

ALJADID

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Silencing the Singer

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Silencing the Singer

BY ELIE CHALALA

A day after he had sang in protest in the square of his hometown, Ibrahim Kashoush was found dead, floating in the Orontes (Al Asi) River. The fate of Ibrahim Kashoush reflects the anger that has been driving Syrians in almost every corner of the country onto the streets and in front of the bullets of the security forces. Kashoush was a popular Syrian singer— and by popular I mean that he sang the songs of the people, as opposed to having been a pop star. However, after publicly singing folk songs that were subsequently repeated by half a million demonstrators in the city of Hama, Ibrahim Kashoush was murdered by Assad's *Shabiha*, or thugs, who and deliberately removed his vocal chords both to make a political statement and to prevent him from ever being able to utter *Irhal ya Bashar* (Bashar Get Out) again.

Kashoush was a folk singer known for his performances at weddings. He chanted traditional *Aradah* tunes as protest songs, and added new lyrics that he wrote himself to the old wedding and celebration melodies, according to Freemuse, a respected website whose specialty is monitoring music censorship. His voice was deep and sad as he sang slogans that he either wrote, borrowed from other songwriters, or compiled from what protestors chanted in Hama, Homs, Dara and other cities.

Kashoush's murder is a hideous reminder that the situations in which protest music is most urgent and potent are usually those in which playing it carries the greatest risk. The courage necessary to sing out in an environment so brutally intolerant of dissent is hard to imagine. According to the Freemuse website: "Ibrahim Kashoush's lyrics were too dangerous and offensive, a reminder that you can lose your life in Syria for being armed with strong will and a vocal spirit."

Ibrahim Kashoush's *Yalla Erhal Ya Bashar* (Bashar Get Out) has become a rallying cry for the opposition not only in Hama but throughout Syria:

Bashar, depart from here
You lost all your legitimacy
Depart depart, Bashar
Bashar, you are not one of us
Take Mahir (Basher's brother) and depart from here
Depart depart, Bashar
Bashar, you are lying
You had bad speech
Freedom is very near
Depart depart, Bashar

While very few can recall such ugly crimes, even in the darkest of ages, there are in fact some recent parallels to be

found with Kashoush's murder. Consider the Chilean musician Victor Jara (1932-1973), who suffered severe punishment due to his criticism of the Pinochet government that overthrew the democratically elected Salvador Allende in early 1973. Shortly after the Chilean coup of September 11, 1973, Jara was arrested, tortured and finally shot to death



By Mark Sharp for Al Jadid

with 44 bullets. His body was later thrown out into the street of a shanty-town in Santiago. Similarly, Kashoush's somewhat mutilated body was thrown into the Orontes River. The contrast between the themes of love, peace and social justice in Jara's songs, and the brutal way in which he was murdered transformed him into a symbol of struggle for human rights and justice across Latin America. Likewise, the chants of Kashoush have also become a symbol of struggle, and they are repeated by protesters not only in Hama but also in other Syrian cities. In fact, his words have even been chanted in other parts of the world as demonstrators have gathered to denounce the atrocities of the Syrian regime.

Few observers captured the personality of this simple working class man better than Hussam Itani in his column in Al Hayat newspaper. The article's title is fitting: "The Voice of Hama."

Itani describes Kashoush's voice as having been raw, blunt, and untrained by musical schooling or instruction. His voice resembled those of construction workers and peddlers in poor neighborhoods. He was not an academic, a philosopher, or an ideologue, which was evident in the lyrics he seems to have thrived on chanting. As Itani put it, Kashoush's "words simplify complex political positions." Consider slogans like "Freedom to all, down with despotism, end corruption."

The hundreds of thousands who chanted along with Kashoush did so laughing and clapping for his lyrics as if they were their own. When history mentions Syria and Hama, the voice of Kashoush will be recalled as the unifier of the people of Hama, and other Syrian cities protesting repression, torture, and incarcerations. The killers were well aware of the danger inherent in what Ibrahim did, namely in denouncing the symbols of fear and terror, and also, as Itani adds, in showing that mockery of the state can roll off the lips as easily as the words of love or *Ataba* (a popular form of song, mainly among workers and peasants).

With respect to brutal crimes, the Syrian regime has an almost unmatched record, and its cruelty has constituted a sort of dark age for its people, as well as for some of its neighbors. One need only recall what happened in Lebanon 31 years ago. On March 4, 1980, a terrible crime was committed that brimmed with a symbolism akin to that inherent in the one perpetrated against Ibrahim Kashoush. Just as Hamad (a Hama resident) found the tortured body of Ibrahim Kashoush in the Orontes River, a Lebanese shepherd similarly found the body of a middle-aged man with a mangled hand. This story is recounted in Al-Nahar newspaper by journalist and TV news talk-show host, Ali Hamadeh. The body was that of the eminent Lebanese journalist Salim al-Lowzi, then publisher of the London-based Al Hawadeth Magazine. After having spent some time in Lebanon following the death of his mother, the journalist was kidnapped en route to the airport for his return trip to London and held captive for eight days. According to Hamadeh's account, there was no doubt that the Syrians were behind the killing and that the decision was taken at the highest level in Damascus. He was killed by one of the Syrian-

supported Palestinian armed groups, Al Saiqa (ironically a member of the PLO at the time and therefore supposedly committed to liberation of Palestine!).

Al-Lowzi had expressed disapproval of the Syrian regime. His brother, Mustafa al-Lowzi, had previously been the victim of a political assassination in the city of Tripoli. In eulogizing his brother, Salim wrote as if he knew that it was only a matter of time before he would meet a similar fate. "And tomorrow if the military intelligence succeeded in implementing its order to assassinate me—and it is capable of this because of its many different tools—I would have deserved my fate, and it would be my wife's and daughters' consolation, as well as of my brother's nine children, that I loved my country and remained loyal to my profession," wrote al-Lowzi.

The journalist's body was discovered with a mostly dissolved hand, which resulted from dousing it in acid. The symbolism could not be lost on many people in Lebanon at the time — dissolution of an offending hand was appropriate punishment for anyone who dared use the pen to protest.

Al-Lowzi was killed under the father, Hafez, while Kashoush was killed under the son, Bashar. Hamadeh references the ironic slogans used by Hama demonstrators, such as "Hafez killed my grandfather in 1982, and Bashar killed my father in 2011."

AT LAST: Lebanese Cultural and Artistic Communities Protest Syrian Atrocities

It has been a mystery to many as to why the Lebanese, who successfully fought Syrian domination of their country by fomenting what is known as the Cedar Revolution, have stood relatively silent on the current popular uprising in neighboring Syria. Having suffered under the Assads for 30 years, the Lebanese were expected to be at the forefront of the international movement of solidarity with the Syrian people. Astonishingly, though, they merely looked on while many groups in scores of world capitals vigorously protested the atrocities in Syria.

How can we explain this? In fact there are some very specific reasons for the Lebanese reserve. Some members of its progressive community attribute the seeming indifference to sectarianism in Lebanon. Bluntly put, because the groups supporting the Syrian uprising would predominantly hail from the Sunni Muslim community, while the pro-Assad group would come from the Shiite Muslim community, there has always existed the possibility that Lebanon could erupt in further civil sectarian-based strife as the result of these clashing allegiances; expressions of solidarity could break Lebanon's fragile communal peace.

Thus the solution of non-intervention was arrived at to prevent overt and incendiary displays of solidarity, since, as some have put it, "the security of Syria is the security of Lebanon." This same strategy was employed with respect to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), which was set up to investigate the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik

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Writing Together: Two Generations of Arab Americans Serve the Public Purpose

BY HOLLY ARIDA AND RICHARD ALAN POPP

The events of September 11 caused a considerable increase in curiosity about the Arab World and, in particular, about Arab Americans. All too often, this void was filled by images in the mainstream media that did a poor job of reflecting the true essence of Arab people or Arab culture. In order to educate the non-Arab public and combat the negative stereotypes that persisted, a contemporary movement of Arab-American writers and artists began to come together to take on this critical task. In recent years, this new generation of Arab-American writers has received so much attention for their talent and achieved such popularity that their work has developed into something of a genre. This new genre is made up of playwrights, satirists, poets, essayists, novelists, and scholars. They work either individually or collaborate through anthologies, organizations, or writing collectives to expand their readers' awareness of common Arab-American themes; these include migration, cross-cultural identity, family, war, homeland, and America.

However, this is not the first generation of Arab-American authors to come together artistically. Although overshadowed by the popularity of Gibran, the Al-Mahjar generation of writers possessed a profoundly collective spirit. Some of the most renowned writers of this era were commonly referred to as the Pen Bond or *al-Rabitah al-Qalamiyah* during the early part of the 20th century, appearing in two different incarnations (first in 1916 and then from 1920 to 1931). Spearheaded by Nasib Aridah, Abd al-Masih Haddad, and later Mikhail Naimy and Gibran, this group published many of its original works in the high-minded literary journal *Al-Funun*. Although separated by over half a century and subject to different historical circumstances, the Al-Mahjar share with the new generation the tendency to fuse diverse cultural identities, the compulsion to take action and publish together, and, most

importantly, the motivation to introduce their audiences to a new moral ideal by writing with the intention of serving a higher purpose.

Historical Impact

Mostly of Syrian or Lebanese origin, early Arab-American immigrants brought their old-world sectarian rivalries and feuds with them. According to Alixa Naff's "Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience," the Maronites and Eastern Orthodox made news when their mutual animosities boiled over on to the streets of New York City (along with their knives, pistols, and clubs) on 24 October 1905. The New York Times account of the battle related the incident in pejorative terms, referring to the participants as swarthy easterners. Although these rivalries generated revenue for the Times, they did little to unify the expatriate community, much less to integrate it into greater American society. Rather, these skirmishes reflected a continued conformity with the dictates of Old World sectarianism, unfortunately increasing the sense of the immigrants' otherness on



Nasib Arida, his wife Najibah Haddad and niece Nora Haddad. Image courtesy of the authors.

the part of the general American public. This sectarian identity (e.g. Maronite and Orthodox) began to change with (1) the arrival of larger numbers of Arab-American women, which led to permanent settlement in the New World, (2) the outbreak of World War I and the elimination of the Ottoman Empire, (3) the onset of the Syrian Famine and (4) the arrival of a new generation of writers concerned about creating a

broader social identity both in the United States and the Middle East.

The Mahjar writers who were trying to create a broader social identity could not rely on the preexisting concept of a “Greater Syrian identity,” since it was not part of the early Arab American community’s mind-set until after Syria was no longer under the control of the Ottoman Turks. The majority of the earliest Arab immigrants traveled west to make their fortunes, primarily from peddling, with the intention of returning home. As a result, it was not in their interest to criticize the ruling powers in their homeland. Although some Arabs began to settle permanently in the United States by the turn of the century, any expression of discontent with the Ottoman Empire, even from individuals in the New World, continued to be met with direct punishment of the offender or, when circumstances did not permit, with retribution visited upon the transgressor’s family. While this generally stifled criticism of the Ottomans, it did not mean that the early Arab American writers totally censored themselves, especially with the advent of the famine in greater Syria (1915-1918) and the popular feeling that the disaster was exacerbated by the Ottoman Turks. Coming together around a public concern, the Arab American literary journal *Al-Funun* published an entire issue dedicated to the crisis in 1916. Many members of the famous *al-Rabitah al-Qalamiyah* also contributed to this edition. Gibran drew the cover of the magazine, as well as a number of other drawings within the issue, and contributed a prose poem titled “Mata Ahli” (Dead are My People).

@@The subsequent creation of the French and British Mandates advocated a greater role for their ethnic groups within their homeland. For example, the status of Lebanon after the war and the possibility of its becoming an independent state instigated a great deal of discussion and spilling of ink in the Arab American community, especially in Naoum Anthony Mokarzel’s *Al-Hoda* periodical. With the development of a literary class among the community that encouraged a more inclusive identity, these later generations of Arab Americans who had begun to establish roots in the U.S., intermarrying gradually with non-Arabs, began conceptualizing their Arab identities in regional rather than local terms.

Today’s generation of writers has similarly come together out of shared historical circumstances and public purpose; however, they are a much more diverse group of writers. While the al-Mahjar writers generally hailed from Greater Syria,

the second half of the twentieth century saw a greater heterogeneity in Arab immigrants- in particular there were more Muslim Arabs. Correspondingly, writers today are more varied in terms of religious background and gender, in contrast to the largely Christian male composition of *al-Rabitah*. Female and Muslim writers now have a much more visible presence among contemporary diaspora writers. This group utilizes a wider range of forms and artistic mediums, including theater, television, film, spoken word, and music. While a large and talented network of writers still concentrates in New York, Arab American writing is a national phenomenon and our literary magazines, such as *Mizna* and *Al-Jadid*, coupled with organizations like RAWI (Radius of Arab American Writers), pursue a broad spectrum of undertakings and are spread out across the country.

As with *Al-Mahjar*, today’s writers have been shaped by seismic historical events in the Arab homeland. Three key events stand out: the 1967 War with Israel that galvanized Arab Americans into political organization and action; the Lebanon Wars that not only began a new wave of Lebanese migration in the 1970’s and 1980’s, but whose sheer destructiveness impassioned the writers to act; and, of course, 9/11 and the subsequent “War on Terror” that inspired Arab- American authors to define themselves and fight against stereotypes springing from terrorism and a public propensity toward collective blame. The 2003 U.S. led invasion of Iraq and Israel’s recent forays into Lebanon and Gaza have provoked today’s Arab American writers to elaborate on the topics of war, homeland and identity, with the aim of raising a w a r e n e s s . The tipping point in the recent wave of Arab-American writing is commonly traced to the 1998 publication of the anthology “Grape Leaves” by Greg Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa, who traced the work of Arab-

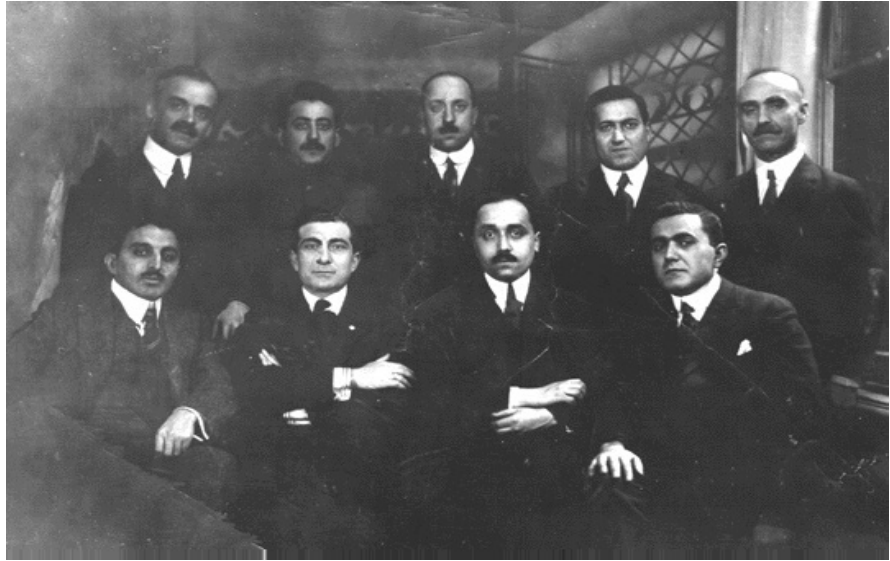
American writers from *Al-Mahjar*’s Rihani, Gibran and Naimy through the middle generation. The volume highlighted greats like Etel Adnan, D.H. Melhem, and showcased rising stars like Naomi Shihab Nye and Elmaz Abinader. The anthology’s introduction unified these different generations of writers: “When a people leaves the dry, hot lands of civilization’s oldest cities (Damascus, Byblos, Jericho) and finds itself in one of the youngest countries on earth – what happens? Poetry for one thing. Like mint in a wall-crack, poetry sprouts from such ruptures of sensibility... It is the purpose of this anthology of



Title page of the first edition of Al-Funun, April 1913

poetry by Americans of Arab descent to evident that fertile rupture.”

Among others, the anthology featured the work of Lawrence Joseph, who wrote of his yearning for his ancestral soil, remembering the “Lebanon of grandpa giving me my first coin.” Agonized in recalling a cousin describing “his niece’s head severed with bullets, in Beirut, in civil war,” Joseph also recounts the sting of anti-Arab prejudice in America: “Sand nigger;” I’m called, and the name fits,” he declared in his famous poem of the same name. Tracing a clear line back to Al-Mahjar, “Grape Leaves” featured a current generation of writers forging a collective identity as they came together to write and publish.



Members of *al-Rabitah al-Qalamiyah*. Back: Rashid Ayyub, Unknown, Nadra Haddad, Nasib Aridah, Wadi Bahut Front: Amin al-Rihani, William Catzeflis, Abd al-Masih Haddad, Ilyas Attah
Allah Image courtesy of the Authors

Coming together for the Public Purpose

Different historical circumstances motivated both generations not only to write, but also to collaborate and rally around a purpose larger than themselves, their craft, or their individual careers. Writing together, the Mahjar and contemporary writers set out to inform, shape and move their audience toward a greater good. Particularly inspired by Transcendentalism and classic Russian literature the Mahjar writers were concerned primarily with the spiritual and material welfare of their countrymen in both the homeland and the U.S. Today, the political landscape vis-à-vis the Arab World has motivated contemporary Arab-American writers toward civic engagement, bringing them together to combat stereotypes, address social injustice, and educate the public. There are significant differences between the audiences of these two generations of writers. The Mahjar wrote primarily in Arabic for an Arab American audience that had a diminishing ability to understand Arabic, whereas contemporary writers serve the public purpose by educating a mostly non-Arab readership or audience.

The desire to mold public discourse as it relates to the Arab World, Islam, and Arab America has dictated the themes and approach of contemporary writers. The Mahjar writers were certainly not living and writing in a period of ethnic and religious tolerance, but the *zeitgeist* was markedly different. Today’s writers combat ethnic and religious bigotry and promote understanding of both Arab and Arab-American culture, as well as of conflicts in the Arab World. Over the last decade in particular, Arab-American writers have done much collaborating: they have published innumerable anthologies of their work, formed writing collectives, and taught writing in the nation’s best universities. They have also produced plays with Arab-American themes that have toured both nationally and internationally, written comedy for group performances, made

television appearances, and been recognized by the New York Times as an emerging class of playwrights and authors. Their organization, RAWI, has expanded and held multiple national conferences, and writers are featured in the Arab American National Museum’s bi-annual DIWAN conference and are eligible for their annual book awards. In a time when there is suspicion that any Arab American may be a “terrorist,” today’s writers show courage in confronting cultural and political misunderstanding for the benefit of their readers. The stakes have never been higher, and writers are banding together in various ways to speak truth to power and be recognized for their contributions.

As with contemporary writers, the public purpose for the Mahjar was primarily concerned with addressing the issue of identity in light of given historical circumstances. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Mahjar writers envisioned a less sectarian and more unified “Arab” identity for their audience of fellow immigrants. It is interesting to note that there was no Arab, much less Arab-American identity prior to World War I. Instead, it was largely the reformulation of the Middle East that happened in the wake of the war which brought an unprecedented opening to imagine and realize new possibilities for the homeland to which the *Al-Rabitah* writers retained such a strong connection.

Many of the Mahjar writers retained a sense of attachment to their homeland and never acquired American citizenship. However, because cross-Atlantic travel was difficult and their families were tied to life in America, the *Al-Rabitah* writers could seldom return home to the countries of their birth. Instead, they dedicated themselves to bringing their home countries to their new setting, invigorating their community in New York with a new and broader sense of self. By forging an Arab identity that went beyond the parochial, these writers were able to create a meaningful identity that was more regional and more cohesive, and based on a mutual heritage. Through their transcendentalism

and romanticism, the Mahjar embraced the unprecedented notion that Muslims and Christians shared a regional history and language that made inter-religious harmony possible.

Al-Rabitah supported the growth of such a community through their choice of language and literary themes. Additionally, these writers used their privileged position as a platform to speak out and take political action. A key tactic was their move away from traditional meter and obscure vocabulary, since the Arab immigrants of New York were generally descended from peasants, as opposed to an educated elite. This meant that their ability to speak even kitchen Arabic, much less formal Arabic, was dwindling. Consequently, the Mahjar poets adopted a less formal style and meter, sometimes using vernacular to preserve the language by breathing new life into it. For example, the famous Lebanese singer Fairuz sang lines from Gibran's poem "Two Voices": "Give me the flute and sing!" The writings of *Al-Rabitah* often called for unity. For instance, in Gibran's letter "To Muslims from a Christian Poet" that was printed in *Al-Funkn* 1 in November 1913, the poet praised the prophet Muhammad. *Al-Rabitah* writers played the public role of bridge to the Arab World. For example, Amin Rihani introduced 'Abd al-'Aziz al Saud to President Franklin Roosevelt. In a common spirit and through their words and deeds, this early generation committed itself to a public purpose that defied preoccupation with individual career.

Common Purpose

Distinct historical circumstances drew these two generations of writers together to serve a common objective. Through their writing, the Mahjar were trying to explain themselves *to themselves* both by transforming the Arabic language and by promoting a wider conception of identity among their audience of first, second and third generation immigrants. The contemporary writers have taken it a step further by trying to explain themselves to a non-Arab audience in order to combat ignorance and stereotyping. In 1990, shortly after "Grape Leaves" was published, the question was raised as to whether contemporary writers could inherit this mantle. According to a Saudi Aramco review article in 1990 entitled "Poetry in the Blood," "the living generation of 'Grape Leaves' poets...owes little allegiance, if any, to the Mahjar school. Dispersed across the United States, these poets in no sense comprise a literary movement like the Pen Bond; indeed, many had not known each others' work prior to coming together in the anthology." Yet, the level of interaction, collaboration and collective spirit with which today's writers meet onerous challenges to the Arab American community demonstrates their ability to inherit this mantle; they do indeed have "poetry in the blood." **AJ**

Please note that Al Jadid has new telephone number and new e-mail address

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A Butterfly from Jisr al-Shoghour By Hala Mohammed

(1)

The butterfly landed on my hand this morning
My only complaint is
The beauty of its colors

(2)

This morning
The blue sky did not rise
Neither did Hamza wake

(3)

The butterfly said: I am Turkish. . . and you?
The refugee said: I . . .

The butterfly said: how old are you?
The refugee girl said: I died seven days ago.

