

Women Writers in the Middle East and in the West

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Abstract:

Trips to Morocco and Jordan, and later to Syria, have allowed me to pursue my interest of literature coming from the Arab world. I received a grant from the US government to visit and research libraries in Morocco and Jordan. As a librarian I studied practices that were used in these different countries in their own libraries, and contributed best practices in the United States to local staff. My expertise came from experience at state of the art university libraries and study at Simmons College. During the second Fulbright I filmed women writers and created two websites (<http://www.bu.edu/library/guide/caww/>) and (<http://www.womenwritersoftheworld.com/>).

In my paper I discuss the positive aspects of reading the literature of another culture. I also discuss the women who I video-taped – both Middle Eastern women and Westerners. Those from the Middle East come from: Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, and Syria. Women from the West who I videoed are from: Scotland, India/Germany, Boston and other local areas. All of them are dedicated and are passionate about their professions as writers despite the many obstacles they have encountered. Some have other occupations. Some have families. There are similarities between them – both between the West and the East, and among themselves – that are curious.

Understanding other cultures through the writings of these women, and the reading of their works, is instrumental in banishing stereotypes that the media send our way every day. Misconstrued ideas of other cultures can drive public attitudes and policies in unexpected and destructive directions.

Keywords: women writers, Middle East, culture

Introduction

My deeper knowledge of the Arab world started with a Fulbright grant in 2007 to go to Morocco. I am a librarian at Boston University in Boston, Massachusetts, and one of my duties is to collect material relevant to Arabic and Arab culture for our university Library. My job has included nourishing a passion for Arab culture, Arab literature, and Arabic as a language that I have managed to turn to practical use through an electronic research website I created and keep updating.

Before my departure on that Fulbright to Morocco, I contacted Al-Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco and agreed on a mutually beneficial stay for me – I would teach the librarians what I had learned in the United States, and I would in return learn more about a region that I didn't know well. I received a second Fulbright two years later to go to Jordan and spend months at a University. I contacted Mutah University in Kerak, and we agreed to a similar situation as the one in Morocco.

When I arrived in Jordan, with the second Fulbright, I was informed that the man who had hired me had left the University. No one knew what to do with me. I then proceeded to my own Plan B, which involved filming women writers. I had brought a movie camera with me, and although it was a simple one it served well enough. I was able, through networking and my interest in the subject of writers, to contact and film: Iraqi women living in Jordan; a Palestinian woman living in Jordan; and Jordanese women.

I subsequently made a trip to Syria before the civil war began, and was able to film 3 more women writers. When I returned to the United States I created a website: one for Boston University, which serves also as a bibliography for students/faculty to use as a way to learn about writers from the region (see: <http://www.bu.edu/library/guide/caww/>) and another public website for all to see. (<http://www.womenwritersoftheworld.com/>) . I had a memorable experience being in the presence of these women. I often filmed them in their homes. I learned of the desire to write that inhabited every one of them. I learned of the obstacles they had encountered. I also learned that most of them felt when they were very young that they were 'meant' to be a writer.

Arab Women Writers

What seems to particularly characterize the women writers I research? This is a very broad question. As it is hard to generalize, I must speak of these women one by one. I would venture to say that many had a sympathetic father. This father figure encouraged them to follow what they obviously loved doing – writing. I would also say that finances, or the lack thereof, was a major problem for many of them. Some remained married just for this reason. Some were single. Writing is not a well-paying profession and putting food on a table is important. Writing *for* a journal, or a newspaper, or for some publication leads to a more stable life.

In 2009 I had met an Iraqi writer in Cambridge, MA. She was a writer-in-residence at Harvard, working on writing a book of short stories. She had given me names and telephone numbers of writers who were in Jordan – and I made use of this. One thing led to another. Writers exist in

little groups and they are all known to one-another. It was not hard to network within this group of people. Attention of any kind is welcomed – and although many had never been to the United States, they welcomed recognition from the Western world—any kind of attention. For the writer needs the reader: not just to pay wages, but also to give meaning to their words. As John Cheever (a well-known American writer) said: “I can’t write without a reader. It’s precisely like a kiss – you can’t do it alone”.

