

## **Passionate Story Tellers – Networking among Women Writers from the Middle East and the West**

I am applying for a grant to cover expenses I foresee in a planning phase of my project titled “Networking among Women Writers from the Middle East and the West”. The planning phase will cover: researching interest and feasibility of a conference in England; clarifying participants – who is interested or not interested. It will also cover a trip to the Middle East to revisit women initially interviewed and other writers who would be excellent participants. Communication with women in the Middle East is facilitated by physical presence – I know this. Visiting London would include visiting Margaret Obank, editor of *Banipal* – which is the most prominent literature journal of works from Arab writers. Margaret is a well-connected woman and she has a serious interest in works by all writers in the Middle East.

In 2007 I was awarded a Fulbright scholarship in order to enhance my knowledge of Arab culture, literature, and language. I had just been appointed librarian for all the foreign Literature departments at Boston University. Like many Westerners, to the extent I thought about it all, I considered Arab culture negative, dark, and unpleasant. Yet I needed to challenge these preconceptions to responsibly play my role as Foreign Literature Bibliographer in the BU system. The Fulbright gave me the chance to see another world and I changed my view entirely. In Morocco and Jordan my understanding expanded in a significant way.

In Morocco I spent much of my time working in a University Library, sharing with Moroccan librarians the best practices we employed at BU. I audited courses in Arab history but to my surprise found there was no course on Arabic literature. Because many of the foreign students were there to study the language of Arabic (military students, or those wanting to enter the foreign service) literature was considered unnecessary.

In Jordan 2 years later on another Fulbright I began to read extensively and also to interview writers from that part of the world. I had been told by an Arab friend in Boston that scant attention was paid to female writers and that there were few recorded interviews or films. I became fully engaged when I found that these writers often write movingly about universal issues: of daily life; of the complexities in their culture of dealing with men; of death, pride, abandonment; and fear – all from a woman’s perspective. Even those few Western readers who are familiar with the literature of the region are less familiar with women writers than their male counterparts. Arab women writers embrace change faster than men, and their writings seem closer to the pulse of their communities. The writers I interviewed and later filmed are from a wide variety of countries -- Palestine, Iraq, Jordan and Syria. But I found many similarities of style and content. Moreover, these women have overcome cultural and economic obstacles that Western writers would not have to face. As a result, they are dedicated and proud, passionate about their profession and what they see as their mission.

The obstacles they face are many. To be sure as in the West women often earn a living as journalists, television writers (sometimes for soap operas) and magazine writers. But in the region serious writing is often considered a hobby by family and friends; little encouragement is offered. Indeed many report that when they were children or adolescents, family members often discouraged any impulse to write, and even their early reading.

Here in the West women writers are often supported by and encouraged by peers, teachers, professors, organizations, retreat centers (such as MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, and Bread Loaf). Much in the environment and the writing culture enriches and facilitates their work – reading materials, libraries, peers, writing groups, agents and editors. For Arab women, even finding a convenient space to write in is hard. They are still struggling with the basic problem of a room of one's own that Virginia Wolff wrote so movingly of over 70 years ago. There are almost no bookstores or public libraries in the Middle East. There are no organizations that encourage women writers. They have few colleagues or professors to inspire them. Things that a Westerner takes for granted are simply not available.

For a writer of any country to become known elsewhere he or she must be translated. The Arab language in particular is poorly represented -- translators are hard to come by. Few people know Arabic and English well enough. It is only over the past 10 years that interest in the area has highlighted this weakness. Those translators who do exist are often men, and they seem to translate mainly male works. Denys Johnson-Davies is considered one of the best, and he is in his nineties. Roger Allen and William Hitchens are also known, as is Humphrey Davies. Peter Theroux is considered a superb translator. Miriam Cooke and Marilyn Booth are considered leading female translators. In a sense whether the translation is good or bad is not weighed as heavily as it should be because to have any work translated is a coup. Women seem to have more luck in selling abroad books in English of a sensational nature – e.g. honor killings. These books sell but it is difficult for less sensational subjects to attract publishers and thus hard for many writers to have even a chance at attracting an audience.

The Arabic women sat and talked to me, often in their homes. They were extremely welcoming and kindly. I had read many of their works before our meeting and they opened up to me. One story in particular, written by an Iraqi woman (Maysaloon Hadi) moved me. It was entitled "The World Minus One" and had not yet been published but was translated. The story – of a couple whose son is most likely one of two pilots who has possibly died after their plane was shot down in the desert– is a strong piece of writing. The reader understands that the father of the (dead or alive) pilot can live only if he holds onto the hope that his son was not the body found by the side of the plane. The wife and mother, however, will spend her life mourning the body found, whoever it is. She accepts reality and assumes this body is her son. This is a story that could be located anywhere in a country with a desert. A country at war. The people involved could be from any culture. The feelings of despair and hope evoke common themes. And yet it was written by an Iraqi.