The butterfly said: where is your homeland?
The girl said: my home

The butterfly said: and your neighbors?
She said: the flowers in the fields of Jisr el-Shoghour.

The butterfly said: and your mother?

.....

She looked around
At the white tents
At the void
At the light's chill
.... At the coffin
.....

A refugee is not entitled to history or geography
.....

She looked
And looked
She grew older
Her hair turned white
.....

She pointed
To a land just beyond the border
With blue skies
And no boundaries
She spelled her name letter by letter
She kissed her name letter by letter
She knelt
Kissed the bank of the river
And said: my mother is Syria

Translated from the Arabic by Basil Samara

The Arabic version of this poem appeared in *As Safir* newspaper

New Media and the Arab Spring

BY MICHAEL TEAGUE

The widespread unrest that has gripped the Middle East in recent months came as a shock, even to those of us who follow the region closely from afar. This is not so much because the events were unforeseeable or improbable, but rather because it was difficult to create a mental image of a successful massive popular uprising, much less several of them at once. Most likely out of despair, we had come to believe in the sadistic efficacy of ruling families and their dreaded *Mukhabarat*. Many of these leaders, if they may be so-called, have held the reins of power for several decades with few serious challenges, and no insignificant amount of Western support. It had become very easy to take this deplorable state of affairs for granted.

Now, however, it is becoming apparent that the rulers themselves had also been taking the status quo for granted. Years of repression, nepotism, corruption, and social and economic disenfranchisement are the all-too-obvious root causes of the frustration that is now spilling out onto the streets and squares of the Arab world as never before. Against unfavorable odds, much skepticism, and brutal violence, these uprisings have already scored a number of significant and dramatic victories, as well as a great deal of world-wide attention and solidarity. Indeed, the speed with which Zein Ben-Ali and Hosni Mubarak have accelerated into irrelevance is astonishing.

With the protests in the wake of the 2009 Iranian presidential elections, we saw how young people literate in the use of new media: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and cellular phones – essentially internet-based tools that allow for the quick and relatively unregulated sharing of information – could confront a disproportionately advantaged opponent and even catch it off guard. Since that time, debate about these new communications technologies has rightly had a ubiquitous presence in the overall discourse, especially with the more recent events in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Algeria, Bahrain, Libya, Syria and so on. All too often, and somewhat predictably, the

infotainment-oriented media has largely missed the point and muddled this debate. Instead of informed discussions about how these relatively new means of exchanging information have contributed to the increased flexibility – or vulnerability – of civil society, activists, establishment journalists and pundits have spent a great deal of time sensationalizing terms like “Iran’s

Twitter Revolution” and “Egypt’s Facebook Revolution” into irreferential and meaningless sound bites. This implies that all one needs to do to spread democracy is give people cell-phones and computers. Some of the punditry even seems to be suggesting that since these new resources were made in the U.S.A., Americans are entitled to some credit for the uprisings that have so aptly made use of the technology. More informed observers, however, are acutely aware of how this presumption might stand in contrast to the powerful symbolism of tear gas canisters that also bear the label “Made in the U.S.A.”



By Rania Ghamlouch for Al Jadid Magazine

More serious versions of the discussion have focused on measuring the extent to which the use of new media has actually been effective in galvanizing popular participation, and helping to create the conditions for meaningful change. A more constructive and reasoned enthusiasm for the role that social networking sites can play is exemplified by Wael Ghonim, Google’s top marketing executive for North Africa and the Middle East, and the creator of the popular Facebook page “We Are All Khaled Said.” By now the Khaled Said affair is widely recognized as the last straw for Egyptians: on June 6, 2010, Said was abducted by Egyptian police in an internet café in Alexandria, and dragged to a nearby empty building where he was beaten to death. The police initially claimed that Said was involved in drug dealing, and died choking on his stash of marijuana, which he was presumably trying to hide from authorities by swallowing. However, shocking images of Said’s mangled face soon surfaced, suggesting a very different story.

As it turns out, Said was in possession of video footage of police sharing the spoils of a drug bust.

In response to these events, Wael Ghonim created the “We Are All Khaled Said” page anonymously, and used it to share the gruesome images of Said’s dead body with other activists and the Egyptian public. It quickly became a forum for sharing all manner of visual evidence of the petty and violent corruption that ordinary Egyptians had been tolerating for far too many years, which never seemed to find its way into state-controlled television and newspapers. Now, it must be said that Egyptians had been publishing this sort of damning evidence on the internet for some time, but Ghonim’s page became a virtual rallying point, consolidating popular anger and bolstering feelings of solidarity, and he also used it to encourage folks to take to the streets. Ghonim is widely recognized as and admits to being one of the first organizers of the protests that eventually sent Hosni Mubarak on his way.

But there is a less pleasant side to this story, and one that does a good job of displaying the double-edged sword that internet activism has shown itself to be. As the unrest in Egypt was starting to take on proportions that were becoming overwhelming for the regime, Ghonim himself was abducted by the secret police and detained for some 12 days, even though he had not yet publically admitted that he

was the creator of “We Are All Khaled Said” (he did so after he was released). Perhaps because of his high profile, Ghonim did not disappear permanently. Nevertheless, the fact that he was arrested in the first place begs the question: how did the authorities know of his connection to the Facebook page?

Jillian York and Evgeny Morozov have considered these dangers most realistically. In an Al Jazeera article titled “The Dangers of Social Media Revolt,” York points to the growing trend of authoritarian regimes adapting to internet activism, even learning how to use services like Facebook and Twitter to conduct a little counterrevolution on the “tech-savvy” opposition. So far we have seen this in places as diverse as Iran, China, Morocco, and Egypt as well. It does not help matters that, even in light of recent events, Facebook has stuck to its policy of requiring users to sign up with their real names, leaving

activists online extremely vulnerable to reprisal (Facebook eventually shut down the original “We Are All Khaled Said” page, despite its popularity, when it came to their attention that the page was created by an anonymous user).

Morozov has made the same point. Speaking of Tunisia in an interview with Mother Jones, he explained the danger quite succinctly: “We can be relatively certain that if Ben Ali didn’t fall, his police would now be carefully studying all tweets and Facebook messages posted during the protest and arresting everyone involved.” Morozov knows this well from his native Belarus, where the government has been involved in these very same activities. Beyond this, Morozov points to other inherent

problems with the use of new media outlets for revolutionary activity. He has been dismissive of journalists and intellectuals that have reflexively propagated ideas like the “Twitter Revolution.” In the case of Iran in 2009, he highlights the fact that the majority of those “tweeters” and “online activists” were folks who were not even present in Iran during the unrest, and furthermore were posting their messages in English rather than Farsi. To make matters worse, many of these presumably well-meaning expatriates were actually *slowing down* the Iranian internet – assailed as it already was by regime interference – with the traffic created by all of their digital outrage and cyber-cheerleading. Also, many

high-profile journalists and commentators (Andrew Sullivan is but one example) invested a great deal of time and energy in extrapolating information from the blogs and postings of these “activists,” and thus presented a distorted image of events in Iran to the rest of the world. Furthermore, with the Obama administration’s request to Twitter to postpone going off-line for routine updates so that the service would remain available to Iranian protestors, social media became politicized, ensuring that no repressive authority would ever again leave the net as unregulated as it had been. That it was only a matter of time before this happened irrespective of the administration’s request is inarguable, but it is certainly not helpful to be giving tips to embattled autocrats who we would otherwise like to see washed away by the tides of change.



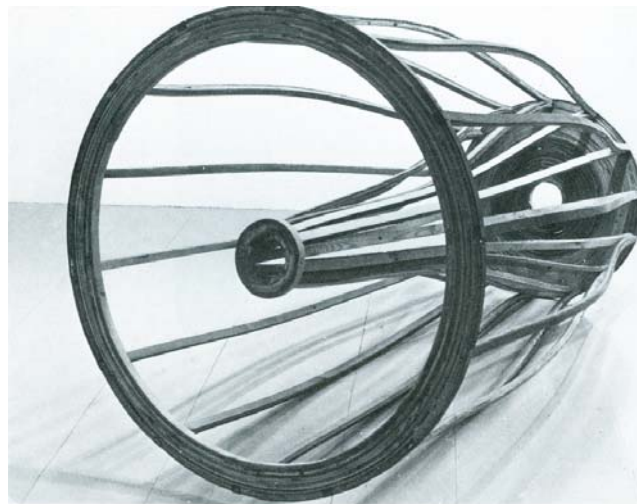
“Untitled,” by Evgenii Rukhin, 1975, from the book “Rukhin.”

The danger here, as Morozov so eloquently states it, is that we run the risk of engaging in “a gigantic exercise in collective transcontinental wishful thinking” that lends itself well to unrealistic hopes and expectations, as well as unpreparedness in the event of government backlash. We need not even use brutal Middle Eastern dictatorships to illustrate this point, for activists in the United States are already quite familiar with official reprisal along these lines. In fact, the federal government of the U.S. has been very creative in setting precedents for using new media in order to criminalize dissent. At the G-20 summit in Pittsburgh of 2009, two anarchists were arrested for posting tweets to fellow protestors about the positioning of riot police (one of the most immediately practical applications of Twitter as well as text messaging in terms of street protest), accusing them, among other dubious charges, of “criminal use of communication facility.” More recently, the justice department has ordered Twitter (as well as a handful of other sites such as Paypal) to hand over the personal information of users affiliated with Wikileaks.

Another aspect to consider along the lines of skeptical thinking is the “kill switch.” Indeed, not only are regimes fast becoming more literate in online communications, it seems that they can also just slow down or shut off the internet and text messaging if things get out of control, as we have seen in Iran, Egypt and elsewhere (the U.S. government is also seeking federal legislation that would define the appropriate circumstances under which the internet could be shut off). If Wael Ghonim exemplifies the successful use of social networking sites and the internet as a tool of resistance, the Mubarak regime exemplifies the increasingly sophisticated understanding that authoritarian governments have of the internet. Indeed, the shut-down of the Egyptian internet that took place on January 28th and lasted for five days was not a simple matter of pressing the “off” button. Renesys is a New Hampshire based outfit that describes itself as “an internet performance and intelligence company” that monitors internet connectivity and data routing trends worldwide. They closely monitored the Egyptian internet blackout, and have been quoted in many articles written on the subject, which they describe as “an action unprecedented in internet history.” This is because blocking the net on such a large scale is an extremely complex process that cannot be accomplished with the mere flick of a switch, and it indicates that the authorities had no insignificant amount of preparation for such an eventuality. Surely, the process was made easier by the fact that all Egyptian telecommunications companies are controlled by the state. Shutting off the American internet, by comparison, would be exponentially more difficult to do without much preparation; hence the vocal attempts by some of our more shamelessly authoritarian-minded politicians (Senator Joe Lieberman for instance) to legislate a “kill switch.”

In other words, we should not fall into the trap of underestimating the potency of old-fashioned organizing. Indeed, the participants in Iran’s Green movement did not just emerge from a vacuum once new media came along, but rather were the product of years of patient activism on the part of the

movement’s organizers, and the very same is true in Egypt. Many of the original participants of the “We Are All Khaled Said” Facebook page were experienced activists. They undoubtedly made very effective use of Facebook to rally support, announce demonstrations (as well as faux demonstrations in order to



“Art for Other People No. 5” by Richard Deacon, 1982, from “An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture.”

confuse and misdirect the police), and create solidarity at home and abroad; and surely this helped to amplify pressure on the Mubarak government. But for all of Mr. Ghonim’s pronouncements about an “internet revolution,” one need look no further than David Kirkpatrick’s February 10 article in the New York Times to see how much Ghonim and his associates themselves built their movement, albeit with a good deal of innovation, on traditional methods of organizing.

Prior to the January 28th protests, Ghonim, as part of a group of about 50 people, set out into the poor neighborhoods of Cairo to rally support for their cause. They entered cafes and engaged the citizenry, eschewing ethereal platitudes about democracy, and opting instead to harp on more immediate working-class issues like unemployment and food prices. This leg-work netted them about 7000 supporters in one swoop (as well as two charred police vehicles), by their estimates. Encouraged by this positive result, the intrepid organizers reconvened to draw up more detailed plans in anticipation of the protests that were to take place a few days later. These included setting a public relations trap for the regime by making sure to tip off the press about which mosque the prominent opposition figure Mohammed El Baradei would be appearing at, thereby insuring that images of the Nobel Prize laureate drenched by water cannons would get maximal media coverage. Furthermore, in the planning stages they coordinated with labor unions and the Muslim Brotherhood, groups that have years of experience organizing political action in Egypt.

Had the internet been the only locus of the opposition, one would imagine that the shut-off on January 28 would have had a measurable dampening effect on the demonstrations. As we know, this probably had the opposite effect, putting the desperate

“The Fear of Throats!”

BY DAUD AL-SHIRYAN

tactics of the regime into even starker relief than they had previously been. One young Cairo man with whom I spoke around that time – who was very active in Tahrir square – told me that Egyptian society is already very similar to a social networking site in that information travels fast through family and community bonds. When word got out that internet service was to be severely restricted, everyone just made sure to exchange the numbers to their land lines.

There is little doubt that new media has played a crucial role in the recent agitation against nihilistic regimes. The relative uniformity of message coming from the streets of Middle Eastern cities is to some degree a reflection of this, but efforts must be made to realistically assess the advantages and disadvantages of these new tools if they are to continue to be effective. Thus, the Assad regime’s recent decision to allow Syrians to access social networking sites should not be misinterpreted as Syria “opening up” or “liberalizing,” as it most likely indicates the exact opposite. Also, exaggerating the possibilities of new media can be a distraction from other extremely effective catalysts of the recent uprisings, such as the increasing availability of television networks like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya that has done at least as much to blow the lid off of the media blackout upon which so many of these regimes rely.

The honeymoon period during which geriatric and calcified regimes were dumbfounded by a new, modern threat is certainly finished, and the counterrevolution is well underway. The internet has been instrumental in nourishing the connective tissues that bond activists and the citizenry in general, and has even had more immediate, practical applications. Indeed, in a short span of time, online communications have helped Arabs to redeem the multiple failures of the heady pan-Arab and Arab nationalist dreams of the 50’s and 60’s. If the movements that are unfolding today at such an unpredictable pace are to be successful, however, much more sacrifice still needs to be made. That means, first and foremost, the sacrifice of unreasonable illusions about what is possible and what is not. **AJ**

Hamad is an elderly Syrian man and a devout Muslim who has lived in the city of Hama since he was born. Each day, he wakes up early, heads toward the Orontes River (Al Assi River), washes up and performs dawn prayers in a mosque on his way to work. On Sunday, July 3, Hamad headed toward the Orontes as usual. As soon as he finished washing, though, he saw something floating on the water: a body. Upon closer inspection, he realized that it was that of a young man whom he recognized as Ibrahim Kashoush. Only the previous day, he had watched Kashoush electrifying the masses in the Orontes Square with his chants. Who would kill a young man singing for freedom? A stunned Hamad asked himself.

Hamad looked for someone to help him move the body of the voice that had been silenced. The place was quiet as Hamad regarded the corpse; he somehow felt that Ibrahim was smiling. Continuing to stare at the dead man’s face in shock and disbelief, Hamad began repeating the words, “Syrians want freedom.” But Ibrahim Kashoush remained silent. Nevertheless, Hamad did not despair and persisted in reciting Kashoush’s chants that had so inflamed Hama the day before. But Ibrahim remained frozen in eternal silence. As Hamad got closer to Ibrahim in awed homage, gazing at his angelic face, he was horrified to discover that the young man’s vocal chords had been cut out. “Oh God what savagery!” he exclaimed.

As the sun rose on Hama, its community began gathering around the body of Ibrahim Kashoush, with some differing on how to wash and shroud the dead man. Hamad insisted the martyr should not be washed, that the clothing in which he was killed should be the shroud in which he was buried, and that he should be buried in the very place where his vocal chords were removed. One bystander asked ‘Where was Ibrahim killed? Hamad replied, ‘ Ibrahim was killed in the Orontes Square, and it is there where his throat was stolen.’ Another shouted and proposed to return the body of Ibrahim to the river, for that was where it had been found. Hamad turned down the idea, saying ‘we will carry him to the Square and bury him there – perhaps he will reclaim his voice and ours.’ So Hamad began organizing the funeral of freedom’s martyr, all the while repeating Ibrahim’s chants. Everyone responded enthusiastically and the Orontes River was enlivened by the passion of the people of Hama. The water started to flow around Ibrahim’s body as it was laid to rest at the shore, and the martyr was eventually consumed by the waters of the angry river. His body faded, but his voice remained, expressed in the growing determination of the people. **AJ**

This article was translated from the Arabic by Elie Chalala

(Source: From Daoud al-Shiryar’s “The Fear of Throats,” published in Al Hayat newspaper)

Forthcoming in Jadid 64

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THE DONKEY KILLERS
By Elie Chalala

SAADARDASH
By Michael Teague

ON MOHAMMED ARKON’S LATEST BOOK
By Hashem Saleh

SANCTITY AS AN ARGUMENT
By Khalid Ghazal

The Arab Spring — The Original Arab Revolution?

BY ELIE CHALALA

I have read a sizable part of the literature on the Arab Spring, in addition to having watched scores of documentaries and what seems like hundreds of hours of news footage of this most unprecedented event in modern Arab history. In my Middle East politics class, I used to tell my students that, aside from the 1979 Iranian case, there had been no genuine popular revolution in the modern Middle East. Now, I can lengthen that list to include the Tunisian, Egyptian, Libyan, Yemeni, and Syrian revolutions, regardless of whether they are ultimately successful or not.

Of the many articles I have read, one in particular caught my attention. Written by the Lebanese academic Mohamad Ali-Moukaled, an article titled “The Arab Spring is Their Revolution Two Centuries After the Enlightenment” appeared in *Al Hayat* newspaper on August 7, 2011.

Moukaled chose two prominent Arab intellectuals that have been key players in shaping the current discourse on Arab society and politics: Samir Amin, author of the famous book “The Arab Nation” (among others), and Adonis, the pen name of Ahmad Ali Said Isber, whose oeuvre has reached well beyond the borders of the Middle East. Amin approaches the Arab Spring from an economic perspective, while Adonis examines it from a cultural one. Unlike Amin, Adonis distanced himself from the day-to-day goings on Syrian politics decades ago, refusing to sign petitions demanding the release of Syrian dissidents (such as that of fellow poet Farag Bairkadar, who had been imprisoned under Bashar al-Asad and his father). Some of Adonis’s detractors attribute the writer’s silence on the atrocities committed by the Assad regime to his Alawite background.

What attracted me to Moukaled’s substantive article, which will be cited hereafter, is the methodological criticism that enabled him to steer clear of both the personal and the sectarian. For example, Moukaled appears to be familiar with the many recent criticisms of Adonis, and faults these critics on purely methodological grounds for their position on Adonis’s approach to the Arab Spring.

II

“What has happened in the Middle East is more than a mere uprising after which society will return to what it was before. It is more than a protest but less than a revolution, in that the movement had no goals that exceeded the overthrow of Mubarak,” according to Samir Amin, as cited by Moukaled.

Moukaled and Amin have engaged each other in defining what happened in Egypt and Tunisia, focusing more on the former. Can we consider what happened in Egypt a radical change? Moukaled differs with Amin in considering the

overthrow of Mubarak and the subsequent change at the country’s political helm as such. The system of hereditary succession was ended, giving way to the possibility of rotation of power. Did the so-called revolution accomplish all of its goals or were its ambitions curtailed? Moukaled answers that the revolution fell short of true systemic change, and he goes on to raise additional questions of his own: “Who are the revolutionaries, and what is the new meaning that the Arab Spring gave to Revolution?”

Moukaled makes an insightful observation, the gist of which is that the Arab world had generally rejected modern civilization, particularly capitalism, prior to the Tunisian revolution. Consequently, the Arab world had lagged behind the tide of history for about two centuries. The question that follows is what were the reasons for this rejection of modernity? He answers that the Arab world mostly opted out of capitalism by embracing a combination of alternative systems, some of which were wrought in reaction to capitalism. Included are nationalism, Marxism and radical Islamism. According to Moukaled, the Arab political world learned tactics of starvation and brutal exploitation from capitalism, while the socialist, nationalist and fundamentalist experiments nurtured policies of eliminating the Other by means of murder and imprisonment (tactics that have become practically synonymous with dictatorship).

He makes a second insightful observation: Without political revolution, capitalism could not have fostered the technological, educational and economic accomplishments that the West has enjoyed during the last two centuries. The radical change in state structure that accompanied the 1789 French Revolution was the key factor in protecting and propelling the economic achievements of capitalism. Thus, until the Arab Spring, the Arab world had not yet experienced a true, homegrown political revolution, which is a prerequisite for economic and cultural development.

Moukaled also claims that the Arab Spring represents a political return to the pre-imperial era—interrupted by Napoleon’s 1798 campaign in Egypt—or even farther back to the time of the ruler Mahammad Ali Pasha and his family. The interruption dealt by Napoleon lasted up until the moment that Bouazizi sparked the revolution in Tunisia. Thus the Arab world is finally undergoing political revolution after two centuries of preoccupation with nationalism, socialism and political Islam. The idea of democracy was shelved behind these great philosophies for what may have been believed to be a transitional period. But transitional it was not; the Arab peoples were subjected for over 100 years to types of violence unprecedented in that region at the hands of single-party regimes, regimes of hereditary succession, and military coups.

Moukaled says that, although the revolution has not achieved all of its stated goals in either country, what happened in Egypt and Tunisia constitutes revolution in that the process in both countries began with an uprising and ended in the overthrow of the regime and its symbols. Yet, many expect the political revolution to expand to also include culture and economics. He pleads with Amin to extend his practical knowledge in research, history and political economy to assist



Illustration by Carlos Latuff

and guide this progression.

Moukaled discusses what he calls Amin's "reservations," which he says are rooted in the academic's fundamental convictions about revolution. These include Amin's views on the Left, as well as on imperialism, corruption, and other topics deriving from the Bolshevik, Chinese and even the French revolutions. Moukaled is critical of the usefulness of Amin's leftist legacy and language, averring, "Such terms and categories offer a very limited framework for analyzing the Arab Spring."

