetry), *«Mawaqif»* (Standpoints), *«Fusul»* (Seasons) and others.

What is new in **Khalida Said's** work is that she introduces Arab readers to «difficult» literature, i.e. literature that differs from the classical or romantic style they are accustomed to. She points out the depths and hidden meanings behind the words, symbols and imagery in the «new, strange and ambiguous» poetry of contemporary poets like Unsi al-Hajj, Badr Shaker as-Sayab and Said's husband, Adonis. Her latest articles are very much influenced by modern semantics and structuralism.

Yared points out that women writers of Lebanon have not written many autobiographies. One of the rare ones is that of **Anbara Salam el Khalidi's** *«A Trip in Memory from Lebanon to Palestine»* (1978), (see *Al-Raida*, No. 26, p. 2-3).

However, autobiography plays a key part in many of their novels. For example, **Emily Nasrallah**, who wrote her first novel *«Birds of September»* in 1962, relied a lot on her childhood in the village to depict the theme of migration. Twenty years later she took up the same theme in *«Going Against Time»* (1981), picking up the threads she had left in her first novel.

The main theme of Lebanese women novelists is themselves, and the problems women face in general, states the lecturer. She cites **Leyla Baalbaki's** two

novels: *«I live»* and *«The Deformed Gods»* and her collection of short stories *«A Spaceship of Tenderness to the Moon»* **Emily Nasrallah's**; *«Oleander Tree,»* *«The Hostage,»* *«Those Memories,»* *«Women in 17 Stories»* **Hanan Ash-Sheikh's** *«The Devil's Steed»* and *The Story of Zahra.»*

These stories, says Yared, are the means through which these women writers delved into their own depths, to find out and to show us the truth of woman's deepest self. However, they only dealt with the various implications of love and marriage, which are only two among the many phenomena in a society that binds woman, that gives her little respect and that does not consider her as having equal capacities as man.

Leyla Baalbaki's books, for instance, are a fierce revolt against people's hypocrisy and lies. They rage against a society which refuses to grant women equal rights to men and deprives them of their freedom and independence, considering them mere instruments created to satisfy men's pleasures and desires. The reader is taken aback by her courage and outspokenness in describing these sexual desires; after all, she wrote these works back in the fifties.

Moreover, her revolt against man and society leads her to utter disrespect, refusal and defiance. Facing her father, Lina Fayad, the heroine of *«I live,»* says: «I felt a growing desire in my shoe to rub his nose in the mud and to obliterate him». The violence of these words reflects her hatred and revolt, says Dr. Yared. Traditional marriage in the young heroine's opinion is a form of slavery and a humiliation to women. This is why she hates her mother as well: «My poor mother! All she knows about life is to share a man's bed, cook for him and bring up his children». Lina has no respect for any woman who offers her body, liberty and life in return for financial security. When describing the relationship between Lina and her communist boyfriend Baha', **Leyla Baalbaki** shows us how the young men who claim to be «progressive» are as conservative and reactionary as their elders with regard to women.

Baalbaki's revolt goes even further, for she rejects such moral and intellectual values as love, friendship, respect for knowledge, culture and professors. Unfortunately, because of this desire to provoke, we find in **Baalbaki's** novels unconvincing exaggerations, tedious repetitions, long exposés and simplistic declarations.

Emily Nasrallah's novel, «The Hostage», (1974) and Hanan Ash-Sheikh's, «The Story of Zahra» (1980) are both artistically superior and more mature than Baalbaki's novel's.

Nasrallah's novel tells the story of Rania who was a hostage and victim of backward marriage customs, and who married a rich old man against her will.

The theme of the story is not new, but the author uses a symbolic style in telling it. To start with, the name chosen for the main characters are symbolic. The hero's name, «Namrood», suggests power and strength in Arabic. That of the heroine derives its origin from the Arabic verb «rana,» which means to contemplate quietly. Her name thus symbolizes two things: her contemplative emancipation which is a dream (i.e. cannot be realized) and her incapacity to realize this dream. The author also shows us that education pushes a woman to rebel against her drab reality; Rania's university degree «became a path to revolt.» Moreover, the university graduate, Marwan, is in Rania's eyes, the ideal husband for a conscious and educated woman because marriage with him would be based on equality, mutual love, respect and understanding. But although the reader might expect that love and liberty will triumph after Rania becomes aware of the backward traditions enslaving her, she in fact leaves Marwan to go back to Namrood.



Emily Nasrallah

The «Story of Zahra,» by Hanan Ash-Sheikh, is also about woman as victim, although it differs completely from Emily Nasrallah's «The Hostage.» Here too we find that the heroine's name is symbolic. «Zahra» means flower: the seeds and beauty of life. What is the story of this flower?

She is a flower trampled and crushed by men. The novel shows however that backward norms and traditions play a big role in Zahra's tragedy. Moreover it is the man who sticks to those norms and traditions: he overlooks them when he wants to love a woman, then suddenly clings back to them and kills her if she becomes a threat to his independence or what he considers his «honor.»

To dramatize this reality, Hanan ash-Sheikh has divided her novel into two parts. The first part is the story of Zahra who was loved by a married man who lies to her and takes advantage of her love and naiveté in order to satisfy his sexual desires. Zahra is then obliged to get an abortion and her life becomes a nightmare haunted by fear: fear of her father, then of her husband. She becomes numbed, even crazed by fear, incapable of love and of having normal relations with her husband, who finally divorces her.

The second part of the story takes place during the first years of the war in Lebanon. Here Zahra is confronted by the horrors of this war; she sees how property is looted,



innocent lives are taken and how all moral, religious and human values are disappearing. We hear her say: «The war has swept away beauty, riches, fear and traditions, exactly as it has done with the corpses»!

So this time Zahra yields to her sexual desires out of her own free will, and not as a prey man. But when she tells her lover, a sniper, that she is pregnant and cannot abort the child, he kills her, although he is the father of the child.

The novelist's technique is a mature one, states Dr. Yared. In the first chapter the heroine, who is also the narrator of the story, recalls some vivid, but vague and disconnected memories of her childhood. As she grows

older these memories become clearer to her and to the reader and we realize that her mother used to meet a secret lover and take her little daughter with her in order to allay her husband's suspicion.

Zahra is the frightened witness and victim, first of her mother's treason, then of her father's wrath, when he discovers the truth and beats up Zahra for having withheld it. In fact the story of Zahra can be summarized as the intermingling of sex and fear with the resultant feelings of solitude and loneliness. Furthermore, the greatest part of the narrative is in the form of a monologue, which accentuates Zahra's solitude and incapacity for communicating with society.

If woman loses her identity, personality and happiness whether she yields to the customs, traditions and norms of society or revolts against them, where is she to find happiness and fulfillment, asks Dr. Yared. She might, Dr. Yared suggests, find the answer in **Hanan ash-Sheikh's** novel, «**The Devil's Steed**» (1975) and in **Emily Nasrallah's**, «**Those Memories**» (1980), despite the difference in their style. Moreover, she adds, I don't think I'm mistaken in saying that both novels are camouflaged autobiography and in both the heroine is in fact the narrator».

In sum, what the three novelists, **Leyla Baalbaki, Hanan ash-Sheikh and Emily Nasrallah**, have in common, despite a great difference in style, are two major points: They all deplore the miserable and empty life of the woman who is considered only as a sex object and a mother and they all show that a conscious woman has to struggle to change her life. However, we feel that Lebanese women novelists consider women's deliverance to lie in a marriage based on true love, equality and mutual respect for if the continuity of life depends on the physical relations between both sexes then the happiness of this life depends on the moral, mental and spiritual relations between them.

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