When one speaks of Arabic literature it is tempting to think of the large geographical area that includes many countries. Yet while there are universal themes, local context and history produce variety. From Lebanon, a country that has lived with war for decades, one finds women writers who express suffering in a tragic voice. Stories by contemporary Lebanese writers include events like families being torn apart by political violence, persons losing their homes and both geographic and psychological displacement.

From Egypt, a country with a rich independent history but also colonized by the English for decades, one finds a different kind of literature. Egypt has nurtured a Nobel Prize winner – but many would claim that Nagib Mafouz was never nurtured by the Egyptian government. Women writers are plentiful in Egypt, and many write from a feminist view. They are considered more advanced than women from other countries in the region. There is an old saying is that "books are written in Egypt, published in Lebanon and read in Iraq."

Sudanese writing reflects the land's history, its past, and its geographical proximity to Egypt. Palestinian writers often speak of the reality of leaving land and homes that their people once owned – characters

who once worked and lived on the same land for generations. Moroccan women writers seem to focus on the rights of women i.e. the writings and films of Fatima Mernissi. While she has written some fiction, she is known as a journalist, memoirist and editor. Morocco has not suffered war as has Lebanon and other countries, and the country has lived with the same Royal family for decades. Traditionally, all Arab lands were famous for oral poetry readings. Even today in Damascus there is a weekly oral reading in a famous cafe – or there was before the revolt. I interviewed and filmed Syrian women writers in 2011. Their writing, apart from veiled inferences to inequalities and lack of freedom, are stories that aim to interest a wide range of readers.

In terms of genre, works from the Arabic world comes to us mainly through short stories. Those few (Mahfouz and Idris, and an occasional female writer) who do publish novel-length works are rare. Short works are easily published and have more possibility of appearing in a magazine or journal. Publishers are more likely to bet on a short work that does not take up too much space.

In the end, despite limited time and resources I was able to film a total of 11 women. Returning to Boston I created, with the help of some experts in the field, a bibliography of women writers from the Middle East, including some of the videos I had filmed. More videos will be added after the editing process is complete (specifically those from Syria: see : <http://www.bu.edu/library/guides/caww/index.html> )

One of the goals of the Middle Eastern Women's Writing Project is to help others realize that these writers share the same passion as Western writers. We have a stereotypical image of many from the Middle East that must be broken down if conflict is to be eased and communication enhanced. Reading the literature of another culture is an important way to bridge differences and to pave the way for empathy and respect. Knowing more and understanding more about Arab lands is essential to avoiding unnecessary conflict. Violence and hateful feelings are often due to ignorance or misunderstanding. Education and exposure to other cultures and issues that these cultures face today is not a panacea but it IS important. The filmed stories of these writers – watching them speak and move and react to the right questions -- can turn these women into recognizable figures. Different languages and unfamiliar names become secondary. The events of 9/11 caused many Americans to harden feelings towards Arabs. Stereotypical feelings and images are hard to change when violence has been so horrific but our goal should be to begin the process. I have often been asked by intelligent and well-meaning people including some colleagues: Do women writers exist in the Arab world? Do we have anything in common with them? In short, there is a large gap in basic information and cultural understanding.

The problem is not new but it now must be addressed. And as one writer puts it: "...the Western misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Arab women is not a recent development. It is a historical phenomenon that goes back to the time of the Roman Empire, and has contributed to the common stereotypes of Arab Women today" (Sabry Hafez, in "Zenobia: between Reality and Legend" by Yasmine Sahran, 2006). Middle Eastern women, of course, are not the only stereotypes. Margaret Mead's daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson, writes that women in general "have traditionally been regarded as conservative and inclined to stay at home. Going forth to seek adventure has been regarded as a male specialty."

Knowing more and understanding more about Arab culture is essential to resolving one of the world's fundamental conflicts. Ignorance or misunderstanding are powerful forces and education and exposure to other cultures don't always defeat them but the arts have their own powerful currency. Films of

foreign lives – watching writers speak about their work and how they cope in their work with the forces in their own societies-- can both humanize Arab women and open the door to cultural understanding.

Addressing the problem of fear and misunderstanding of other cultures is the goal of my project. I envision a meeting of women writers -- from the West, and from the Middle East. There are presently 11 videos of Western women of all ages in and around Boston. These videos, once edited, will join the Middle Eastern videos on a joint website here at BU. Some Western writers are happily published and successful. Some are still students, but students who have decided that writing is important to them. Passion is the one element that binds all 22 persons. Are differences of these cultures major or minor? Elemental or environmental?