While the Soviets and their Cold War allies were thought to have epitomized the political left, the global Left and Right became intermingled since the collapse of the USSR. The Left and Right can still be told apart by economic indicators, Moukaled claims, but politically speaking, the distinction between the two is no longer as useful as it used to be; such easy classification ceased to be possible when the former international leftists became allied with the United States and its partners. This alliance was evident in both the Gulf and Yugoslav wars, particularly when part of the Arab left called for Western intervention to assist the Iraqi people against Saddam Hussein's despotism.

The claim that the Egyptian or Tunisian left had a role in the recent revolutions is something of a misrepresentation, according to Mouakled. The role of the left was in fact marginal, with some of its factions "joining the revolution merely on the eve of its onset." Many of these groups had been previously corrupted by socialist propaganda — particularly from the

Soviets, who encouraged iron-fisted dictatorial leadership. Consequently, Mouakled advises Amin to launch a dialogue that might help rebuild the left in the Arab world and restructure its language and terminology.

Amin's discussion of imperialism seems a bit antiquated—especially since the Second Gulf War, when both leftist and rightist groups pleaded for U.S. assistance against Saddam. Since Amin's credentials on the subject of imperialism are impeccable, Moukaled asks him to rethink the relationship between imperialism and occupation, given that world capitalism has changed its methods of control in the age of globalization. The lesson here for Mouakled is that "liberation" forces must respond in kind by changing both their methods of struggle and their programs in general.

If Samir Amin doubts that the Muslim Brotherhood will be able to transform itself into a democratic organization, similar reservations should be expressed for all the various factions of the old Left, writes Moukaled, adding that it is impossible for leftists and Islamists to approach politics the same way they did in the past. Moukaled concludes his discussion of Samir Amin by agreeing with him that "conspiracy" has become a theory unsuitable for explaining imperialist "designs," and that corruption is not the exclusive preserve of capitalism.

III

Undermining the Bulwark of Despotism

I am an avid reader of Adonis, and my admiration for him led me to translate some brief texts of his, while assigning other "Adonisian" texts to colleagues to translate and publish in this magazine. Personally, I consider him to be one of the Arab world's greatest literary and cultural critics. Yet, many have commented on his long silence regarding Syrian politics. They have also pointed out the ambiguous terminology of his letters/essays in *Al Safir* newspaper with respect to the Syrian revolution. For example, Adonis recently referred to Bashar al-Assad as "the elected president"; such statements have caused many to doubt his support for the demonstrators. I am of the opinion, however, that the more Adonis has spoken and written, the more he has come to favor political change and reform. By reform, of course, I do not mean the "reforms" the Assad regime speaks of.

That Adonis is disappointed with both the regime and the opposition, as Moukaled claims, can almost not be quarreled with. But the important question remaining is why Adonis, of all Syrians and particularly Alawite intellectuals, declined to openly condemn the enormous violence used against peaceful demonstrators? The sectarian explanation is that Adonis does not speak out against the Alawite regime because he himself is Alawite. Although Adonis is known for being secular, many of his critics have advanced the sectarian theory. It should be kept in mind, though, that these attacks are mere speculations and cannot be verified.

Also relevant is the fact that Adonis's two letters, one to the

Syrian president and the other to the opposition, were published in a daily newspaper that generally supports the Syrian regime but, at times, also features articles by opponents of the Assad regime, both Lebanese and Syrian. The contradiction and ambiguity follow Adonis all the way, with very few commentators citing his courage in undermining the two most prominent pillars of despotism: the Baath Party and political Islam. Unfortunately, as Moukaled observes, most critics believe that Adonis's position produces the opposite effect: it neither helps the revolution nor furthers the cause of change, but instead supports the two aforementioned despotic powers.

Though critical of Adonis, Moukaled thinks the attacks leveled at him are too harsh. These criticisms, he says, amount to "revolutionary despotism," with blasphemy now among the tactics used by progressives and reactionaries when they sense they are losing a debate. This is not surprising, since blasphemy can be used against those who question religion, as well as those who break away from a politically correct position. In both cases, the individual is accused of heresy for having challenged the main religious or ideological line. Adonis is undeserving of such mudslinging because he remains an Arab intellectual who has spent more than half of his life calling for change through scores of books and a major work of four volumes titled "*Al-Thabet*

Wa all-Mutahawel" (The Static and the Changing). In all of his works, Adonis was in the forefront of those calling for intellectual, artistic, and even political changes in Arab and Islamic society.

@@Many also accuse Adonis of having an overall flawed approach to the Arab revolutions—especially the Syrian one. An erroneous approach will probably not lead to sound conclusions, even if the terminology and the analytical tools happen to be the correct ones. The results become even more catastrophic if the misuse of terms is added to the equation, claims Moukaled. He adds, nothing explains the problem with Adonis more succinctly than what the late scholar and leftist activist Mehdi Amel said about him in his book, a "Critique of Daily Thought." Amel considered Adonis's critique of religion to be derived from religious thought itself, with his approach based on the deadly dichotomy inherent in all of the

monotheistic faiths, as well as in atheism. Amel claims that this duality has been one of the principal sources of despotism throughout history. "Angel or Satan, Heaven or Hell, black or white, neither meets the other..."—the negation of the Other springs from here.

In Moukaled's opinion, Adonis's secularism is not secularism in the liberal tradition. He instead terms it a "despotic-fundamentalism that seeks to negate the Other." The problem with Adonis's approach is that he stands against religion, but not against the religious establishment, the equivalent of the Church. Adonis cannot coexist with religion because he views it "as an enemy," and this explains why he trusts neither the Syrian revolution nor the opposition, especially since the latter seeks shelter in mosques. The implication of his approach is that "the struggle is cultural in the first place and not political.

Perhaps the harshest criticisms of Adonis followed his discussion of "the mosque." The critics countered with a simple question: where else should the demonstrators congregate, since demonstrations are banned? Should they organize their rallies at the Baath Party headquarters, or perhaps at the Opera House? In other words, the mosque is the only place that is safe enough for Syrians to speak relatively freely. Moukaled says that the Arab Spring shows up Adonis's dated assertions about religion and culture with a bold and courageous new vision of

struggle that the Syrian writer has yet to grasp. This new vision promulgated by the Arab revolutions aims at creating a system that embraces and protects cultural and political diversity rather than exploiting or suppressing it. While the old Arab political mind rejected the values of plurality and diversity so that power would remain with the dictator and within the single-party system, the revolutionaries are unanimous in their insistence that plurality and diversity increase the vibrancy of the democracy they are striving to create. They also hold that the rotation of power is a critical pillar of democracy that must be instituted in the future political system.

Moukaled also discusses what he calls the "deadly generalization" at the heart of Adonis's reasoning. Adonis reduces the struggle to a fight over the state, insists that society merely consists of communities, and holds that the Arab state will



Soap Story: Ravenna and Beirut, details large cobblestone space installation, 2008 Doris Bittar, 1100 bars of oil soap, acrylic latex paint, 240" x 336"

Mahmoud Darwish in “Fi Hadrat al Ghiyab”

inevitably resort to violence, which is in turn linked to the religious question. Moukaled says these generalizations are borrowed from Adonis’s past writings, namely from the *Al Thabit and Al Mutahawel* in Arab history. If so, is this a problem? According to Moukaled it is. He claims that comparing the outcome of the present circumstances to the outcomes of circumstances past is a gross mistake. He goes on to say that every political struggle is a struggle for the state or the apparatus of power, with violence, according to Max Weber’s definition, being monopolized by the state. This does not mean, however, that the struggle for power must be the *only* feature of this or any other conflict. Furthermore, every prominent religion, including secularism, has at some point been involved in a political power struggle, making the religious presence nothing new or particularly noteworthy. Adonis’s simplistic ideas help explain why he has sometimes wavered in his positions, such as when he initially praised the Iranian Revolution only to later withdraw his support and censure himself for his previous stance.

To demonstrate the continuity between Adonis’s past and present views, Moakled cites some of his “redundant” questions: “Is Islam the Islam of Ali or Muawiyya? Is the Quran created or written? Is the Muslim belief in heaven and hell literal or metaphorical?” But Adonis’s preoccupations are apparently not shared. No one read anything like this in the myriad slogans promoting the Arab Spring; no demonstrator wrote anything similar on any sign, nor were these sorts of quandaries the subjects of discussion on anyone’s Facebook page, according to Moukaled. Yet, the central question presented by Adonis to himself and others is why have the Arabs failed until today to build a civil society? Important as this question undoubtedly is, he does not raise it as a matter of scientific or political inquiry, but merely as a rhetorical question for venting anger and disapproval. Thus, it remains the question of the poet, but not the scientist. Had he left it open for discussion, Adonis might have found a multitude of diverse answers untainted and unbiased by bitterness and disappointment.

Adonis’s textual narrative is also problematic. In it, he refers to revolution as “the moment the beautiful tempest comes to shake the minds.” A romantic statement indeed.

Although Moukaled believes that the beauty of Adonis’s writings lies in his poetry, he says that when Adonis writes about politics in a poetic style he registers and understands politics as a poet. In doing so, Adonis misunderstands the mechanisms of revolution (confusing its terms), judges the present by the standards of the past, and defines revolution as a fundamental change in cultural values and the structure of society itself. This unfortunately leads him to label Nasserist, Khomeinist and Baathist *coups* as revolutions.

IV

The Arab spring is a revolution that has been overdue for two centuries. However, this level of change and uprooting takes time; one cannot expect a speedy transformation in thoughts, values, traditions and customs, nor is a swift overhaul of the

For many folks in the Middle East, this year’s selection of Ramadan television drama will include some unexpected supplementary material. The trial of Hosni Mubarak, for instance (in the countries where it will be allowed to air) could be a spectacular introduction for Egyptian society to the reality show format that leaves so many Westerners hypnotized. Also scheduled to air is a new biopic about the iconic Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. *Fi Hadrat al Ghiyab*, “In the Presence of the Absent,” directed by Najdat Anzour and written by Hassan Yousif, both very well-known, has ignited a fairly acrimonious controversy in the Arab press.

Syrian actor Firas Ibrahim, who is also the film’s producer, plays the part of the poet. Many seem to think that Ibrahim is not sufficiently talented to do the late poet any justice, and there has been some bitter name-calling between the actor and his critics (among whom can be counted the late poet’s family). Since the series has been showing this past month, there is also a consensus program that the series itself is of a kind with Ibrahim’s acting abilities. To exacerbate the situation, critics of the series point to the contradiction between the artistic and political legacy of Darwish’s life and work on the one hand, and Ibrahim’s shameful and reactionary parroting of Syrian state propaganda on the other.

We at Al Jadid have watched some episodes of the series, and have found it pretty much impossible to disagree with the critics. “In the Presence of the Absent” is indeed an impoverished series on many levels. Add to this the actor’s arrogance, combined with his sympathy for a state that generates terror, and Ibrahim becomes the perfect punching bag. But the critics are also crossing a dangerous line by trying to pressure various Arab satellite television providers to not carry the show. Not only have they been mostly unsuccessful in that endeavor, but there is something hypocritical about trying to censor works of art with which one disagrees, especially when ostensibly done in the name of a man whose life and career made the most passionate defense of artistic freedom.

After all, this is not the first attempt to make a documentary or biopic about Darwish, and it is not likely to be the last. Beloved artists and personalities the world over have often been the victims of post-mortem character assassination on the screen, a situation that is not likely to change any time soon. And besides, if one’s goal is to make of Ibrahim a *bête-noire*, would it not make more sense to guarantee that everyone actually see this series? If it really is as dreadful as many already seem to think it is, it stands to reason that the more folks who actually see it, the greater the embarrassment and shame for Ibrahim. If, on the other hand, the series were to be shut down, the artistic merit of the film would remain debatable. More importantly, it would be an act of censorship totally contrary to the spirit of the Arab spring. **AJ**

–Michael Teague

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Presently Reading the Past: A Look at Early Arab-American Literature

BY THERI ALYCE PICKENS

In his article “Ethnic Identity and Imperative Patriotism,” eminent Arab-American literary critic and scholar Steven Salaita explores how the pedagogy of Arab American Studies has changed. Salaita suggests that it has changed considerably, and that Arab-American Studies now receive the sort of attention for which its scholars once clamored. However, he is quick to point out that attention alone is not the goal of Arab-American Studies. Given this fact, Salaita poses a second question: given the changed circumstances, “How do we find a viable space to develop Arab American Studies?” Striking a cautious tone, Salaita discusses the context of the politicized nature of the subject, and the patriotic imperative often imposed on Arab-American scholars and intellectuals, emphasizing that the issue is an extraordinarily complex one, and its implications resonate throughout the academy.

It is beyond the scope of this article to address the entirety of the issue. Instead, I intend to focus on Salaita’s second question regarding the development of Arab-American Studies by taking a look at how we teach and discuss early Arab-American literature (with the exception of “The Pen League” which includes Kahlil Gibran and Ameen Rihani). For my purposes, early Arab-American literature includes literature written from the beginning of the 20th century (circa “The Pen League”) until the publication of the “Grapeleaves Anthology” in 1988, which introduced the term “Arab American” into the Library of Congress. Other scholars might quibble with me on this rather lengthy time range. Tanyss Ludescher, Layla al-Maleh and the late Evelyn Shakir have considered distinct the work

that belongs to what they term ‘the second wave of Arab American literature,’ which includes works written between World War II and 1988 like those of Vance Bourjaily, William Peter Blatty, and Eugene Paul Nassar. I do not believe that distinction is arbitrary, but writers like Bourjaily, Blatty and Nassar share a common scholarly fate with earlier writers like Abraham Ribhany,

Salom Rizk, and George Hamid. That is, scholars tend to write very little about these authors because their work is marked by (or marred by, if one prefers) assimilationist rhetoric, uncritical depictions of the American dream, and scant political engagement with domestic or foreign policy. The notable exception to this is Evelyn Shakir, who wrote three seminal articles on second wave literature, all of which appeared in *Multi-Ethnic Literature in the United States*.

In my brief analysis, I have not included Arab-American poetry like that of Sam Hamod, Sam Hazo and others. Certainly, their absence should be thought of as an oversight. After all, Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa rescue Arab-American poets from this scholarly purgatory with the publication of “Grapeleaves.” For those of us who believe in and seek to celebrate a multifaceted yet clear Arab-American voice, these authors deviate from both the “The Pen League” and contemporary authors who embrace Arab-American identity. Given that the authors I discuss are not easily subsumed under this rubric, I wish to explore what

they offer for the field of Arab-American literary study. In what follows, I will provide two brief sketches, one of Salom Rizk and the other of Vance Bourjaily, as their work is representative



Gebran Kahlil Gebran by Emile Menhem

of early Arab- American autobiography and fiction respectively. I will also explain how studying these authors, and authors like them, is valuable for our field.

Salom Rizk's "Syrian Yankee" presents an autobiographical account of his unabashed assimilation into America. He explains his various jobs during the Depression Era and his career as a lecturer with the Reader's Digest. Published in 1952 by Doubleday, Rizk's tale showcases the quintessence of the successful immigrant narrative. True to form, he veers away from explicit political opinion about any of the circumstances that would have affected Arabs in America at that time: George Dow's Supreme Court case, the 1923 Romey lynching in Florida, or the events precipitating and including 1948. Such a narrative – dedicated as it is to the ideas of Horatio Alger – presents the individual male immigrant narrative as uniquely American. However, Rizk's narrative is not unique. It not only shares a literary heritage with Benjamin Franklin, but his Arab-American predecessors and contemporaries also believed in and promulgated the idea of the self-made immigrant man. Rizk's contemporary, George Hamid, wrote "The Circus" (1950), a novel that features Lebanese circus performers and concentrates on their entertainment value. Abraham Ribhany wrote "A Far Journey"

(1914) before both men, but his autobiography is quite similar, focusing on the similarities between his own Christian background and the Protestantism of the United States.

Vance Bourjaily has only one work that deals explicitly with Arab American identity. In "Confessions of a Spent Youth" (1960), only one chapter, "The Fractional Man," showcases his character as a young soldier in Lebanon during World War I who was wrestling with his emotional distance from his Lebanese cousins and his ignorance about his heritage. In some ways, the depiction is problematic as the narrator admits his difference to his Lebanese grandmother by admitting that his politics were "vaguely Zionist," the implication being that his identity is constituted by a stark political delineation rather than a complex matrix of cultural and historical differences. Bourjaily's remaining works have more in common with other American modernist writers like Ralph Ellison, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. Bourjaily favored not only the longer, more complex sentence, but also the exploration that was only possible

in a lengthy and dense novel. His characters, including Quincy of "Confessions," are intricately woven and the literary merit of his work is unquestionable. Bourjaily's contemporaries, Blatty and Nassar, belong to decidedly different genres – fantasy/horror and elegy, respectively – but they present similar conundrums as Bourjaily does the Arab-American presence is rendered simplistically and problematically.



Ameen Rihani by Mamoun Sakkal for Al Jadid

evidence of literary connections to other Arab-American writers (namely Kahlil Gibran), as well as other American writers. I believe that this proves that Arab Americans do not owe their existence to the volatile political ether.

To treat these works seriously is to undertake a project similar to that of African American literary scholars during the institutionalization of that field in the 1960s and 1970s. During that time period, they sutured together a literary history based on shared literary, cultural, and political concerns. Some authors seemed to be in sync with each other, like Pauline Hopkins and Francis EW Harper. Others had significant creative and personal differences, like Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston. What we find with early Arab-American authors is an intergenerational version of the same. However, these earlier works do give us useful and critical information about the strategies authors employed to survive in the United States. Despite the absence

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Syrian Screenplay Writer Najeeb Nseir Speaks On Breaking Taboos in Syrian Drama

BY REBECCA JOUBIN

The bold and courageous scripts of Najeeb Nseir, a leading *avant-garde* screenplay writer of Syrian Drama, deal with controversial societal issues. Editor-in-chief of Fikr Magazine, Nseir is also a highly prolific author of numerous television drama scripts such as “*Al-Intizar*” (Waiting), “*Reejal wa Nissa*” (Men and Women), “*Ayamna al-Hilweh*” (Our Beautiful Days), “*Hekayet Khareef*” (Autumn Tale), “*Qabl al-Ghoroob*” (Before Sunset), “*Assrar al-Madina*” (Secrets of the City), and “*Nissa Saghirat*” (Little Women). His “*Zaman Al-Ar*” (Time of Shame) was chosen as the best script of Syrian television drama in 2009.

One characteristic that stands out in your television drama is your refusal to preach or judge. On the contrary, your scripts inspire empathy toward your characters.

Because of my father’s job as a weather forecaster in a government office of meteorological observation, we moved around a lot. During my childhood, we lived in Qamishle, Hassseke, Al-Bookemal, Safita, and Der-Ez-Zor before moving to Damascus. Assyrians, Armenians, Kurds, Arabs, Nestorians, and Circassians populated my schools. I heard about 10 different languages spoken in the classroom. I saw that although others had the same legal rights as me, they enjoyed different folklore and culture. This instilled in me the ability to appreciate differences and respect others as they were.

How did the constant moving around affect your sensory perception? Please speak of some of your earliest memories of the cinema.

The colors, smells, and sounds of the regions I visited gave me a rich palette of sensory perception. I learned to notice and feel everything. I remember the first time as a young child I saw a television in a garage in Aleppo in the 60s when I was traveling there with my family. The magical box mesmerized me. I stood transfixed in front of the dancing images as if time had stopped.

I loved the cinema. In Hasseke, our class was once taken to the movie theater. I stayed in the cinema long after the film had ended, and my parents searched everywhere for me. They even called the police. During the 70s in Aleppo when I was about 14 years old, I used to put on my pajamas so that my mother would think I was sleeping. Then, in my pajamas, I would run to the movie theater. At first it took me about ten minutes to sprint there, but as I gained experience it took only six. But then the Muslim Brotherhood arrived in the 80s and cinema became increasingly under attack by extremist elements. We started to



Screenplay writer Najeeb Nseir

buy videos to watch at home. Unfortunately that habit continues to this day.

How did your career in Syrian television drama begin?

I began critiquing cinema in the 90s and then turned to critique of television drama. From the start, I felt that there should not only be one person writing a 25 to 30 hour television series, but rather there needed to be a collaborative effort between at least two individuals. I tried to organize a workshop to advance this idea, but writers showed little interest. Then I met writer Hassan Sami Yussef and discussed this idea with him. Together we started what would turn into years of collaborative effort in writing Syrian television drama. We worked together on “*Nissa Saghirat*” in 1997, by which time the Islamists were already influential. We believed that women paid the bigger price when they deviated from accepted norms. Although I began focusing on women as victims, experience later taught me that, while women are weaker vis-à-vis the law, they could find creative solutions and use the law to their benefit. Indeed, men can also be victims. In my series now, I deal with the individual- male or female – and how societal norms can prevent either sex from attaining happiness.

How do you and Hassan Sami Yussef write your scripts together?

We discuss a story idea for about six months. Then I sit down on my own to write the first draft. We meet once a week as I am writing the first draft and we discuss what I have written. When I complete the first draft, I give him the notebook and he polishes the final draft. He calls me when he has questions.

When do you conduct your research?

I do my research at the time that Hassan and I are discussing the story idea. I talk to people. We focus a lot on neighborhoods in Damascus where there are no zoning laws – neighborhoods that are a bit chaotic. In those areas there are secrets, yet no secrets. Neighbors know about the details of each others' lives, but pretend that they don't. I roam these areas, observe how the inhabitants dress and behave. For example, in *"Al-Intizar,"* the character, Bassima worked as an escort in cabarets in order to survive. To understand her character I needed to study escorts. Thus, I frequented cabarets and discovered that some women veiled at home while simultaneously working as escorts at these clubs. I even met a pharmacist with children, who went to a cabaret every Monday. I observed the secret lives of these women and this gave me material. There was a character of a chauffeur in *"Assrar al-Madina,"* so I rode a microbus for over a month and spoke to that chauffeur as well as others. In *"Ahlamna al-Halwa"* there was a story of a man who stole a satellite dish, so I talked to a technician who installs dishes on the roof. Now I am working on the character of a butcher, so I visit a butcher's kitchen. I work about two years on each of my scripts, exploring details.

The script of *"Zaman al-Ar"* (2009) – the story of the repressed Buthayna, her affair with a married man, pregnancy, and scandal that ensued – won prizes as well as critical acclaim in world festivals. How did the idea for the script come to you?

I once read a story about a Syrian man who went to Denmark, became a doctor there, and got citizenship. He then returned to Syria to marry and later returned to Denmark with his wife. In Denmark, one day his wife called him and said a young man was spending time alone with his daughter in her room. The doctor immediately left his clinic and returned home in order to protect his family's honor from shame. In reaction, I wrote an article saying that the doctor abandoned his sick patients and rushed home to make sure that his daughter was not having an inappropriate relationship, thus prioritizing his sense of shame over his professional duties.

In *"Zaman al-Ar"* you ask the question: does shame inhere in the illicit sexual encounter? Or does it proceed from the theft, blackmail, lying and cheating that are so rampant in our society? As the character Tamer says, there is poverty around us, the tragedy of Palestine and Iraq, trash in streets. Is that shameful? Or is Buthayna's action shameful? Your answer seems to let society take itself into account before taking others into account.

In *"Zaman al-Ar,"* Buthayna, has been taking care of her mother for 11 years, and thus has forgotten herself until her neighbor's husband, Jamil, flirts with her and her body responds. No one sees Buthayna as a human being with feelings. Even her sister-in-law, an employee who works full time, helps Buthayna for her own self-interest, knowing that one day she will need her to



Image from *Al-Intizar*



Image from *Zaman al-Ar*

raise her children. When Buthayna's affair, pregnancy and unsuccessful abortion are discovered, she faces the wrath of her family. The question I pose is whether or not her sexual affair is shameful. Then what of the fact that her elderly father wants to get together with Suhaila, a woman in her 40s, as his own wife lies on her deathbed? Or does shame lie in the cheating, lying, and deceit that go on daily in the context of business? Or in the context of neighbors swindling each other?

Why did you choose for Buthayna to be veiled?

In television drama, the topic of women is a major area of battle where we either break or uphold taboos. In *"Zaman al-Ar,"* I purposely chose a veiled woman as Buthayna, since, in my opinion, there is no difference; a woman's clothing does not control her hormones. Some critics got upset and said I should not have veiled her – but I insisted on it. It is elitist and ethnocentric to say a veiled woman or society is superior to one that is not. I am against depicting Muslims as somehow better than the rest.

The ending of *"Zaman al-Ar"* is sad. Buthayna returns home to now take care of her sick father. We feel she has lost her struggle.



Image from *Zaman al-Ar*



Image from *Zaman al-Ar*

Yes, she was crushed. For a while, Buthayna will ignore her needs. Later she will feel her body again, and have another affair. But this time she will manage to do it secretly, as others do in a society possessed by notions of honor and shame.

In your work, music and body language are emphasized and sometimes used in place of dialogue. For example, “Al-Intizar” contains many scenes with music and no conversation. The music reinforces the sense of waiting. Yet, if the wrong director picked up your work, this quality could be destroyed. Do you work closely with directors once they begin working with the script?

I don't like to interfere with the work of directors, and feel they need complete freedom without meddling from the original writer. However, I do respond to the work of the director once the show is produced. Since I work on each script for two years, every detail is important. In “*Zaman al-Ar*,” I was disappointed that many of the meaningful and symbolic details were taken out. For example, the character Tamer, an open-minded individual, faces duality in his life since he works both as an educator and a realtor. In the script I show that he teaches sex education, but this important detail was left out of the televised serial. Also, Suhaila, the woman in her 40s who wants to marry Buthayna's father for money, is depicted as a horrible and manipulative woman in the serial, but in my script I characterize her also as victim. She is an unattached woman, easy prey for men, and never able to have a real loving relationship. She lives alone in a tiny room with her brother. Yet, all of these details were taken out by the director, and thus we could not empathize with her, but were instead encouraged to judge her. However, the director Rasha Shabartji understands the mentality of Eastern women, and thus did a superb job inside Buthayna's household. As a woman, she identified with Buthayna's circumstances.

In “Al-Intizar,” however, I worked closely with director Alayth Hajoo on the music and body language. I also worked closely with Alayth's musician, Taher al-Mamelli. To study the

character of Bassima, an escort at cabarets, Alayth and I visited cabarets together and discussed our observations.

How do you see the impact of the Gulf-state satellite channels on Syrian drama?

Since 2000, Syrian drama has been financially dependent on the Gulf-state satellite channels – and they ask for religious programming. I am against religion in series, since I think we have to look at drama today not just as art, but also as media. In the 60s, we had much more freedom for women in television than today. The message in the serials in those days was for women to become liberated. Beginning in the 70s, however, there was more and more movement toward religion. Influenced by the Emirates, the series' these days want to educate women to cover themselves and act piously. In my opinion, the recent religiously oriented serials encourage a public-private dichotomy, cultivating the hypocrisy of feeling one way but behaving another.

What do you think about the fact that most serials are written for Ramadan?

I don't care about writing for Ramadan. I take two years to write each serial, and don't like Ramadan television drama very much. It's like a circus.

What are some of your Future Projects?

In a script I am working on now, a man divorces his wife upon discovering on their wedding night that she is not a virgin. When he returns her to her parents' house and complains that their daughter is full of shame, her father defends her, asking saying so what if she's not a virgin? This father's reaction is different and more supportive of his daughter than that of Buthayna's father in “*Zaman al-Ar*.” My next project is going to be called “*Al-Awanes*” (Old Maids), and will consider the hardships of this group of repressed women in our society. **AJ**

Eyad Shehab Ahmed on Editing, Documentary Projects, and the Impact of Gulf-Funded Satellite Demand on Syrian Television Drama

BY REBECCA JOUBIN



Eyad Shehab Ahmed



Image from *al-Takht-e Sharqi*

Eyad Shehab Ahmed has been a prominent Syrian television drama editor since 1997. The television dramas he has edited include: “*Bab al-Hara* Part 1, 2, 3” (2006, 07, 08); “*Zaman al-Ar*” (2009); and most recently “*Assad al-Waraq*” (2010), “*La’nat al-Tin*” (2010), and “*Al-Takht- al-Sharqi*” (2010). As the director of the company Version: Media Production, he also makes documentaries of leading figures in Arab culture, such as Adonis.

You’re one of the most prominent television drama editors in Syria. Tell us about your role in television drama.

I edit and provide the publicity for about four television series per year, mostly for the month of Ramadan. Usually each series requires about five months of editing, improvement of the quality of the picture, and the provision of sound effects. Each time, I do my editing with the director under different conditions. For example, when I edited Najeeb Nseir’s screenplay “*Zaman al-Ar*” in 2009 with Syria’s most prominent female director, Rasha Sharbatji, we worked together a lot via Internet since she had travelled to Egypt. Despite the distance, I worked well with her. And when she was in Damascus, we would sit down together and discuss all the details. She always gave me a tremendous amount of artistic freedom.

Najeeb Nseir’s “*Zaman al-Ar*” is bold in its feminist perspective and critique of societal norms. The character Buthayna, the veiled woman whose sexual repression and frustration leads her to an affair, caused a lot of debate and controversy when the show first aired. In your opinion, was it important that the director be a woman?

The sensitivity and understanding of the condition of women in our society was so strong in Najeeb Nseir’s screenplay that many believed that only a female director could truly understand the character of Buthayna. I believe this is true, especially since so much of the serial takes place in Buthayna’s home. We see the everyday details in the life of this woman- her quirks, longings and aspirations, and we feel the depth of her anger and suppression. In my opinion, only a female director could have handled this text so gracefully. The message in “*Zaman al-Ar*” – that shame does not lie in a woman having extramarital sex, but rather in the cheating, theft, lying, and deceit that are regular features of the social terrain – was clear, yet subtly phrased.

Most Syrian television drama is funded by the Gulf-state satellite channels. How did those satellite channels affect your editing work on “*Zaman al-Ar*”?

“*Zaman al-Ar*” was originally presented as “*Al-Ar*” but the Gulf-state satellite committee insisted that we change the title. Also, in “*Zaman al-Ar*,” writer Najeeb al-Nseir had intended for Buthayna and Jamil to have extramarital sex, but the censorship committee ordered us to put it in the context of *Urfi* marriage. Director Rasha Shabartji and writer Najeeb Nseir did not agree, but producer Hani al-Ashi imposed this upon us. Another silly thing was that they said that the Qatar license plate on a car was not accurate, so we had to change it with graphics.

The censorship process works like this: the censor first sees the script and makes comments. Then the censorship committee sees the whole edited series and recommends changes. Sometimes we are forced to take out scenes or make corrections.

There are other times when we don't make the changes that the censor has demanded, and the channels make their own cuts.

In Syria, we have a lenient censorship committee, but in the Emirates censorship is extremely conservative and thus difficult to deal with. You can get past some really serious things, but then they focus on trivial details. Since most producers take money from the Gulf-State satellite channels, we face the complicated problem having people who are more culturally conservative than we are controlling our television industry. They simply have more money than we do.

There is one Syrian company, Sooriya Dawliyya, which is owned by Muhammad Hamshoo. While director Harem Ali was involved from 2000-2006, it produced good serials. But since 2005, it has not really produced any distinguished work.

For Ramadan 2010, among others, you edited the series “Al-Takht Al-Sharqi” (The Eastern Bed), which was about a year in the life of four friends who had gone to college together. Written by Yem Mashadi and directed by Rasha Sharbatji, it contains a feminist perspective. Please tell us about this series.

“Al-Takht al-Sharqi” has a lot of courage in it that Syrian television drama does not usually have. The combination of a noted female writer and director allows for a nuanced depiction of the female characters and their circumstances. In “Al-Takht Al-Sharqi” each character has his or her personality and quirks. The show, which overturns stereotypes about both sexes and unveils hypocrisy and dishonesty in relationships, will make a difference. For example, the hypocrisy of a girl who has 20 relationships, but manages to keep her virginity is one topic. We address the problem of Syrian women marrying foreign men and not being able to get citizenship for their children. Men and women discuss relationships openly; they critique their failure to be honest with each other. There is also a lot of frankness about sex. “Al-Takht al-Sharqi” will be produced by Abu Dhabi. Surely their censorship committee will take out some parts, but it will be shown in full in Syria.

You edited Parts 1-3 of “Bab al-Hara” (The Neighborhood Gate), which takes place in the 1930s in old Damascus. Tell us your thoughts on this show, which has become the most popular series in the Arab world and started a trend of serials hearkening back to old times when men and women knew their place in society.

“Bab al-Hara” is not historical, although it is often treated as such. “Bab al-Hara” started a dangerous trend in Syrian drama. Rather than bringing us progress, these kinds of old city series inspire us to move backward. “Bab al-Hara,” for example, advocates patriarchy and women’s subordination, as well as religious extremism. It is an inaccurate portrayal of Damascus in the 1930s, featuring no intellectuals, only uneducated persons. The writer simply took his own experiences in an orthodox neighborhood in Salhiya and transferred them to another historical time and place.



Image from al-Takht-e Sharqi

Please tell us about your future projects.

I have been editing television drama since 1997, and now have my own company, Version: Media Production. In a few years, I plan to focus on my own documentaries. I am currently working on producing a documentary on the noted Syrian poet and critic Adonis. I have about 100 other personalities that I would like to explore in addition. We have real treasures in our society whose lives need to be documented, and this is my ultimate dream. **AJ**

A Look at Early Arab-American Literature

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of political opinion, there was never a disavowal of Arab heritage. What we find is a desire to avoid racism, bigotry and the bodily violence that accompanies the most virulent forms of it. Moreover, early Arab-American authors attest to a rich tradition within the United States. Early Arab-American autobiography pulls from American realist writers of the late 19th century. Arab- American fiction of the mid-20th century pulls from modernist contemporaries. (Just as an aside, Eugene Paul Nassar’s “Wind of the Land” was published in 1979, but its literary style is much like that of modernists.) Despite misgivings over their political positions or lack thereof, these writers do make clear that Arabs have a long literary history in the United States and thus their work should not be examined without keeping this in mind.

As scholars and teachers, we need to incorporate these authors. A viable space for Arab-American literature cannot be found; we have to make it – with our future, our present and our past. **AJ**

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Imane Chaabane Bennani Speaks with Poet Lahab Assef al-Jundi

San-Antonio based poet Lahab Assef al-Jundi is the son of acclaimed Syrian poet Ali al-Jundi. The younger Al-Jundi writes poetry, mainly in English, that transcends ethnic themes to address issues of universal significance. Both political and personal, his richly evocative poems reveal a refined consciousness, a keen perceptiveness, and a serious engagement with humane concerns. While widely published, Al-Jundi's Arab-American presence was particularly voiced through the groundbreaking anthology "Inclined to Speak," edited by Hayan Charara (2008).

In this interview conducted with him via e-mail, al-Jundi tells us about his beginnings, his father, and his views on Arab-American poetry.

Bennani: What motivated you to begin writing poetry?

Al-Jundi: Growing up in Syria, I never thought I'd be writing poetry one day. I loved my father's voice and how it sounded when he read, but I was still too young to appreciate the poetry itself. Instead, I thought I would pursue a career in science and I came to the States to study electrical engineering. However, as I grew older, I began to discover my love for poetry. By age 30, I had started writing what I thought of as "love scribbles." Soon after, the pace turned feverish, and the subjects expanded. That was a time when I was delving deeply into mystical and metaphysical material. I enrolled in a poetry class at a local university and, since then, poetry has been a major part of my life.

Bennani: How has your father influenced you?

Al-Jundi: My father was what I would call a "free spirit to the extreme." He came up with his own rules for how to live: Abide by the fewest rules possible, rebel against the status quo, indulge in the pleasures of life, and give no value to material possessions. However, this lifestyle did not lend itself to the responsibilities of family life, and he and my mother eventually divorced. From a very young age I accepted my father for who he was. I love him very much and still do. From him I learned valuable life lessons, such as the importance of cherishing my personal freedom and finding the courage to reject things that many accept without questioning, such as religion or social customs.

Bennani: Did your relationship with your homeland change after he passed away? What does Syria represent for you today?

Al-Jundi: My relationship with Syria is complex. While he was alive, my father was the conduit for that relationship. Now that he is gone, I am not sure what shape that connection will take, if any. Obviously, I am not in a hurry to answer that question.



Photo of Al-Jundi taken by Melanie Rush Davis

Bennani: What are your influences? What inspires you?

Al-Jundi: I am inspired by love, beauty in its infinite manifestations, and a deep desire to enlighten myself and others. As for poetic influence, I started with Naomi Shihab Nye and Kahlil Gibran, and now find myself reading all the Rumi and Hafez I can get my hands on. If I could attain half the beauty and richness of my father's poetry, I would consider that the pinnacle of my life.

Bennani: How do you understand the 'label' 'Arab-American' and would you consider yourself an 'Arab-American' poet?

Al-Jundi: I believe that such categorizations cannot capture a human being's true essence, and are therefore transient, shallow identities. At the same time, I recognize that they are not meaningless. In my case, I am aware that my name, my looks, my history, my mother tongue, and my emotional connections all comprise an important "layer of reality" that makes me an Arab American poet.

Bennani: You are also a photographer. How does photography complement or inspire your writing?

Al-Jundi: I love immersing myself in the direct beauty of colors, shapes, and artistic images. For me, photography is a natural extension to what poetry paints between its letters. **AJ**

Rubaiyat

By Ali Al-Jundi

"Five butterflies lived in a house by the river.

Every morning they energetically set out
to gather flowers' music.

One day, one returned with a sword of flames.

It declared mutiny.

Shortly, the walls crumbled,

the ceiling burned,

and, in the house, the poems died!"

Excerpt from "Rubaiyat '10'," by Ali Al-Jundi

Translated from Arabic to English by Lahab Assef Al-Jundi.

Healing Afghanistan in Exile

BY BOBBY S. GULSHAN

The pain of separation represents a critical dimension of the refugee's existence. When the land left behind suffers from unending conflict, that pain can prove devastating and ultimately numbing. However, it can also inspire and produce positive action. In the documentary film "Good Morning Kandahar," director Ariel Nasr brings us the story of some young Afghan-Canadians using a variety of means to offer healing to the country they left behind.

"Good Morning Kandahar" is primarily a story about young Afghanis who, having left their homeland for various reasons,

Good Morning Kandahar

Directed by Ariel Nasr

Canadian National Film Board

2008, 52 min.

have settled in Canada, and are now doing what they can to effect change in Afghanistan. The film begins by exploring a radio station, RANA FM (from the Pashto meaning "light"). Yahseer, a young man from Kabul now living in Canada, works at the station providing news and entertainment programming. The self-stated purpose of RANA is to "bring some light" into the lives of the Kandaharis listening on the other end. The format tends towards the upbeat, contemporary pop culture of Afghanistan, while maintaining a safe distance from topics such as religion or politics. Yahseer believes that this focus on the positive – even if it seems to deny a discursive space for more serious, even grave issues – will provide the listeners in Afghanistan some mild solace. The filmmaker (also the narrator) takes exception to this, and suggests during the film's narration that perhaps this is not enough – that what is needed is an unflinching look at all the elements that characterize life in a strife-laden nation.

This central tension characterizes the film's primary argument. Ariel Nasr walks a fine line between asking critical questions about identity, exile and activism, and gingerly judging the intentions of his subjects. Shareef Aminzadeh, a young Afghani medical student now living in Canada, participates in a unique and curious military simulation. The Canadian military, with its involvement in the NATO Afghan operation, has sought to recreate a Kandahari village in the badlands of Western Alberta. The simulation – complete with other Afghan-Canadians acting as village elders, Taliban, and locals – serves to prepare Canadian military personnel for the experience of conflict in an alien and complex society.

Shareef participates as a translator in mock diplomatic sessions. Shareef, as well as others interviewed, tell the camera that they believe they are helping Afghanis back home. They hope that they can contribute to cultural understanding, thus facilitating communication and ultimately avoiding unnecessary

conflict. The filmmaker, however, suggests that the Canadian military is not practicing "peacekeeping" at this facility. Shareef himself states that some of his friends do disagree with his participation, going so far to say that he may be considered a traitor against his Afghanistan.

Ultimately, the film does not – and probably could not – settle the question on what is the best way for these exiles of circumstance to proceed. A brief interview with Farhad Darya, Afghanistan's best known pop singer, raises the possibility that through music and art the image of Afghanistan can be humanized. For artists all over the world, the power of an emotional response often proves to be far more effective in "winning hearts and minds" than military adventures and nation building. In the end, life in exile from one's homeland remains problematic, especially when distance and conflict threaten to stifle whatever ties remain.

The film's production value is high, interspersing sit-down interviews with photographs and live footage from both Canada and Afghanistan. The film contains an original score, excellent editing and pacing, and is technically well executed. However, the presence of the narrator, and in particular his own judgments and evaluation of his subjects, is a bit distracting, especially considering that the actual voiceover doesn't seem to follow any appreciable structure or reason for intervention, but is, rather, sporadic and indistinct as a voice in the film. **AJ**

About Films

From the Victimizer's View: 'Lebanon'

BY MICHAEL TEAGUE

I recently saw the film "Lebanon" when it was playing at the West Los Angeles Nuart. To my dismay, it turned out to be the latest example of how hyperbolic stylization and personal narrative are increasingly common in American and Israeli films in order to shift the focus away from the terrible consequences of waging wars.

The film's theme is immediately evident: four young, naive Israeli kids are put into a tank with the ostensible task of invading Lebanon. The narrative is based on director Samuel Maoz's experience as an IDF soldier during the '82 Israeli invasion. For the duration of the film, the only glimpse of the outside world is through the scope of the tank, and the resulting atmosphere of claustrophobia is sickeningly palpable. According to A.O. Scott, who reviewed the film for the New York Times in August, what viewers saw was essentially a dramatization of "the moral confusion of combat." For Scott, this ontological quandary is best encapsulated early on in two scenes: the first, in which the character Shmulik's hesitation in opening fire on some villagers (who turn out to be militants) results in the death of one of his

fellow soldiers, and the second, in which Shmulik finally gets control of his nerve only to end up killing an innocent farmer.

Scott's interpretation of this is the following: "In a few seconds the young man's ethical universe has been dismantled and replaced by a cruder set of imperatives: keep moving; do what you can to survive; obey orders; when in doubt, shoot to kill." In saying this, he is doing exactly what the film is asking him to, namely focusing on the pathos, the tremendous anxiety and inner turmoil of one man, rather than the historical and political context in which the film's plot actually exists. The problem here is not so much with the director's sincerity in rendering a formative, and undoubtedly terrible, experience of his life onto the screen, but rather with his use of cinematic technique to trap the viewer into sympathizing with those who would wage war.

That the near complete lack of political context is deliberate makes this look all the more like a public relations film. Maoz was frank about this in an interview: "The mistake I made is to call the film *Lebanon* because the Lebanon war is no different in its essence from any other war and for me any attempt to be political would have flattened the film." The ever-perspicacious Slavoj Žižek called this out in a recent column on the London Review of Books website—the film is a *personal* account, not a rejection of Israeli policy, and this creates a situation in which the viewer does not have to feel responsible for exercising any moral judgment, or for questioning the larger political picture that put these young men in the tank in the first place. Thus, a sort of apology is offered for the actions of the soldiers, and the viewer can more comfortably sympathize with them.

As for the style, throughout my viewing of "Lebanon," I could not rid myself of the impression that what I was really watching was a war film rendered with all the stylistic complexity of the endless "SAW" flicks that have done such a disservice to the genre of horror cinema over the last few years. The "SAW" movies are slickly-produced but rather unsophisticated in their aims: they seek to cause the viewer extreme discomfort and terror, perhaps as some modern and highly commercialized form of catharsis. Hyper-sensory overload is a common trope in mainstream film these days, indeed it may be even more important than the plot or the screenplay. But to employ this brand of cinematic excess, in which the viewer is strong-armed into being a spectator of horrible events— in this case Israel's '82 invasion of Lebanon, which brought about the deaths of tens of thousands of Lebanese— is not only tasteless but also somewhat offensive. The cloistered atmosphere of the tank and the close-up view through the lens are quite effective in making one squirm in his or her seat, but the pretext of "realism" behind which these elements hide is not valid as an end in itself.

The point of Žižek's aforementioned critique, not only of "Lebanon" but also other recent likeminded films such as the academy award-winning "The Hurt Locker" and the critically acclaimed "Waltz with Bashir," is to sift out the disingenuousness that is concealed by refined cinematic flourish. In the case of "Waltz with Bashir" at least, a specific tragedy following the '82 invasion (the Sabra and Chatila massacres) is comprehensibly the central traumatic event in the story, and the

"personal" narrative becomes nearly convincing when coupled with that film's innovative use of animation. However, the same principle is at work, only in a more complex and evolved artistic format. The lens of the tank through which "Lebanon" is viewed provides a handy illustration of this, since it symbolizes the circumscribed perception of the viewer that is built in to the film. By overly humanizing the perpetrators, the fear and angst transmitted through this lens ensure that the viewer will not have too much leeway to consider the even greater suffering of those who were the victims of the invasion, or what the reasons for the invasion were in the first place. **AJ**

CONTRIBUTORS

Continued from page 5

Nancy Penrose ("One Hour in Hama," p. 46) writes to explore the territories where cultures converge. Her work has appeared in, and occasionally won awards from, publications that include *Memoir*, *Passager*, *Carpe Articulum Literary Review*, *Drash*, the essay collections of *Travelers' Tales*, and the anthology *Burning Bright: Passager Celebrates 21 Years*. Details may be found at <http://www.plumerose.net>.

Theri Alyce Pickens ("Presently Reading the Past," p. 18; "Loom: A Novel," p. 40) is a visiting assistant professor of English at Pitzer College.

Richard Alan Popp ("Writing Together," p. 6) holds a Master of Liberal Studies in Arabic and Islamic Studies from Ohio State University and a Ph.D. in Arabic Language, Literature, and Linguistics from Georgetown University. He is the founder of the Al-Funun website and author of *Al-Funun: The Making of an Arab-American Journal* (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 2000). Dr. Popp has been published in the *Journal of Arabic Literature* and teaches at George Washington University.

Lynne Rogers ("Touch," p. 36; "Of Irony and Empire," p. 36; "B as in Beirut," p. 37) is a professor and author whose articles have appeared in various publications.

Hanna Saadah ("The Wedding," fiction, p. 44-45) is Emeritus Clinical Professor of Medicine, University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center. He is also the author of several novels and books of poetry.

Basil Samara translated Hala Mohammed's poem: "A Butterfly from Jisr al-Shoghour," and also translated Adonis' poem: "Reflections on the Arab Spring."

Andrea Shalal-Esa ("Origin," p. 38) is a Washington-based journalist with a great interest in Arab-American literature.

Daoud Al-Shiryani ("The Fear of Throats," p. 13) is a prominent journalist and a broadcaster.

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Lamentations from Baghdad's Bygone Era

BY RAMI GABRIEL

Cut over four sessions in Baghdad during the periods of 1925-26 and 1928-29, this compilation of recordings showcases an impressive range of musical traditions. It appears that the British engineers working for the Gramophone Company were lacking in local knowledge and therefore recorded pell-mell over a thousand sides of Kuwaitis, Kurds, women, Jewish hymns, and both city and country music, inadvertently providing an invaluable aural snapshot of the city during a period of imperialism, modernization, and urbanization. These recordings turned out to be very popular in the region at the time, selling 11,000 records.

"Give Me Love" was compiled from EMI's Hayes archive and mastered at Abbey Road studios by Honest Jon's Records. A notable feature of this record is that, although the music and lyrics are almost entirely from Arabic and Kurdish traditions, almost every musician on it is Jewish: in fact, Baghdad in the 1920s had the largest Jewish population of any Arab city, and a majority of the musicians hailed from that community.

Give Me Love: Songs of the Brokenhearted –
Baghdad, 1925 – 1929
Honest Jon's Records #35, 2008

These recordings ought to be of great interest to aficionados of Middle Eastern music, as both urban and rural traditions can be heard in fairly unalloyed form. The true ethno-musicological value of this record lies in its diversity: this single recording features musicians trained respectively in the Egyptian, Kurdish, Assyrian, Iraqi maqam, Levantine, and Ottoman styles.

The compilation is centered on the theme of the "broken heart" and features a handful of wrenching laments, most notably "Kassem Miro" by Said el Kurdi, "Fahasboulom Hatha" and "Wenini" by Hd hairy Abou Aziz, and "Ahis Ras Eddelil" by Badria Anwar. "Give Me Love" also features great pop-style songs, like Sultana Youssef's "Khouthni Bthemmetak" and "Anouh Ithlal Hathy" by Mulla Seoud El Koweity. The Kurdish folk songs are notable for their use of a wailing, weeping, screeching, and pathos-filled vocal technique that must be heard to be believed (tracks 8, 10, and 19). This presumably Kurdish vocal technique is especially striking because it does not appear to be derived from either of the two dominant schools of music of the time, the Egyptian Arabic and Ottoman. Other pieces stand out by virtue of their unique mix of folk and pop styles. Most notably, a piece by Sayed Abbood, "Shoo Lonak", offers a special blend of classical Arabic introductions (*dulab*) and distinctly rural and unruly vocals.

The four *taqsims* (solo improvisations) either include or mimic the popular Egyptian Arabic, Levantine, and Ottoman approaches, or approximate the aforementioned Kurdish vocal technique. They are overall far less melodically complex than



t a q s i m s
r e c o r d e d
during the
same period in
Istanbul (see
"Istanbul
1925" on the
Traditional
Crossroads
label released
in 1994, or
K a l a n ' s
excellent series
on "Masters of
T u r k i s h
Music").

The album notes fail to discuss the tradition of "the Beloved" in Sufi mystical poetry, leaving Western listeners in the dark about a significant historical context that is the essence of Middle Eastern love songs. The notes also do not bring attention to the Roma or to other traditions of rural lamentation that suffuse these plaintive calls of the brokenhearted.

Despite these criticisms, this album showcases a wide range of musical traditions and includes several haunting songs of heartbreak – a subject that transcends time and culture, and should therefore be part of any home collection of Middle Eastern music. **AJ**

Reflections on the Arab Spring I

What has happened in Syria was ultimately expected in one form or another – the dormant and the hypnotized had to awaken some day, the people had to demand freedom, human dignity, the end of repression, the just distribution of wealth, a cessation of arrests based on the free expression of opinions...etc. The numerical minority is irrelevant, because the numbers here are symbolic. And numerical minority here constitutes a majority in terms of symbolism.

Yes, it was expected, by myself at least.

But I do not know how to cry, and even if I did, I would rather my eyes become two fountains of tears: a southern one for Dira'a, and a northern one for Banyas and Jebela

– By Adonis

From *Al Hayat*, May 5, 2011

Translated from the Arabic by Basil Samara

Masculinity in Arab Fiction: Gender or Political Construct?

BY PAULINE HOMSI VINSON

Samira Aghacy's "Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East since 1967" is a welcome addition by Syracuse University Press to the field of gender and Arabic literary studies in English. Drawing on gender studies and feminist theories developed by American academics such as Michael Kimmel and Judith Butler, Aghacy explores the effects of war and political repression on the constructions of heterosexual masculinity in Arabic fiction. In so doing, Aghacy's work provides an important contribution to the study of literature and gender, as it demonstrates the ways in which masculinity is

Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East since 1967

By Samira Aghacy
Syracuse University Press, 2009

not figured as a homogenous category in the fiction of the Arab East, but rather a socio-political construct that is contested and redefined in different ways by different writers.

Furthermore, because many of the works that Aghacy discusses are not yet available in English translation, her book also serves a secondary function of introducing non-Arabic speakers to a wealth of literary production from the Arab world. Aghacy's work echoes projects that have been undertaken by Miriam Cooke and Joseph Zeidan. In "War's Other Voices" (1988), Cooke examined gendered responses to the Lebanese civil war in the fiction produced by a group of Lebanese women writers whom she termed the "Beirut Decentrists." In "Arab Women Novelists" (1995), Zeidan offered a broad historical view of work produced by Arab women writers. In "Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East since 1967," Aghacy focuses on the 1967 war, known to Arabs as the *naksa*, or the setback, as a point of departure for her investigation of the ways in which political struggle and cultural anxiety are expressed in terms of male sexual identity within the fiction produced by both men and women in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Iraq.

Aghacy divides her book into four chapters. The first chapter, "Oedipus King: Tortured Masculinity," examines works in which the male protagonists cling to a rigid, hierarchical, homosocial, and heterosexual male identity in the face of political and military upheaval. The second chapter, "The Politics of Masculinity: Goal-(Dis)Oriented Masculinity," addresses works that position the freedom fighter, or *fida'i*, as the embodiment of an idealized masculinity and a male-centered definition of heroic nationalist identity. The third chapter,

"Dictator as Patriarch: The State and the (Dys)Functional Male," focuses on how writers circumvent state tyranny by using "oblique strategies" that explore the ways in which repressive state apparatuses position men as both perpetrators and victims of oppressive patriarchy. The fourth chapter, "Oedipus Deposed: The Man's Sex(uality)," discusses texts that articulate a sense of vulnerable masculinity, revealing the ways in which gender categories are in a moment of transition and redefinition. The four chapters are framed by an introduction that offers an overview of gender studies and an afterword that addresses the role of censorship in privileging discourses of sexuality over overt critiques of political or religious authority.

While the titles of the first and last chapter, "Oedipus King" and "Oedipus Deposed," evoke both a heroic model of masculinity and a Freudian understanding of male sexuality, the discussions within the chapters themselves offer more of a close reading of works of fiction than a theoretical analysis of the intersections between psychoanalytic, classical, and Arab conceptions of masculinity. In all the chapters, however, Aghacy addresses the relationship between the constructions of masculinity and the political and social conditions that are presented within the various works. In the process, she makes a forceful case for the idea that masculinity in the fiction of the Arab East is a category in transition, one that is neither homogenous, nor divorced from historical events.

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WHAT IS SALAFISM?

BY MICHAEL TEAGUE

There is perhaps no Islamic movement of consequence that is more misunderstood in the West today than Salafism. This may seem a fairly equivocal statement considering that all Islamic movements seem to be misunderstood by the majority of Westerners. Nevertheless, the combination of literalism and scripturalism embraced by Salafist theology, as well as its increasing global influence, gives it a character that is distinct from other forms of Islamic activism and thus deserving of scrutiny. The recent publication of “Global Salafism,” edited by Dutch scholar Roel Meijer, is an impressive collection of research on the subject and goes a long way towards clarifying the various elements of Salafism.

The Salafis are often associated with terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda, or with ultra-orthodox Islamic doctrines like Wahabbism. While it is true that Salafism adheres to a very strict and traditionalist interpretation of Islam, the picture given in “Global Salafism” shows us that there is more to explore. In fact, it would be totally incorrect to categorize this movement as monolithic in any sense, much less in the simplistic “War on Terror” language (a lexicon wherein anything vaguely Islamic

Global Salafism

Edited by Roel Meijer
Columbia University Press, 2009

is immediately suspected of clinging to irrational, regressive, and violent attitudes towards the Judeo-Christian world). That being said, this book does not attempt to downplay the use of political violence by some Salafi groups. Instead, it takes a sober account of the different Salafi groups throughout the world (in Pakistan, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Indonesia, Yemen, etc.) and attempts, with much success, to describe their domestic and international relationships.

What is immediately clear in almost every article is that the intense and sometimes petty factionalism that exists within and between Salafi groups and Islamist groups (for they are not the same) is most often the result of doctrinal disagreements, particularly as regards politics. In this sense, the articles expose the wide reach of Salafism, and the movement’s greatest strength as its greatest obstacle to coherence: not all Salafis agree on how to deal with the states under whose rule they live, the other political and/or religious groups in those states, and/or the political processes to which they have access.

Although “Global Salafism” is not the first publication to seriously explore the various Salafi groups, it is valuable because it brings to light a wealth of information that has been previously tucked away in academic journals. In addition, the genesis and foundation of this book was a 2007 conference in the Netherlands



Midhkar Pickup Pattern from “Bedouin Weaving of Saudi Arabia”

titled “Salafism as a Transnational Movement,” which brought together the foremost authorities on the subject. Therefore, this is not simply a work that collects the best articles on the subject to date, but one in which the writers of these articles were working together to go beyond what had already been written. The most basic example of this is a piece by Thomas Hegghamer that reconsiders several generally accepted typologies of Salafism, all of which seem to divide the Salafis into roughly three groups: the purist, the politically minded, and the jihadi. Hegghamer argues that, while these distinctions have been useful in going beyond a superficial analysis of the movement, they can still be misleading, since they tend to confuse the political behaviors of Salafi groups.

What comes into focus upon reading “Global Salafism” is that Salafism as a “movement” suffers from a problem of definition. Madawi al-Rasheed sums it up best in his contribution “The Local and the Global in Saudi Salafi-Jihadi Discourse,” wherein he observes that Salafi jihadism is a category constructed by Western politicians, academics and journalists on the one hand and jihadi ideologues and sympathizers on the other. These competing narratives are run by political interests of all kinds and thus serve to obscure the true actions and intentions of the Salafis. The result is that many myths are dispelled quite easily by simple observation – violence, for instance, is not integral to Salafi political practice. Indeed, some Salafis believe that Palestinian Muslims should actually *leave* Palestine because the Israeli occupation makes proper religious observance impossible (perhaps a reason why Salafism has very little appeal there). A large number of Salafis reject any sort of political activity, claiming that no political action can be substantial until all Muslims are able to calibrate their behavior to that of the pious ancestors. Other Salafis choose to focus most on conflicts with competing political organizations, like the Muslim Brotherhood, while still others emphasize

sectarianism – best reflected in their revulsion of Shiites, who are even more loathed than Jews and Christians. And then, of course, there are the jihadis, many of who have become frustrated with the doctrinal limitations of Salafism that do not allow them to better fight the American invaders (Brynjar Lia’s article about Abu Musab al-Suri is fascinating in this respect).

For the casual reader, this book may pose something of a challenge, but this is not necessarily the fault of theoretical density (in fact all of the authors prove to be highly readable), nor even of the meticulous dissection of theological disputes. Rather, the attempt to outline intrigues that exist between competing Salafi groups in their respective countries and the labyrinthine character of these disputes in a transnational context could prove to be the most confusing aspect of “Global Salafism.” But this is simply an observation, not a criticism, since the intended audience here is more likely those who are to some degree familiar with the subject. The book does a brilliant job of shedding light on a socio-political dynamic whose global relevance is increasing. **AJ**

Editor’s Notebook

Continued from page 3

Hariri. With the country split on the STL and the two groups unable to reach an agreement, the pro-Assad group suggested that an ultimatum hung in the air: either justice or communal

peace. The implication was that, just as protesting Syrian atrocities might destroy communal peace, cooperating with the STL in the name of justice could similarly spark civil strife.

But this did not sit well with a small group of courageous students who went to protest Syrian repression in front of the Syrian embassy in West Beirut on August 3. Predictably maybe, the students were met by the Lebanese equivalent of the Syrian *Shabiha* – a group comprised mainly of elements of pro-Assad Lebanese parties and other likeminded thugs – which reportedly came out of the embassy and attacked the protestors. The students did not belong to any of Lebanon’s major political groups – neither the 14th of March movement nor the 8th of March group. Nevertheless, they were attacked physically, with some being taken to hospital, and one even undergoing serious surgery.

The events on Hamra Street in West Beirut have had major national repercussions, mainly for the right of freedom of speech and police protection. This was not a surprise since the new cabinet is correctly labeled pro-Syrian. Perhaps the most important result was the galvanizing of hundreds of activists, writers, journalists, poets, musicians, and some politicians, who gathered in downtown Beirut in Martyrs Square (where many Lebanese and Syrians were executed by the Ottomans early in the 20th century) to show solidarity with the Syrian people. It was peaceful by all standards, although *Shabiha* attempted to

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About the Novel

Epistole is a novel in letters between a Christian Western man and a Muslim Eastern woman that transcends 35 years of history. It is the story of two college sweethearts who were separated, married, lived different lives apart, but could not un-love each other. Time and fate converge on the two lovers and on their children bringing them to a unifying finale. The letters tell the stories of many hearts in many locations. The reader peers into the souls of all characters and becomes acquainted with their intimate details. The human soul emerges triumphant, transcends all human boundaries, brings harmony to dissonance, and order into chaos.

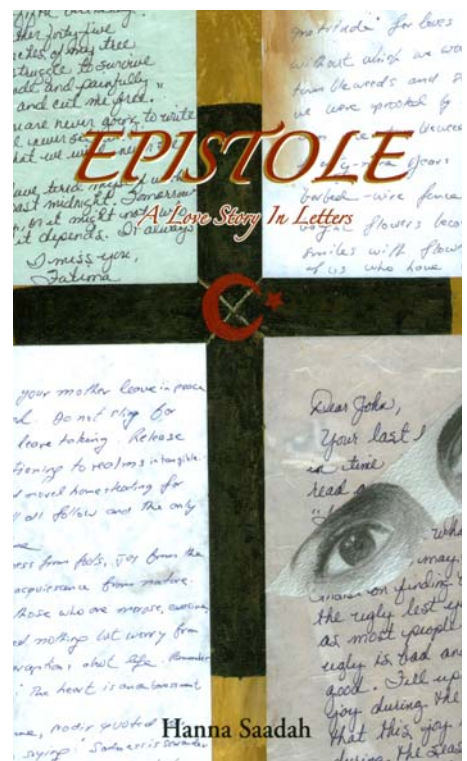
About the Author

Born in Lebanon in 1946, Hanna Saadah studied medicine at the American University of Beirut. He came to Oklahoma in 1971 for post-graduate training with strong intentions of returning to his homeland, but when the civil war prevented his return, he made Oklahoma his home.



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Mercy Amidst Intifada

BY REBECCA JOUBIN

In August 2000, Emma Williams, along with her three children, joined her husband, a U.N. official in Jerusalem, where she was to work as a medical doctor. The Second Intifada started just four weeks later. For the next three years, Williams offered medical assistance in Palestinian hospitals on the Mount of Olives and near Ramallah, while her husband worked for the most part in Gaza and the West Bank.

It's Easier to Reach Heaven Than the End of the Street: A Jerusalem Memoir

By Emma Williams
Olive Branch Press, 2006

Because they insisted on remaining in Jerusalem as a family, they shared the traumas of ordinary Israelis and Palestinians on a daily basis. Along with Israelis and Palestinians, they lived through violence that included suicide bombings, Israeli military counter-measures, checkpoints, and a thirst for revenge from both sides of the conflict. Alongside the hysteria, Williams and her family saw acts of heroism and understanding.

The uniqueness of William's gripping personal memoir comes in her uncanny ability to delve into the psychology of each side. Forging friendships and alliances with Palestinians and Israelis allowed her to understand the complexities of each position. What is more, her personal memoir is woven in to shed further light on the struggle. She talks of how her children grew used to seeing armed struggle and that Williams and her husband learned how to answer their many questions.

However, challenges continued to arise. On one such occasion, Williams and the children visited Ayalon Park, near the Green Line – the 1949 armistice line between Israel and what is left of mandated Palestine. Williams describes how the children played among the Roman, Byzantine and Crusader ruins. For the children, the day seemed like regular play in a recreational area. The truth, however, was unearthed the next day when one of the Palestinian school friends of William's son yelled at him for playing on his grandfather's land. When her shocked son asked questions, the family soon found out that until the summer of 1967 there were three Palestinian villages in Ayalon Park, which was home to 10,000 Palestinians.

Yet, in William's account the Palestinians share some blame. She gives voice to her Israeli friend's account of how between 1948 and 1967, the Jordanian authorities denied Israelis access to the Wailing Wall in East Jerusalem, a historic site that has sustained the Jewish Diaspora for generations. The savage killing of a baby girl, Shalhevat Pass, in her father's arms by a Palestinian sniper, is described. The impact of the suicide bombings on the Israeli psyche is explored.



Beach Camp, Gaza Strip, 2002 from "In Hope and Despair."

While portraying bitter realities of war, Williams pays attention to human acts of kindness and sacrifice seldom reported in the Western press. For example, she writes of how a young Palestinian-Israeli swam out and rescued a Jewish family who almost drowned in the Sea of Galilee. The Jerusalem Post led a campaign to raise money for the widow and the two toddlers. It is the description of acts of kindness and heroism from both sides, the ability to reach a common ground amidst great violence and tragedy that makes Williams' memoir unique and refreshing. **AJ**

CONTRIBUTORS

Continued from page 27

Zaid Shlah ("I'jaam, an Iraqi Rhapsody," p. 38) teaches English and composition at Solano community college. His first book of poetry, "Taqsim," was released in 2005 and is currently in its second printing.

Michael Teague ("New Media and the Arab Spring," p. 10; "Mahmoud Darwish in Fi Hadrat al Ghiyab," p. 17; "From the Victimizer's View," p. 26; "What is Salafism?," p. 30; "Liberating Public Space in Beirut," p. 34; "The Sexual Life of an Islamist in Paris," p. 40; "Instruments of the State," p. 42; "The Modesty of the Intellectual: Waiting for Abu Zayd," p. 48) is a Los Angeles-based writer and graduate of French literature from the University of California, Irvine.

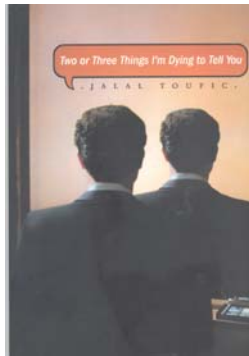
Pauline Homsy Vinson ("Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East since 1967," p. 29) is an adjunct assistant professor. Her publications include articles on Arab women writers and translations from Arabic to English.

**Contemporary Art
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Two or Three Things I'm Dying to Tell you

By Jalal Toufic
145 pages. \$20
ISBN 0-942996-55-0

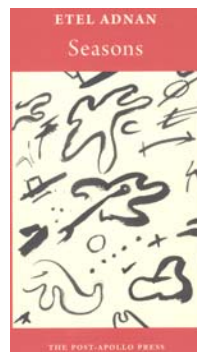
What was Orpheus dying to tell his wife, Eurydice? What was Judy dying to tell her beloved, Scottie, in Hitchcock's "Vertigo"? What were the previous one-night wives of King Shahrâyâr dying to tell Shahrazâd? What was the Christian God "dying" to tell us? What were the faces of the candidates in the 2000 parliamentary election in Lebanon "dying" to tell voters and nonvoters alike? In his sixth volume Jalal Toufic goes on investigating his environment with magnifying lenses. "There is nothing else in literature like it," writes Publisher's Weekly. He is an "amazing writer" says Richard Foreman.



Seasons

By Etel Adnan
2008, 77 pages \$18
ISBN: 978-0-942996-66-1

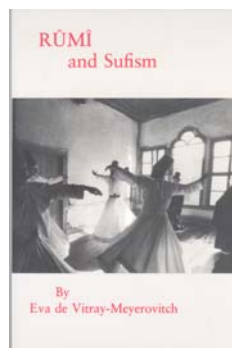
"Seasons" is a series of prose poems concerning the seasons, but that's just a starting point. It is in fact a meditative endeavor that encompasses the whole of "Being" in new, innovative ways. The boundaries are blurred between mind, body and matter throughout. The poet takes us (and herself) into nooks, crannies and abysses innumerable as the sands. Surrender and revelation throughout.



Rumi & Sufism

By Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch
Translated from the French by Simone Fattal
Illustrated with 45 photographs, charts, and maps; index and bibliography
1989 2nd edition, 167 pages. \$12.95
ISBN: 0-942996-08-9

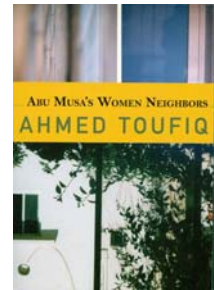
"In this fine volume all of the arts come together in a splendid unfolding of all that is Rumi Sufism. The photographs and paintings play against vibrant prose, and open all of the locked doors leading to the universality of Rumi and his teachings. The great care taken in the translation is a marvel unto itself."
– The New England Review of Books



Abu Musa's Women Neighbors

By Ahmed Toufiq
2006, 338 pages. \$18
ISBN 0-942996-56-9

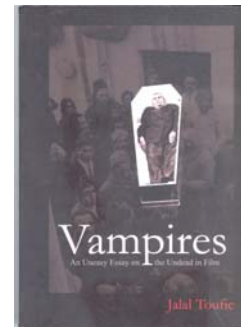
"Abu Musa" is an unforgettable novel translated from the Arabic by Roger Allen. Abu Musa is a Sufi saint whose Maqam can still be found in Salé, a suburb of Rabat, Morocco. Ahmed Toufiq has recreated the circumstances of his life. He tells his tale with love and care for the history and culture he depicts as well as a tender exploration of the human soul. Toufiq made it accessible to a modern and international audience. Already a motion picture in Morocco, the novel is to have a German edition soon.



Vampires: An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film

By Jalal Toufic
With color and black and white photographs.
295 pages. \$26
ISBN 0942996-50-X

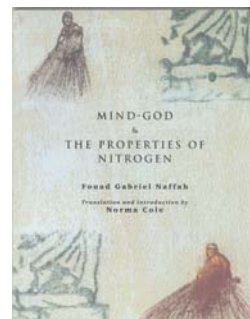
Jalal Toufic uses the metaphor of cinema and the character of the vampire in particular to read the historical period we are living in the Arab East right now. The vampire is the character that most renders the situation in Lebanon and the whole region, living "disaster surpassing disaster." Drawing on altered states of consciousness, films, psychiatric case studies and mystical reports, the author tackles many dubious yet certain characteristics of the undead state, and analyzes the current Lebanese art and political scene through these lenses. And his encyclopedic mind joins it to the whole history of cinema. An absolute must for readers and teachers of modern Arab cultural studies.



Mind-God and The Properties of Nitrogen

By Fouad Gabriel Naffah
Translation and Introduction by Norma Cole; Pastels by Irving Peltin
2006, 96 pages. \$24
ISBN 0-942996-53-4

Lebanese poet Fouad Gabriel Naffah's "Mind-God and The Properties of Nitrogen" charts the mind's progress through the material world to the realm of pure spirit. Crystalline and elusive, his poetry frustrates our tendency to consume form and meaning whole, without first appreciating the subtleties binding them more closely together. Fouad Gabriel Naffah is one of the great poets (still unknown in the U.S.) to be discovered at last thanks to the masterful translation of Norma Cole. Cole further distills the text, disintegrating and reintegrating its spirit into English. It is beautifully illustrated by Irving Peltin, who contributed five pastels for the cover and inserts.



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Viewing the Consequences of the Iraq War through Psychological Lenses

BY KATHERINE PARKINSON

The disastrous consequences wrought by the last eight years of war in Iraq are most often examined through a political lens. Considerably less attention is paid to the emotionally corrosive effects this deadly conflict has had on its soldiers, who return with wounds not easily detectable or treatable. Hanna Saadah's recent novel "Back From Iraq" is a valiant effort to address this

Back From Iraq

By Hanna Saadah
Almualif Publishing, 2010

gap in our understanding. It is the harrowing tale of combat soldier Scott Thornton's return from deployment and his subsequent struggle with the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Syndrome as well as with the process of readjusting to civilian and family life, which had drastically changed during his absence.

The novel is effectively arranged for the purpose of exploring the impact of fear on the human psyche. Each of the main characters suffers from some sort of traumatic experience that leaves each consumed and paralyzed by fear. Beginning with Scott Thornton, the reader is gradually introduced to the chilling memories of war trauma. This is followed by introducing the frightening traumatic experiences of Scott Thornton's daughter, Sarah, then his wife's, Nancy, and finally, Debbie Hunt's, who represents the fleeing fragments of Scott's soul as he represents the fleeing fragments of hers. The goal of overcoming the impacts of their frightening pasts is the thread that unites all characters as the novel un-scrolls; they all struggle to rid their inhibited lives of dread and to infuse them with uninhibited joy and meaning.

Debbie Hunt is a psychologist who is propelled by her own traumatic experiences to conduct her own fear research. As a student, Hunt found the terminology and studies on fear to be inadequate and she set out to conduct her own research, motivated by the belief that "fear was the most pernicious force within the human psyche." She began her work with war veterans at a VA hospital, and later worked with Iraqi women, whom she trained to look after Baghdad's orphaned and war-shocked children. She subsequently plays a major part in facilitating the recovery of the Thornton family, which was nearly destroyed by its traumatic experiences. In the process of unraveling the Thornton case, Debbie Hunt also succeeds in confronting and

jettisoning her own past fears. Hunt's medical credentials lend an authoritative tone to the novel's exposition and dramatization of the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Syndrome.

This book is recommended for anyone who wishes to gain insight into the workings of human nature as it confronts fear and battles against it. It is also useful for anyone who has abandoned hope in favor of despair because it explores the powers of love, faith, courage, patriotism, heroism, and the indomitable tenacity of the human spirit when challenged with potential self destruction. **AJ**

Liberating Public Space in Beirut

BY MICHAEL TEAGUE

Beirut's pine forest, the *Horsh Al-Sanawbar*, has been no less a victim of Lebanon's social and political challenges than its citizens have. Nominally public property since Ottoman times, the park has been shut down since the civil war. During

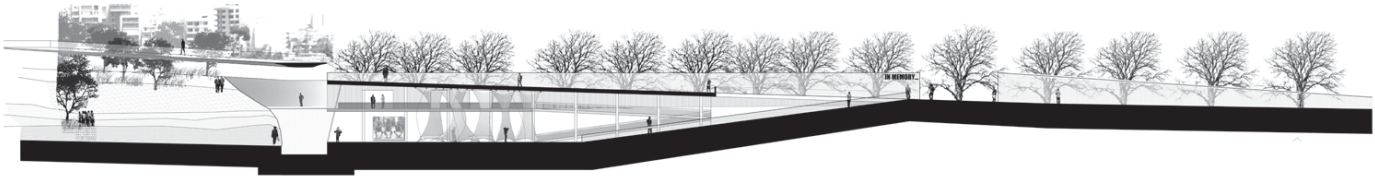
At the Edge of the City: Reinhabiting Public Space Toward the Recovery of Beirut's Horsh al-Sanawbar

Edited by Fadi Shayya
Discursive Formations, 2010

the 1990s, its greenest and most attractive section was remodeled and replanted, and also completely sealed off from the general public by fences and razor wire. Today, only a concrete plaza, a parking lot, and a few athletic courts remain open to the public. Only certain citizens are allowed to enjoy the park's verdant interior; officially, one must be at least 35 years of age and of the proper pedigree to gain entry, or, alternatively, one must have connections with the Municipality of Beirut. All the same, a contingent of the park's visitors prefers to bypass these narrow official portals entirely, opting instead for holes in the fence.

The Municipality of Beirut offers several explanations for the closure of the park's most sought after areas – the landscaping done during the '90s is still relatively new and needs more time to mature and grow before it can withstand use by large numbers of citizens, or if the park were opened to just anyone, young folks would use it to engage in "immoral behavior," or the masses would not know how to respect the park and keep it clean, and so on. Behind the official explanations and promises that the park will one day eventually be opened to all lies the fear that the physical features of such a space would provide an ideal forum for sectarian tensions to manifest. The *Horsh*, after all, resides on the borders of Christian, Sunni, and Shiite neighborhoods.

A recent collection of essays titled "A Public Space: Reinhabiting Public Space Toward the Recovery of Beirut's



“Space of Remembrance: A section through the submerged Beirut Park landscape where individuals may record memories and narratives of the war.” Image credit: Drawings courtesy of Rola Idris, 2008 as they appeared in “At the Edge of the City,” 2010.

Horsh al-Sanawbar,” addresses the negative implications of the park’s closure for the citizens of Beirut, and offers many realistic and highly imaginative ways of using the *Horsh* as a vital space for interaction and civic life in a city whose accessible green area per-capita falls pitifully below norms established by the World Health Organization. The book’s contributors hail from a wide variety of intellectual disciplines, but all are united in their call for the complete reopening of the park. They dismiss the reasoning of the Municipality as exemplary of the elitist, patronizing stance adopted all too often by authorities at the local and state levels, a stance that is one of the greatest obstacles to the establishment of a sustainable civil society in Lebanon.

These writers must be doing something right, because the January 7 issue of the Los Angeles Times featured an article about the *Horsh* on its front page. Though the article only mentions “At the Edge of the City” while avoiding any discussion of its contents, it does include a few snippets of conversation with Fadi Shayya, the architect who is also the editor of the book. Shayya has received several awards for studies he has done on the park since his first encounter with it in 2005, and has been a leading voice among civil society activists calling for the park’s rehabilitation.

“At the Edge of the City” does a painstaking job of laying out all the issues surrounding the current state of the *Horsh*. Its writers are impressively dexterous in their combination of theoretical and poetic registers, and the book provides all manner of visual aids (charts, graphs, photos, maps, and even a DVD) to help the reader understand how the *Horsh* is one of Beirut’s most necessary public goods. Naturally there is a good deal of criticism of the political system and its ineffective bureaucracies, (for example, the fact that the Municipality can hardly even provide for the security and upkeep of the minute portion of the park that is open to the public), though plans are currently underway for other parks in different, perhaps less “troublesome,” areas of the city.

Yet, what makes this book so wonderful is its emphasis on the solution, not the problem. The authors spend far more time providing concrete and highly plausible scenarios for the park’s re-admittance into Beirut’s public life. These include but are not limited to access across the major roads that otherwise put the park out of the reach of pedestrians, proposals for how the city could fund the maintenance and security of the park through various combinations of public and private initiatives, concerns about environmental issues, and, most significantly, how the

park could be used as a space for Lebanese citizens to collectively purge, rather than anesthetize, the traumatic memories that have been accumulating since at least 1975.

An essay by architect Rola Idris offers one of the most moving ideas about how to accomplish this goal. Idris writes, “A deposit space, accessible from many different levels in the garden, is a pit allowing users to deposit any object they have kept from wartime – letters, radios, and other objects, yellow and dust-ridden with the passage of time. Throwing away these objects in a shared pit signifies a cathartic process of letting go, forgetting and accepting that your objects have merged indistinctively with others’, including with those of your enemies.” This idea, and many others to be found in “At the Edge of the City,” stands in diametric opposition to the sort of collective amnesia solution that has been prescribed by the Lebanese state since the signing of the Taif accords. The concrete result has thus far been reliance on the delicately ruthless neo-liberal formula of gentrification, long-familiar to inhabitants of great American cities like San Francisco and New York. Unfortunately, not only has Beirut’s pre-war beauty not been restored, but the amnesia seems to not be holding up very well either, as evinced at the very least by recent events in the Lebanese capital.

All in all, “At the Edge of the City” is not a book for the casual reader, but should be very carefully read by every person interested in thinking through the problems that beset Lebanese society. The authors present an inarguable case for strong civic institutions, and in so doing offer much valuable insight about how to begin to overcome the puzzle of Lebanon’s 18 officially recognized sects. **AJ**

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Books in Brief



Touch

By Adania Shibli

Translated from the Arabic by Paula Haydar
Clockroot Books, 2010

“Touch,” a novella by Adania Shibli, follows the story of a young Palestinian girl and of the marriage that carries her to the other side of Israel’s Wall as someone’s wife. Translated by Paula Haydar, who has a history of translating innovative Arabic literature, the novella reads like a prose poem divided into five parts, all of which appeal to the senses. The story is told from the viewpoint of the young girl as she hovers over adulthood with the backdrop of Palestinian politics lurking overhead. In a minimalist narrative, the pervading silence intensifies the fleeting sensations of childhood. In the first section, “Colors,” each brief chapter reads like a paintbrush of color in a landscape of Palestine that quietly moves to the absence of color, a white bridal gown. In “Silences,” the second section, an ear infection brings the young girl a temporary “paradise of silence” interrupted by the domestic sounds of quarreling and her brother’s death. As an adult, she reclaims a “voluntary” silence in her marriage. In the delicate section, “Movement,” the young girl captures the natural beauty of her mother’s prayer “as if it were the wind.” In language, the young girl finds both comfort and isolation in the power of words. The novella concludes with “the Wall,” as the bride “sits on the bridal seat all alone, embracing the wall with her eyes.” While not for those who prefer a linear narrative, “Touch” lives up to its title leaving the reader with an ethereal collection of domestic images of Palestinian life trapped behind a cement wall.

– By Lynne Rogers

Of Irony and Empire:

Islam, the West, and the
Transcultural Invention of Africa
By Laura Rice

State University of New York Press, 2009

In “Of Irony and Empire: Islam, the West, and the Transcultural Invention of Africa,” Laura Rice predicates her discussion of the novels by Cheik Hamidou Kane, Tayeb Salih, Mustapha Tlili and Malika Mokeddem on a liberal and erudite foundation of literary theory. Focusing on the nomadic Saharan culture, Rice illuminates the political potential of irony as “a way of understanding how competing social imaginaries interacted to create transcultural invention of Muslim Africa.” Referring to Edward Said, Franz Fanon, Kenneth Burke, Michel Foucault and others, Rice distinguishes between stable ironies as the tool of exclusion and unstable ironies of open systems which foster analysis of the status quo.

Well-versed in history as well as theory, her chapter on African conscripts provides an informed reading of a variety of sources to expose “Western racial paradigms prevalent in Europe during the first half of the 20th century, as they relate to the experience and representations of African soldiers forced to fight other peoples battles in World War I and II.” Her discussion of Kane’s *Ambiguous Adventure*, both acknowledges previous critics and contrasts “the elements of a Muslim social imaginary from which Kane drew in creating his work (orality, religious and political history, mystical Sufism), and the elements of the Western social imaginary (individualism, notions of progress in literary narratives, existentialism) that distort the reception of this non-Western text by Western audiences.” Rice deftly utilizes Freud’s uncanny and Foucault’s “heterotopias” in her close reading of *Season of Migration to the North*, as she designates Sa’eed’s library as a “space of deviation.” In Tlili’s novel *Lion Mountain*, Rice delineates the “geography of identity” into “three conceptual coordinates: place, time and space.” Rice, who has translated Mokeddem, considers the autobiographical closeness of Mokeddem’s work, her use of a ‘tribal social imaginary with which she is often at odds in crucial ways’ and the complicated “politics of reception” for a Muslim female writing from France. While certainly not for the faint-hearted or those weary of theory, the academic depth of “Of Irony and Empire” provides a treasure chest for graduate students both in interdisciplinary content and as an example of well-researched and culturally sensitive scholarship.

– By Lynne Rogers

I Want to Get Married!

By Ghada Abdel Aal

Translated by Nora Eltahawy
University of Texas at Austin, 2010

Ghada Abdel Aal’s “I Want to Get Married!” – a highly popular blog that went on to become a hit television serial during Ramadan 2010 – is part of a recent trend in writing wherein the novel and the blog intersect. Abdel Aal belongs to a new generation of authors born in the 1970s and 1980s that seeks to show off their knowledge of Hollywood films, TV series, Internet, as well as classical and modern Middle Eastern literature, thus challenging previously established literary canons.

In “I Want to Get Married!” Adel Aal, a young Egyptian female pharmacist, exposes the hypocrisy of tradition through various ill-starred attempts at finding the right groom. Abdel Aal claims that she represents 15 million Egyptian women between the ages of 25 and 35 who face community pressure to marry and are ostracized when they fail to do so. Some critics have hailed Abdel Aal as challenging the role of Middle Eastern women, who are the traditional guardians of the secrets of the home. However, in my view it is just another book propagating dangerous Western stereotypes of passive, victimized Eastern women with no power to change their destiny. Adel’s final sentence, which supposedly presents the monolithic dream of all Egyptian woman, says it all: “My only hope is that it has earned your pleasure, and that it has brought you closer, if only by a single step, to the thoughts of an Egyptian girl trying hard to perform the role her society has allotted her... and until salvation arrives, she will keep saying it, loudly or quietly, or in a whisper: ‘I want to get married.’”

Great credit is due to Nora Eltahawy, however, whose fine translation preserves Adel Aal’s sarcastic voice, and successfully reflects various tones and cultural references present throughout the text.

– By Rebecca Joubin

Child in Jerusalem

By Felicity Ashbee

Syracuse University Press, 2008

Felicity Ashbee begins her memoir with her family’s journey to Jerusalem. She writes: “It was rather frightening and at the same time there was a thrill of excitement in looking down into the water through the little square holes of the steps. Felicity clutched the rail with a small nervous hand and set her feet firmly one another over the transparencies.”

Told in third person narration from beginning to end, Felicity Ashbee’s lyrical



"Untitled" by Huguette Caland

memoir paints a portrait of post-WWI Jerusalem through the eyes of a young British girl. As her father pioneered for four years to restore the city architecturally and artistically, young Felicity experienced childhood during Jerusalem's "golden age of restoration," a time when religious faiths were at ease with one another.

She expressively portrays contradictions present in her life and the city surrounding her. She shows how her father, despite his progressive ideas for restoration, remained unwilling to provide a proper education for his four daughters. Nevertheless, the girls learn to express themselves through the example of their mother, who was ahead of her time.

Ashbee poignantly describes how her hair was once cut into a short boyish crop, giving her the hope that she would transform into a boy and please her father. Years later she remembered her sense of disillusionment when Abou Saleem told her mother that four daughters don't count, that only a son brings joy to the family. He simply shrugged his shoulders in pity when Mrs. Ashbee said she preferred having daughters. These memories and impressions are subtly juxtaposed with images of Jerusalem as Felicity experienced it, once again grounding us back in time and place.

Her innocent childlike perceptions of her new milieu are told against a constant and poignant historical background, which makes this memoir all the more powerful and unique.

Even her family archival photographs interspersed throughout the memoir share their space with photographs of Jerusalem. Indeed, Jerusalem is the central character in her memoir.

– By *Rebecca Joubin*

Bas In Beirut

By Iman Humaydan Younes
(Translated by Max Weiss)
Interlink Books, 2007

In the tradition of Balzac's "Pere Goriot," urban-apartment novels have become the fashionable genre of social realism voicing collective discontent for the Arab world. Iman Humaydan Younes' "B as in Beirut" focuses on four unforgettable yet abandoned women enduring the war in the same apartment building. In contrast to the traditional trope of war-torn Beirut as the captivating whore or the raped, wide-eyed young woman, Younes' heroines are the neglected wives, the forsaken mothers and daughters who cast a harsh indictment on the militias, regardless of their affiliations.

The first narrator is Lilian, a Christian woman married to a Muslim, who recalls their happier marital moments before her husband, a writer, lost his hand. Ironically, Lilian recounts their story while preparing her and her children's emigration, an emigration that will leave her

husband behind. As more than one veteran can attest to, the effects of war seep into their bedroom and their most intimate moments have also become their loneliest.

Warda, the second narrator, separated from her young daughter, suffers from a debilitating depression. In an original narrative of reformulated Christian imagery, Warda's depression begins when her father is killed during an explosion; ultimately, the shattered glass of the family's icon of the Virgin causes his death. In a final act, the dyed-blond Warda, referred to as "Miss Crazy Hair," attempts to walk on water towards a mirage of her fair daughter. Camilia, filled with a youthful yearning for life as the youngest tenant, responds to the war with promiscuity prior to escaping to England. Her series of lovers reflects the cruel cynicism of war. Camilia returns to Beirut as part of a documentary team.

Finally, Maha, a Druze woman widowed before she had a chance to marry her betrothed, unfolds her story. She mourns her lover Ghassan, who died twice: "once when he lost his life, and once when he couldn't give his death the meaning he so desired." Riven from her own history, she travels to the green laws of America to re-read her own letters and search for her own memories. Like Camilia, Maha eventually returns to an irrevocably lost home, and before the war's end, both Camilia and Maha discover their own complicity in the fighting. In this engaging narrative, "*Bas in Beirut*" phonetically toys with the language and geography of the setting, accompanied by a female chorus of "*bas*" – enough sorrow – in Beirut.

– By *Lynne Rogers*

"I Shall Not Hate"

By Izzeldin Abuelaish
Walker & Company, 2010

In "I Shall Not Hate," Palestinian doctor Izzeldin Abuelaish tells his story of loss and forgiveness. Raised in the Jabalia Refugee Camp in the Gaza Strip, he describes a life of poverty and oppression: Israeli gunships on the horizon, helicopters overhead, UN relief trucks, smashed buildings, fear and outrage, and never enough of anything – cooking oil, fresh fruit or water. Still, Dr. Abuelaish has enough faith in life and in the future to become an infertility specialist – to help bring children into this presently ravaged place.

Through sheer determination, Dr. Abuelaish obtains his medical education and earns additional certifications and degrees, including one from Harvard. He marries Nadia and they have eight children together. He becomes the first Palestinian doctor at the Israeli Soroka Hospital, where he and his Israeli

colleagues work in mutual respect. An optimistic outlook and a determination to respond to people as individuals, not members of a group, sustain Dr. Abuelaish as he goes through repeated humiliating border crossings from Gaza into Israel. Rather than condemn all Israeli people for the cruelties and injustices he endures, he confines his anger to the specific border guards who mistreat him. He will not commit the sin of punishing everyone for the actions of the few.

When Nadia dies of leukemia in 2008, Dr. Abuelaish and his children are plunged into sorrow. And more sorrow is to come. Hostilities escalate between Israel and Hamas and on December 27, 2008, Israel begins a 23-day assault on the Gaza Strip. It is a show of overwhelming force, a siege of bombs and tanks. The result is devastating: Gaza is cut off from the world, food is running out, and the air is dense with dust and debris. Dr. Abuelaish wonders how leaders from either side could allow anyone's children to be subject to such an attack.

On January 16, there is a direct hit on Dr. Abuelaish's house. Three of his daughters and his niece are killed: Bessan, Mayar, Aya, and Noor. Much later, Israel admits this bombing was in error. Throughout the trauma, Dr. Abuelaish does not hate. Instead, he continues to work for peace, brotherhood and sisterhood through medicine, crediting his strong Muslim faith for his ability to continue this journey toward human dignity and freedom.

– By Frances Khirallah Noble

Origin

By Diana Abu-Jaber
W.W. Norton & Co., 2008

Readers familiar with Diana Abu-Jaber's previous books, which focus heavily on Arab-American characters and their identity struggles, will likely find her latest novel, "Origin," a startling departure in tone, style and subject matter. "Origin" is a gripping forensic detective novel, with a deeply psychoanalytical twist. There is only one Arab-American character in this novel, and his heritage is not central. Food – so important to Abu-Jaber's other work – plays virtually no role in this story, and even the climate is colder since the story is set in wintry Syracuse, New York.

But some of the elements that made Abu-Jaber's earlier books so compelling are still here, including her considerable talent for writing believable dialogue as well as a fascinating, complex central female character. This time, the search for identity is not riveted on different ethnic backgrounds but delves more deeply into questions of nature vs. nurture, and even animal vs. human. Memory, a constant source of



"Untitled" by Huguette Caland

fascination for Abu-Jaber, plays a key role here, as does the importance of family.

Lena Dawson, a fingerprint expert at a crime lab in Syracuse, finds her ordered and solitary life deeply unsettled by a rapidly escalating investigation into a series of seemingly coincidental crib deaths, which she suspects may be the work of a serial killer. Lena is surrounded by a supporting cast of quirky workplace colleagues, a domineering ex-husband and a new detective friend who is battling his own demons. Abu-Jaber effectively builds the suspense throughout the story, using the stark and snowbound setting of Syracuse to add a noir-like feel to the novel.

As in earlier works, Abu-Jaber's writing is so fluid, her dialogue so believable, that the reader is quickly drawn into the investigation, the growing public panic about a baby-killer, and Lena's efforts to untangle her own complicated life story. Was she abandoned as an infant and raised by apes? Why didn't her foster parents ever adopt her? Is someone trying to kill her, and how does it all fit together? Although initially she appears mentally fragile and passive, Lena grows considerably as the story unfolds, becoming more assertive and comfortable with her own talents – including an extraordinary sense of smell and the uncanny ability to read a crime scene. She also finds some needed closure about her own childhood that allows her to make peace with her foster parents and put her private demons to rest.

Given the current interest in police and crime investigation stories, one could almost picture Lena as the main character in a new television show, the camera following her on quixotic solitary journeys around frozen Syracuse as she and her police buddies solve equally baffling public and private mysteries. Of course, a sequel would be equally fulfilling.

– By Andrea Shala-Esa

I'Jaam, An Iraqi Rhapsody

By Sinan Antoon
City Lights, 2007

Sinan Antoon's "I'Jaam, An Iraqi Rhapsody" is at once a poetic dream and a tyrannical nightmare, relating the human story of one man's journey. The reader follows him into and through the labyrinthine prison system under Saddam Hussein's dictatorship near the end of the Iran-Iraq War.

Antoon reveals the private experience of the young agitator-hero poet, Furat, whose memory and creative force struggle to unshackle the bonds of tyranny. At the same time, one can see it as the public story of the mosaic of Iraqis living under Hussein's fortress: from the archetypal wise but devoted Grandmother, to the spirit of the intelligent and independent Iraqi women, and sadly, of those who would be corrupted by the promise of power:

Then they begin to torture people... they discover that this is easier, and perhaps

more pleasurable, than fulfilling their promises.

Perhaps more importantly, “*T’jaam*” speaks of the darkly humored, generous and sensitive Iraqi people. They would give publicly only what must be given so as to avoid death or prosecution, but still carry privately in their hearts that which no dictatorship (dare we say occupation from time immemorial until now) could extinguish: “... his name [famed Iraqi poet Al-Jawahiri] had not been uttered publicly since he left the country in 1980.... Some of his poems were smuggled... secretly in school.”

Antoon’s precise poetic-prose style, his masterful use of conceit, and lush, imaginative language all help to lure the reader into the uglier domain of Hussein’s prison. He succeeds in making revelations about places no person would want to experience for himself:

Many small things shattered inside
of me every time, things
I cannot name or identify. But their
shards still wound me.

But their shards still wound me.

Perhaps Antoon’s most striking achievement in this brilliant exposé of “memory and nightmare” demonstrates how dictatorships operate under the guise of doublespeak and the entrusted and protective “Father-Leader,” but always at the expense of human and civil rights. Antoon reveals this process through an accurate portrayal of events and state propaganda:

His heroism was used to embolden the
spirit of victory and to establish the icon
of a new citizen—one who puts country
before all else, even his own blood.

These revelations into the machinations of the police-state make Antoon’s book one of the more important novels to emerge from Iraq in recent years. He shows that humanity can triumph even under brutality and oppression, but the novel also serves as a lesson in history – we should heed its warning.

– *By Zaid Shlah*

The Arab-American Handbook
By Nawar Shora
Cune Press, 2009

It is no secret that relations between the United States and much of the Arab and Muslim world have been strained in recent years. Issues of geopolitics and the control of valuable resources lie at the core of the conflict, but the U.S. military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan

have only deepened the divide. The question facing the world today is whether or not it is possible for these two regions to move past the ill will and ignorance of the past and find a way to build bridges in the future.

“The Arab-American Handbook” begins to probe this question while dispelling some of the myths and stereotypes that have come to define Arabs, Arab Americans, and Muslims. Aimed at a general audience, the approach is multi-layered. In the first part of the book, the reader is challenged with common stereotypes. Are all Arabs Muslims? What do Arabs look like? Were Arab-Americans responsible for 9/11? The author explains in easy to understand terms that the answers to these and other questions are not as obvious as one might think – and in most cases the general consensus is flat-out wrong. The discussions are well-organized and additional snippets of information ranging from the definition of “Middle East” to the difference between Sunni and Shia Muslims are interspersed throughout the text. The book’s interactive nature, along with light-hearted illustrations and anecdotes, lend it an informal and humorous tone.

While the first half of the book does a good job of debunking many unfounded stereotypes, the second half is where the book truly shines. Turning to essays by well-known writers, key issues affecting Arabs, Arab Americans and Muslims are brought to the forefront. Travel logs by Fredric Hunter and critical analysis by Hussein Ibish and Juan Cole provide valuable first person viewpoints and project the Arab, Arab American and Muslim perspective as vibrant and sophisticated. As the reader is transported to Senegal, Tunisia, Somalia, Syria, Iraq and Indonesia, critical topics such as the events of 9/11, the debate over secularism versus Islam, and the Arab-Israeli conflict are discussed at length. The diversity of writing mirrors the broad range of perspective found throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds.

“The Arab American Handbook” does struggle with consistency. The informal back and forth of the first section and the high-minded essay format of the second half do not mesh easily and are aimed at different audiences. Future editions could consider separating the sections into two different books. Furthermore, some of the analysis in the second section is too obscure and technical for a primer aimed at the general public, and certain aspects of 9/11 and the Arab-Israeli conflict are treated with safety and predictability. Nonetheless, the book is truly invaluable in many ways and certainly achieves its over-all aim.

In this time of uncertainty and skepticism about all things Arab and Muslim, any attempt to set the record straight and achieve cooperation

and understanding is vital. In this regard, “The Arab-American Handbook” is truly a great achievement, and those interested in understanding more about Arab Americans or the Arab and Muslim worlds – including Arabs and Muslims themselves – will undoubtedly find it a valuable resource.

– *By D.W. Aossey*

Loom: A Novel
By Thérèse Soukar Chehade
Syracuse University Press, 2010

Thérèse Soukar Chehade’s most recent novel, “Loom,” delves into the minds and memories of the Lebanese-American Zaydan family as they brave a blizzard in the New England region. With each new chapter, the point of view switches to showcase the interiority of one of seven main characters: Emilie, the matriarch; Eva, Emilie’s niece; Josephine, Emilie’s daughter; George, Emilie’s son; Salma, George’s wife; Marie, Emilie’s granddaughter; and David, the neighbor whom Marie and Josephine have christened “Loom.” All of the characters are stranded: Eva is stuck in New York waiting for a flight that will take her to her family, David is occupying the home next door, and the rest of the characters are helpless in the family home. Most of the action takes place within the memories of the characters, as they all struggle to make sense of the emotions that have surfaced as a direct result of Eva’s visit or, as is most true in the case of David, the snowstorm itself. Emilie, who had already been sneaking David food for weeks when the storm hit, takes additional pity on him and goes out into the blizzard to deliver an elaborate meal. When she is caught in the snow, both households must temporarily join and, perhaps permanently, break their silence.

A major theme in this novel is the weight of regret, an emotion that all of the characters are consumed by. At many points in the novel, the characters are so fatigued or overcome by their feelings of regret that they appear to be living in their own personal hells. Even the crisp, blinding albedo of the snow mocks the way these memories create shadows in their lives. As the snow falls, the novel’s pace slows considerably to give room to the characters’ musings. This slowness is compensated for by Chehade’s outstanding skill in developing their memories, painting each with depth and sadness without making them tragic or depressing. The texture of her words makes the characters linger and their relationships seem richer, causing their experiences to take on a multi-dimensional quality – a feat difficult to achieve in a novel of relatively short length. I would venture that the

least interesting character is the teen, Marie, because her naïveté stands out in this cast of middle-aged and elderly protagonists. However, that is part of the truth of the novel: that a lack of maturity can be detrimental to one's own introspection.

Given the complexly rendered depiction of life in Lebanon, it was disappointing that Eva remained on the periphery of the novel. She constitutes an absent presence in the lives of Josephine, George and Emilie, as she is not physically present but occupies a significant place in their memories. As a result, the conclusion feels a bit unsatisfying. One could argue that such untidiness bears out the major themes of regret and longing. Chehade's "Loom" joins a rich discussion within Arab-American literature surrounding the nuclear family (Yusuf El Guindi's "Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith," Alia Yunis' "The Night Counter," Mohja Kahf's "The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf"), and the Lebanese Civil War (Rabih Alameddine's "KOOLAIDS: The Art of War," Patricia Serrafian Ward's "The Bullet Collection"). Chehade takes part in this discussion and her voice is not muffled in the presence of her stellar peers; "Loom" stands on its own as a hauntingly beautiful read.

– By *Theri Alyce Pickens*

The Storyteller of Marrakesh

By Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya
W.W. Norton & Co., 2011

Once upon a time, a beautiful French-American woman named Lucia and her Indian lover arrived in the city of Marrakesh. After capturing the attention of the locals, the young couple disappeared from Jemaa el Fina, the famous city square, never to be heard from again. Years later, the tale of the young couple and their sad predicament has become part of Marrakesh folklore and the mesmerizing Lucia has become a local legend, her awful fate inviting rescue or scorn. This is where "The Storyteller of Marrakesh" begins.

From his fire-lit circle in Jemaa el Fina, Hassan, a local storyteller, tells eager listeners the story of the mysterious disappearance of Lucia and her lover. However, as Hassan's version conflicts with the collected memories of his listeners, the truth becomes increasingly elusive. Most listeners recount a red moon and a red lightning bolt, portent signs of danger, on the day of the disappearance, but the rest of the story is lost in a muddle of contradicting accounts. The story takes another confusing turn when the reader learns that Hassan's brother, Mustafa, has confessed to causing the disappearances, though most believe that he is innocent and only willing to stay in prison

because he is still in a trance induced by Lucia's luminous beauty.

Throughout the course of the novel, the reader is introduced to fully developed characters, such as Hassan and his family members, as well as the fleeting speakers in the square who step forth to contribute to the tale then recede into the background, acting more as literary devices than individuals. This counterpoint maintains suspense, advances the plot, and creates multiple opportunities for introducing tableaux of a contemporary Islamic world little changed by modern thinking. All of these voices are set against the backdrop of the square, itself an essential character both timeless and ancient.

A poetic novel, "The Storyteller of Marrakesh" is about the nature and experience of truth and beauty and love. Roy-Bhattacharya's writing is dense with imagery, transforming what could have been a mere mystery into a lyric experience. The continual plot detours may make some readers impatient, but the reader who "gives in" to the story will find satisfaction and pleasure. This book is timeless, carrying on the tradition of "A Thousand and One Nights."

As a reader, I wondered how the author came up with this truly unique story. I was startled by the apparent similarities between the author's photo in the back of the book and his description of the young Indian lover inside the book. Furthermore, I wondered why the author chose to make a French-American woman the epitome of beauty and grace, rather than a local woman. I wondered whether or not the author had any personal connection to the story that he weaved so beautifully.

– By *Frances Khirallah Noble*

The Sexual Life of an Islamist in Paris

By Leila Marouane (translated from the French by Alison Anderson)
Europa Editions, 2010

Mohammed Ben Mokhtar is a self-made man who holds a high profile in the world of Parisian finance. He is also suffering from an identity crisis in which the trappings of his conservative Islamic upbringing and Algerian origins are engaged in a maddening and absurd tug-of-war with the high-class French hedonist and womanizer that he wants so badly to be. Mohammed's psychological integrity, which erodes as the novel progresses, is just one of the intricate layers of uncertainty in which Leila Marouane has enveloped her most recent novel "The Sexual Life of an Islamist in Paris."

In fact, there is not much sex to speak of in this novel. Rather, the sexual life referred to in

the title seems to be largely the fantasy creation of the protagonist (inasmuch as we can even identify him). There are a few things that we are told about Mohammed – he had his name legally changed to 'Basil Tocquard' to enhance the social benefits of his naturally lighter skin, he hides his assumed western identity from his family, and, for all his aspirations to be a *bon vivant* and Cassanova, he is still a virgin at mid-life. The novel follows the gradual unraveling of the protagonist's ego as a result of his trying to accommodate so many contradictory demands.

Near the beginning of the novel, Mohammed/Basil buys himself an apartment in a swanky neighborhood of Paris, and furnishes it with all the fine things that one would expect a man of his stature to have. This apartment is also to be his love nest, symbolizing his break with years of scrupulously observing devotion to family and religion. However, the break never really happens. First, he is unable to escape Sunday lunches at his dotting mother's house. As the novel progresses, he shows up to this ritual event later and later until he stops going altogether, even unplugging his phone to avoid his mother's plaintive phone calls and washing down benzodiazepine pills with expensive scotch to assuage his feelings of guilt and anxiety. The mother's phone calls are a device used very effectively by Marouane to ratchet up the tension throughout the novel.

As if this were not enough, Monsieur Tocquard's attempts at carousing go almost nowhere. The women he does manage to bring back to his apartment – and one in particular – refuse to go all the way, frustrating the search for manhood, as it were. The protagonist's relationship with women in general is haunted by a mysterious figure named Lubna Minar, a writer who steals the souls of her acquaintances in order to write about them. Indeed, Mohammed's cousin Driss warns him that everyone she has written about ends up going mad.

In all, "The Sexual Life" is a meditation on how several different issues can converge into one big existential dilemma. In this case, religious conservatism and all of its attendant preconceptions, prescriptions and taboos, are locked in a sort of helpless dialectic with the supposed sexual permissiveness and materialism of Western European liberal society, which is played out through the moral confusion of one unfortunate man. Of course, in a novel full of sleights of hand, Marouane forces the reader to share her protagonist's uncertainty about himself. Indeed, every chapter begins with "he said" or "he continued," indicating that Mohammed/Basil is not even directly the narrator of this story. Furthermore, no solid indication is given about whom this

narrator might be. Can he/she be trusted with the story being told by the protagonist anymore than the megalomaniacal protagonist himself can be trusted? This structural uncertainty is delightful as it adds depth and even a great deal of seriousness to an otherwise very humorous tale about one man's misadventures. While it is entirely acceptable to laugh at Basil Tocquard and his sexual anxieties, his dilemma nevertheless draws empathy from the reader.

– *By Michael Teague*

Specters

By Radwa Ashour
Interlink Books, 2011

Tone poem, memoir, mosaic, fiction, history – “Specters” by Radwa Ashour is all of these. Two women, Radwa and Shagar – alter egos born on the same day, one a professor of literature and the other of history – interweave episodes of their fragmented worlds to convey an Egypt of protests, rebellions, strikes, war, and oppression. Egyptians fight the English, the Israelis, and each other. There are assassinations and betrayals. Shagar is censored and imprisoned. Radwa’s husband, a poet, is deported. As if in grudging respect to the ghosts that haunt them, Radwa writes a novel called “Specters,” and Shagar writes a history called “Specters” about the 1948 massacre at Deir Yassin in Palestine.

Written by a process of association, it hardly matters who is speaking: as individuals live out their lives in the shadow of external events over which they have little control, Shagar the historian’s concern with the universal is inseparable from Radwa the poet’s exposition of the particular. Through their lives and their writing, both women show that their world sees no difference between the personal and the political.

The chapter describing the massacre at Deir Yassin is the central illustration of this principle: the personal agonies of the massacre inevitably raise the question of the morality of conflict between nations, leading to the more specific inquiry of whether the Jews have lost their ethical legacy in the face of the “original sin” of Palestine.

The boundaries between the personal and the political blur again as Radwa’s husband is said to be Algerian, Palestinian, or Jordanian, depending on the circumstances, perhaps illustrating that the differences between Arabs, like those between Radwa and Shagar, are unimportant.

“Specters” is an attempted exorcism of Egypt’s ghosts, both past and present. In writing this book, Ashour’s goal was to “write about people like her, who were living through a



“Untitled” by Huguette Caland

deadly moment in history, from which there was no escape. She would write the endings... (It) gave her a sense of mastery over her life even if it was in a fictitious world.” The finished product is a beautiful story that comes full circle, fusing history with fiction and political exigencies with the footfalls of everyday life.

The recent events in Egypt add a layer of meaning to this story, as one cannot help but wonder what Radwa or Shagar would think of this winter’s Egyptian revolution? Would they consider it a new paradigm? A version of the old one? If the toppling of the Mubarak regime is a cause for joy, theirs would be a very cautious joy indeed.

– *By Frances Khirallah Noble*

Iraq’s Modern Arabic Literature: A Guide to English Translations since 1950

By Salih J. Altoma
The Scarecrow Press, 2010

The Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88, the Iraq-Kuwait War and the Gulf War of 1990-1991, the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, and the harsh economic sanctions that lasted more than 13 years have made Iraq a source of both academic and nonacademic war study. The Iraq tragedy has also inspired American literary works. However, according to Salih Altoma, there has been a noteworthy absence of attention given to Iraqi writers. For although Iraqi writers, poets,

and novelists have surmounted tremendous obstacles both within Iraq and in exile – continuing their creative output since the 1950s – their work has been largely marginalized. To redress this dearth of recognition for Iraq’s large canon of modern literature, Salih Altoma wrote “Iraq’s Modern Arabic Literature: A Guide to English Translations since 1950.”

In order to guide the researcher through the ever-growing canon of Iraqi literature published in translation since the 1950s, this comprehensive guide presents an exhaustive list of books that have been translated in various English-speaking countries, as well as a thoroughly researched list of secondary sources such as reviews, interviews with authors, and academic articles on Iraqi literary output. In this volume, Altoma also aims to represent a wide variety of writers who are not specialists in the field of Iraqi literature, for the purpose of showing how interest has also been developing amongst the general population. Altoma makes it clear from the outset that this bibliography concentrates on Iraq’s Arabic literature, and works by Iraqi writers who write in English are for the most part excluded from this piece. According to Altoma, Iraqi literature written in English deserves its own separate study.

Altoma explains that, up until now, translations and critical studies have focused on the contributions of Iraqi poets since the 1950s, and the work of these consequently comprises the largest section in this volume. This poetry focuses on issues of exile, resistance



"Self-Portrait," by Huguette Caland

to the former Iraqi regime, and war-related themes. What distinguishes Altoma's seminal bibliographic compendium is that it not only lists the wide variety of sources and books that are now available in translation, but it additionally suggests areas for further study. For example, Altoma views traditional and neo-classical poets as being minimally represented in both translations and academic studies. And while Iraqi poetry has been widely studied, there is a paucity of studies on other Iraqi literary genres, such as drama, the novel, and the short story. Additionally, there is largely an absence of anthologies and collections dedicated to individual Iraqi poets, and also very little representation of women short-story writers and novelists. By giving space to what is currently absent, he calls for further studies. Salih "Altoma's Iraq's Modern Arabic Literature: A Guide to English Translations since 1950" is a must read for all who currently do research on Iraq, as well as for those seeking to begin their research.

– By *Rebecca Joubin*

Instruments of the State

By *D.W. Aossey*

Progressive Independent Media, 2010

D.W. Aossey does not resemble his acclaimed peers in the genre of spy fiction. The work of ex-intelligence operatives and analysts, whose books are always prominently featured atop best-seller lists, mostly tend to criticize the politicization, petty internecine rivalry, and financial intrigue that has rendered intelligence agencies so suspect and incompetent over the last decade or two (Robert Baer and Barry Eisler are only two examples in a long list of such authors). While such criticisms are inarguably well-warranted, Aossey approaches the subject from a far more troubling perspective. His first novel "Instruments of the State" will seem shocking and perhaps even offensive to some, as it thoroughly entertains the idea that attacks on the United States, from the 1983 bombing of the marine barracks in Beirut to the events of September 11, were actually false-flag

operations coordinated by a shadowy group of power-brokers deeply imbedded within the U.S. and Israeli governments. He suggests these atrocities were committed to bewilder their respective populaces, and indeed the entire world, into a highly profitable state of permanent war.

Stylistically, the novel is a mixture of the more gruesome aspects of William S. Burroughs's work with the highly refined cruelty that was the specialty of the Marquis de Sade. "The Gang of Five," a powerful group of operators installed in various high positions in the military and civilian administrations of the United States and Israel, are in a state of despair over the unintended consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Particularly, they lament the possibility that their wide-reaching financial interests will be negatively affected. Together, they hatch a plan to stage the greatest false-flag operation the world has seen, the attack on the World Trade Center towers. Over the course of the decade, they set in motion a sophisticated plot to bring the towers down. Along the way, child-traffickers, assassins, politicians, heroin dealers, and addicts across the U.S., Western and Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, all play some part, unwittingly or otherwise, in enacting this plan. AOssey lampoons these characters' lust for money and power; indeed many of them are very thinly veiled renditions of the Cheney/Bush-era neoconservatives who are no doubt still lurking about in the halls of power awaiting their next chance. This aspect of the novel makes for extremely gratifying reading.

It is probable that some readers will be distracted by the book's thesis about the events of September 11, but that would be unfortunate. AOssey is a fantastic writer and his plot has a non-linear structure that is at once complex and entertaining, and the character development is equally compelling. While it must be said that the author's contempt for the politicians whom his characters are supposed to represent occasionally becomes just a smidgen too palpable and snide, this in no way detracts from AOssey's effective use of them to explore the intertwined themes of power, cruelty and addiction. "Instruments of the State," incidentally the author's debut, is a page turner, and provides a refreshing interpretation of the thriller genre. Let us hope that it is the first of many novels from this promising writer.

– By *Michael Teague*

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The Arab Spring

Continued from page 17

economic structure likely.

What, then, does Moukaled say *can* be expected from the revolution? He believes that a full revolution will not take place unless the political foundation is laid first. It is the political revolution that will usher in the social, cultural, economic, and scientific ones. Europe witnessed overwhelming renaissance in the realms of science and culture during the age of enlightenment, which was accompanied by a religious reformation that shook the pillars of the Catholic Church. These changes helped ignite a massive economic reconfiguration that moved humanity from the old world to the new. Nevertheless, the only event in Europe that deserves the label of revolution is the French Revolution. This political upheaval and reorganization reintroduced the world to the concepts of republics, rotating power, and the rule of law. What follows the Arab Spring will, hopefully, constitute the first step in placing the train of Arab development on the correct rail: the path to democracy and the rule of the people. Only then will the other revolutions become possible. The key to full revolution, then, is the elimination of despotism; reservations, worldviews, and poetic sensitivities that do not work toward this objective may unfortunately be working against it. **AJ**

Masculinity in Arab Fiction

Continued from page 29

Aghacy's insightful discussion is sure to open the way for further analysis of the relationship between gender, politics, and society in Arabic fiction. One cannot help but wonder whether the rise of democracy protests in the Arab world will signal yet another shift in the constructions of gendered identities in Arabic fiction. Hopefully, this newer fiction will reflect a more optimistic and liberated view of sexual dynamics within Arab contexts than the views that have been articulated under the weight of political defeat and repressive regimes. **AJ**

Editor's Notebook

Continued from page 31

disrupt the event, inciting some of Lebanon's most prominent intellectuals and artists to come forward and denounce the bloody practices of the Syrian regime.

Outsiders may wonder about the political and cultural role of intellectuals in Lebanon. The predicament of Lebanon's intellectuals and artists cannot be explained without also examining the attitude of a government that subscribes to the "non-intervention theory." The activities of the Lebanese Minister of Culture on the eve of the gathering in Martyrs Square shed some light on this. On that night he was giving a speech during a dinner held by the Free Patriotic Movement, the political party to which he belongs. During the dinner, he defended the Syrian army and the "strong" relationship between Lebanon and Syria, going so far as to compare the Syrian popular uprising to a confrontation between the Lebanese army and a group of militant Islamist Palestinians in Nahr Al Barid refugee camp in northern Lebanon, according to Abduh Wazen, editor of the Cultural section of Al Hayat newspaper. The fact that the Minister of Culture, Gaby Layoun, recognizes no difference between terrorists and the genuine pro-democracy movement now happening in Syria speaks volumes as to why Lebanese intellectuals tarried in taking to the streets.

When a country's best artists and intellectuals turn out to register protest, one would expect some sort of recognition and legitimization from the Minister of Culture, especially when many of them are members of the country's two main opposing political groups. But in the case of Lebanon, the Minister was dining and lending support to the official Syrian position. Was

the Minister of Culture fazed by the activities of his country's intellectuals? Apparently not, according to Wazen. "He does not consider himself their minister and they do not recognize him as a Minister of Culture, given their understanding of the requirements of that post."

Thus, there are several factors that hindered the development of early protest by Lebanon's intellectual and artistic communities. Since Lebanon has no "Ministry of Culture" but rather only a "Minister of Culture," as Wazen put it, whose main objective is to provide support to his political party and its Syrian ally, intellectuals cannot expect much support or protection of any kind.

Against the many odds, however, Lebanon's best artists and intellectuals came out and said NO to the atrocities and the butchering of innocent civilians that has occurred in almost every Syrian city. **AJ**

The Modesty of the Intellectual

Continued from page 48

With so much invested in the language of "moderates" and "reformers" in Islamic societies and elsewhere (consider the routine American outrage at the repression of Chinese artists and intellectuals), it is hard to imagine that Abu Zayd's plight was overlooked for so long. Yet nowhere in this film can he be seen pointing fingers at the West. Instead, it seems that Abu Zayd's understanding of the Islamic faith was based solely on the responsibility and devotion of the believer. The fact that this upset so many people indicates just how dangerous such ideas still are, especially for those who are courageous enough to share them. **AJ**

Arabic & Islamic
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Arabic calligraphy for cover of Light in the Palace, Cune Press, Seattle, WA

The Wedding

BY HANNA SAADAH

When I picked up the phone that Monday evening in August of 2011, I thought I was hearing the voice of my hero, Ghalib, Mirza Assadullah Khan (1797-1869) oboing across the half-night, “*Ghalib, I think we have caught sight of the road to death now. Death is the string that binds together the scattered beads of the universe.*”

I gazed at the rouge Oklahoma sunset hovering between the day and night and notioned that, in the East, that very same sunset is a sunrise poised between the night and day. How confusing is relativity? I thought. How can the same thing be two different things at the same time?

My brother’s voice across the time-space wilderness resounded in my head, another echo of confusing relativity. How can we dialogue, ear to ear, from two dissonant times and places? “Brother,” he said, “can you hear me?”

“What’s wrong?” I gasped. “Your voice portends a heartache.”

“Uncle Ibraheem gifted us his years.”

“Oh. When? When’s the funeral?”

“Whenever you arrive?”

“If I leave tomorrow morning, I can be there Wednesday evening.”

“Good; I’ll tell Father Elias to set the funeral for Thursday afternoon then.”

Another of my hero’s sayings scrolled before my burning eyes, “*O Asad, don’t be taken by the delusion of existence; The world is but a ring in the web of thought.*”

Uncle Ibraheem was the baby, the last of my father’s eight siblings, the only one who did not remember his father. His father, Priest Nicholas of Amioun, died at eighty-two when Ibraheem was only five months old and his mother, Grandma Khouryieh, was fifty-two. The saga of this frail woman—who, singlehandedly, raised eight good children between the Two Great Wars and died at 102—is an unsung Odyssey. Lebanon was under French mandate then, having been extricated by forceps from the womb of the dying Ottoman Empire.

Flying east across eight time zones confounds the brain’s circadian rhymes and spins vertiginous thoughts around the half-awake mind. Looking from above the clouds, I thought that I could see eternity’s dome bending under the weight of time. My thoughts grew wings. *Homo sapiens* originated in Africa about 200,000 years ago out of a planet that is four-and-a-half-billion years old, I mused. And, throughout that entire time span, no one had ever experienced air travel until the 1930s. That was when *Homo sapiens* first travelled against time. I felt privileged as I recited to myself lines from John Gillespie Magee’s *High Flight*:

“*Up, up the long, delirious burning blue
I’ve topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace*”

*Where never lark, or ever eagle flew —
And, while with silent, lifting mind I’ve trod
The high, untraversed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.”*

Beirut airport was abuzz with immigrants returning from the circumferences of earth to their little hometowns in Mount Lebanon where, awaiting them, were all the loving arms and brimming eyes of relatives and friends.

“What is the purpose of your visit?” asked the officer as he examined my American passport.

“A wedding,” I replied.

“Oh, congratulations; who’s getting married?”

“My uncle.”

He eyed me with consternation as he took a second look at my birth year, 1946. Then, as if it were his duty to investigate this sexagenarian oddity, he held the passport stamp in midair—to indicate that he was not going to stamp my passport until I had answered his questions—and wryly queried, “*How old is your uncle?*”

“*Eighty-eight,*” I replied, with a matter-of-fact tone.

“*Is it going to be a big wedding?*” he teased.

“*A very, very big one, indeed.*” I nodded knowingly.

“*And how old is his bride?*”

“*Four-and-a-half-billion years,*” I sighed.

He grinned knowingly – to say that he understood that I wished to withhold the bride’s true age from him – and muttered, “*Alf mabrouk.*”*

Then, with automatic disregard, he stamped my passport, handed it back to me, and yelled, “*Next Please.*”

Amioun, our hometown, stretched like a sly cat atop the long, rocky mount that framed the olive plane beneath – its nightlights in the distance glowing like a halo around a golden crown. At my uncle’s home family and friends were sitting on the cool, long veranda and all the women were dressed in black. His wife, Aunt Salam, walked towards the car as I was pulling my suitcase out of the trunk. She was smiling when we started hugging but her smiles turned into tears over my shoulder. I kissed my five cousins, their spouses, and their twenty children before I sat next to my aunt and asked, “*Did he suffer?*”

“*He went peacefully and quickly. We were all with him. He smiled at us before he took his last breath. Pneumonia was his friend.*”

The funeral services were held at St. George’s Orthodox Church, one of the oldest in continuous use in the world – it used to be a heathen temple, dating back to about two thousand years before Christ. One could see the different strata of stones carved during different eras to rebuild its walls after its myriad destructions by wars and elements. The floor, the walls, and the arched ceiling were all of ancient stones. It could only hold in its bosom my uncle’s family and close friends; the rest of the attendees – hovering around the church like a black, humming belt of pilgrims encircling the Ka’bah – savored the siren tunes of the Byzantine mass as it crept into their ears out of anachronistic loudspeakers.

“No hand shaking or kissing, please,” announced Father Elias, as he ended the mass and led the family into the condolences hall. There, we all stood in an arch while the masses of condolent faces passed us with bowed heads and uttered, “Allah yirhamu.”** The passing endured close to four hours, causing our eyes and feet to surrender their stamina to mounting fatigue. It was not possible for some of us to remain standing – my mother at ninety-five, my aunt at eighty two, and many who had frail joints sat down after the first hour or two and escorted the long, black line of ‘pilgrims’ with their eyes.

It was deep into the night before we could retire back to Uncle Ibraheem’s home for a huddled family time. Faces were relieved at the closure of an eighty-eight-year-long life, filled with love and smiles. We talked of simple matters, admired all twenty boisterous grandchildren, and memorialized with endless tales an entire generation whose last ambassador had just bid us farewell.

The following three days were equally grueling. Visitors filled the condolences hall on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday and we all took turns in sitting and standing up. They came from remote corners with faces that have aged along with mine. I renewed contacts and friendships with many I had not seen since I left Lebanon, forty years before. We made covenants with each other and promises, which we knew we could not possibly keep, but which felt so dear at the moments of making. “Let’s get together soon. Come visit us, please. We’ll call you when we visit the U.S. We’ll have so much to talk about.”

During these few days, I said so many good-byes to so many old faces that I might never see again. Lines from a poem, ‘How Do You Say Good-Bye’, which I had written to a departing friend a long time ago, floated before my gaze:

*“Let us wander to the tavern at the corner of the street
Share a jug of frothy spirit, something warm to eat
Watch the many faces of a lazy afternoon
Exit together in the diming light
And then, pretending we shall be together soon
Depart on separate ways into the night.”*

Back at the airport, a high school friend and classmate shouted my name from above the throngs. We hugged after forty years as if we had never been apart, sat in an isolated corner, and began reminiscing. Then, as if seized by an afterthought, he looked at me and said, “I’m sorry about your uncle. I saw the pictures in the paper. It was a massive funeral, said the reporter who wrote the article.”

“Do you happen to have a copy?” I asked, wanting to return with something to show my Oklahoma family.

“No, I’m sorry.”

“Never mind; I’ll get one from one of my cousins.”

“He must have been a very rich and famous man, judging by the thousands of people who showed up to pay their respects.”

“Uncle Ibraheem? Rich and Famous? He was anything but that.” I smiled.

“Well? How come such a massive funeral then?”

“He was a kind man who spent his entire life glowing with joy. It was his joy, his indelible smile, and his tireless readiness to help anyone in need that touched all those who knew him.”

“Does he have children?”

“Five, and they’re all like him.”

“You mean kind, helpful, and glowing with joy?”

I smiled and nodded. I did not tell him that my ordinary uncle and aunt raised five highly intelligent, educated, and very successful children. Relative to kindness and joy, such attributes seemed much too perfunctory to mention.

Back among the clouds between East and West it suddenly came to me that funerals are reunions just like sunsets are sunrises. Feeling smug at my startling discovery, I picked up the new book I had planned to read on my way back, David Hume’s ‘A Treatise Of Human Nature’ and began browsing. A group of lines that contemplated death clung to my eyes. “We all were part of the inanimate for four-and-a-half-billion years. Then we all experienced miniscule specks of sentient existence, which we came to call life. Why then, when we are returned to our primary state, do we so protest?”

Funerals are not just reunions, I thought; indeed, they are also weddings. We are returned to our original home, to be what we had forever been, wedded to earth. Two thousand years ago, the Stoics figured out that ‘the goal of life is to live in agreement with nature, which is to live according to virtue. For nature leads to virtue.’ And Epictetus (55-135), not Hume, was the one who said it best: “Never say of anything, ‘I have lost it’; but ‘I have returned it.’ Is your child dead? It is returned. Is your wife dead? She is returned.”AJ

* A thousand congratulations.

** May God bless him with mercy.

Reflections on the Arab Spring II

A ruler rejected by his people: what importance would such a ruler still have if he conquered his people by cutting their throats, as has happened in the past, or if he defeated them with a rabid mercenary army, or with his tanks and his grenade launchers, like what is happening now?

Would not such a victory be a debacle? Would not his “military progress” actually be a defeat?

Is it not an inhuman tragedy to continue this mad rush for power and dominance on this Arab land?

Is it the weight of history? Is it the cunning of reason? Or is it in the cunning of this land itself?

From Al Hayat newspaper

Translated from the Arabic by Basil Samara

–By Adonis

One Hour in Hama

BY NANCY PENROSE



View of wooden waterwheel on the Orontes River, Hama, Syria, November 2010; photo by David R. Muerdter



Balloon seller in the park along the Orontes River, Hama, Syria, November 2010; photo by David R. Muerdter

Hama is a city in Syria. Hama is the city where I stopped on a journey from Palmyra to Aleppo, where I photographed the ancient wooden water wheels that jigsaw the curving riverbed of the Orontes, where it was the day before the feast of Eid al-Adha, where the foretaste of a holiday effervesced the crowds that strolled the park by the river, where my husband and I were the only apparent Westerners, where people watched us with curiosity, where a man in a red-and-white checked *keffiyeh* that wrapped around his head and flowed down the back of his robe used his cell phone to photograph a little boy, his son perhaps, posed before a water wheel, where a balloon seller tethered to his bouquet of lemon, tangerine, turquoise, and rose watched me as I took a photo of the man in the *keffiyeh*, where a coffee seller poured from the long-handled stainless steel pot on his cart that was a bicycle, where he gestured to me to buy a cup and I should have as payment for taking his picture but I did not, where a young woman wearing a lavender headscarf and black boots with spike heels stood by as her young man companion bought an ear of roasted corn from a vendor on the sidewalk, where I asked our driver, Abed, to find a pastry shop so we could sample the specialty of *halawat al-jibn*, where we watched the baker roll flat the mounds of sweet cheese dough, where the

baker pinched off a piece for me to taste, where the chewy cream-colored dough was cut and rolled around a custard, where the sliced and overstuffed logs were served to us on a small white plate wreathed with painted pink roses, where the green sprinkle of ground pistachios topped the confection, where the first bite whispered rosewater, where sweetness surged across my tongue from the sugar syrup poured over it all, where Abed bought a box of the sweets to take home to his family, where he paid our bill as a quiet gift to us, where I read in my travel guidebook of a massacre in 1982, where then-President Assad murdered 20,000 members of the Muslim Brotherhood, where in the autumn of 2010 this felt like history, where in the summer of 2011 snipers loyal to now-President Assad, the son, kill peaceful protestors, where hundreds of thousands demonstrate against the regime after Friday prayers, where tanks and soldiers storm the city, where blurry images of limp and bleeding bodies are captured with cell phones and posted to the web pages of *Al Jazeera*, where I am bonded to the horrors I see on the screen, where the memories of my lyric hour there are changed by the boldness and blood of Syrians, where the dark crevasses of repression are no longer hidden beneath sweet surfaces. **AJ**

Marcel Khalifé

Al Mayadine Ensemble

FALL OF THE MOON

*An Homage to the Poet Mahmoud Darwish
and a Salute to the Arab Spring*



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The Modesty of the Intellectual: Waiting for Abu Zayd

BY MICHAEL TEAGUE

Contemporary debates about the role of Islam in modern Middle-Eastern societies are often captive to the vocabulary of “moderate vs. extremist,” leaving little room for discussions that move beyond these black and white distinctions. Mohammed Ali Atassi’s recently released documentary about the late Egyptian liberal Islamic intellectual Dr. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd is a rare exception. Moving beyond the cacophony of forces trying to steer the debate in one direction or another, Atassi’s film provides an excellent window onto the many nuances of this debate that exist beneath its surface.

One of the virtues of this film is its commitment to reflecting the comprehensive nature of Abu Zayd. Clips of speaking engagements, casual dinner parties, and patient attempts to engage the press display the theologian’s more public face, while interviews with Abu Zayd, his family, and his close friends create a more intimate picture. From these many different sources, collected over the span of six years, the audience begins to understand Abu Zayd and his approach to Islam in a more holistic way. Abu Zayd’s approach to Islam is focused on historical context and the “interaction between the people and their sacred texts,” rather than doctrinal disputes and the “divine qualities” of those sacred texts. On the level of intellectual debate, the film does a good job of providing an expository of this point of view, especially in the choice of scenes from lectures and exchanges with the audience.

One of the prominent themes of the film is the controversy surrounding Abu Zayd’s work. This theme is developed throughout the film through interviews with his wife, Ibtihal Younes. As is well known, Abu Zayd and Younes were the victims of a court divorce decree in 1995 after Abu Zayd was declared an apostate by the Egyptian religious establishment. Through the eyes of Younes, the film

reveals the strain caused by the divorce and Abu Zayd’s subsequent exile, but also the story of a couple intensely devoted to one another.

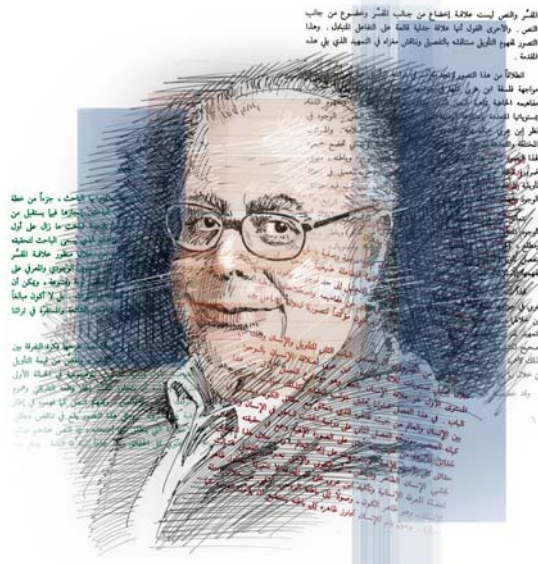
The more dire circumstances of Abu Zayd’s life are counterbalanced by his charisma, and especially his joyfully mischievous sense of humor. Nowhere in

about Wahabism?” to which Abu Zayd responds: “I told you, I was just waiting...”

As this example indicates, the film is not a simple documentary, where camera and narration are detached from the subject. Instead, it is clear that Atassi and Abu Zayd are close friends who delight in each others’ company. The result is a dialogue between the two that modulates between intellectual discussion and debate, strategic planning (especially before and after media appearances), and more jovial exchanges. This aspect of the film is not only novel and gratifying, but also adds a layer of complexity to the portrait of Abu Zayd. The contrast between Abu Zayd’s seemingly effortless poise and patience and Atassi’s obvious irritation with the various journalists they encounter is especially revealing.

Abu Zayd’s humor and impeccable comedic timing go hand in hand with his commitment to intellectual honesty. Late in the film, during a talk at the American University of Beirut, he makes one of the most salient statements in a film that is replete with poignant dialogue when he underlines the necessity for modesty in the Arab intellectual: “It is time that he becomes modest and realizes that his role, if he performs it well, is equal to that of a janitor.” His critique is of the tendency of the intellectual to overemphasize his own importance and imagine himself as a leader or even a prophet. For Abu Zayd, this intellectual immodesty puts the thinker on a par with the common dictator, who also claims to own the truth.

“Waiting for Abu Zayd” leaves the audience wondering how a man offering such utterly reasonable and essentially humanist ideas could be so persecuted.



Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd by Mamoun Sakkal for Al Jadid

the film is this more apparent than in his dealings with various Arab media outlets. One scene in particular, in which he is interviewed by *Al Arabiya* television in Beirut, illustrates this wonderfully. Prior to the interview, Atassi warns Abu Zayd that the station is beholden to Saudi funding, and is thus indulgent towards the Kingdom’s various sensitivities, making the interview subject to censorial editing. Less than 45 seconds into the interview, Abu Zayd, with incredible guile, turns the interviewer’s question about the veil controversy in France into a jab against a “rigid doctrine that does not evolve, just like Wahabism.” Only moments after this pronouncement, the obviously perturbed interviewer hastily and awkwardly calls for a break in the interview. Abu Zayd then flashes a few subtle grins at the camera, surely in response to his previous conversation with Atassi. Later on, Atassi asks: “How did you pass that comment