Women Writers’ Common Grounds

My initial interest in women from this part of the world and their writing was furthered by the idea that similarities in all writers exist. One can live on a different continent and still share life experiences that can be understood in other countries – if they are well written.

I begin discussions with Lutfiyaa Delaimi, who currently resides in Amman due to the war in Iraq. Her story is interesting because she was supposed to have taken the grant from Harvard University, and she would have spent a year writing. But because she suffered from a mugging in France, shortly before she was to leave, she declined travel and thereby declined the grant from Harvard. Lutfiyaa knew when she was little that she would be a writer. Her stories are about human situations, about the human soul, and often about Arabic women. She writes early in the morning, and finds that writing gives her life meaning. She has received many letters from Arab women who write her to say: Yes, this is my life, you have portrayed it perfectly.

In comparison with Lutfiyaa Delaimi is Rana Azzoubi, a young modern woman who speaks English perfectly. She writes books for children and is interested in having other nationalities relate to her own Jordanian nationality – children relating to similar games, similar adventures, even though they are from vastly different cultures. The children can then begin to understand another culture and bridge the gap that often creates fear and mistrust. One can hear birds singing in the background of this video, as we sat in her back yard.

Another writer I videoed was Samiha Khreis, who told me that she was born to be a writer. She feels it is her job to tell stories. Those stories can touch you and trigger your imagination – and can be found in the smallest of things that happen around us. In order to make money to survive, Samiha is a journalist. Her writing process is daily – and she writes for just one person. The reader. Can one’s writing change the world? Samiha tells me that when she was young she felt yes, one could change the world with writings. Older now, she understands that writing will not change the world – but one can change some people and give them hope or happiness. A reader can identify with the experiences that are exposed.

Laila Atrash is a Palestinian writer who was the founder and is currently the head of PEN Jordan. I went to Laila’s home and luxuriated in the richness of the surroundings. She has a similar story to that of many women who I videoed: her mother was a story teller. At the age of 13 Laila

produced a story for her teacher who felt she had real talent. She feels strongly that women from the Palestinian world do not demand the respect they deserve. If she can do something for the Palestinian cause in her writing, she is happy.

Basma Nsour, a Jordanian writer, knew she had a gift early on. She was often treated as “the girl who knows how to write” in school. Her writing expressed what she was thinking. Chekhov, Naguib Mahfouz, and O. Henry were some of those writers who inspired her. Beauty, sensitivity, human stories were what attracted her. O. Henry’s writing in particular was a role model for her. Today Basma is the editor of the journal *Tyche*, from Jordan.

Colette Khoury is a woman with a rich and illustrious past and she is from an important family of poets and writers. We in the West have never heard of her – and yet she is the granddaughter of former Syrian Prime Minister Faris al-Khoury. In 2008 Colette was appointed literary advisor to President Bashar al-Assad. During her interview she stressed to me the point that: “The West knows nothing of us. It thinks we are all terrorists. I would like to change that idea with my writings”. She remains a supporter of Bashar al-Assad. and not only Arabs, but also Westerners need to understand why she would do that.

Arab Women Writers in a Larger Context

The last Arab woman writer I will speak of is Salma Khadra Jayyusi who has done so much for Middle Eastern literature in the Western world. She has helped to build a bridge between the East and the West by translating many books written in Arabic into English. She wanted to tell the West that Arabs do have a culture of their own – they do have a culture, and they do have a legacy with literature and with writing. That legacy is not recognized by people in the West because they are not privy to the Arabic culture and they are not acquainted with the Arab culture. They do not know how to read stories so as to understand who Arabs are – what their story is, where they stand.

So Salma Khadra Jayyusi decided that perhaps it was up to her to bridge that large gulf between the East and the West, by translating stories. She also wrote books in the Arabic language about writers, poets from her world. She helped to debunk the myths that exist in the West about those who live in the Middle East – the idea that those in the East have no heritage, no culture, and no literature of their own. Her goal was to enable others to see the Middle East through their lens.....not for things to be written about Middle Easterners, but for they themselves to tell their own stories.

There are interviews on this website of other women who are seriously involved in writing. In Syria: Colette Khoury (who feels that the world does *not* know Middle Easterners, and thinks that they are all terrorists), Colette Bahna, Samar Yazbek, Rosa Hassan. I have also included several writers from the West, to whom I have asked similar questions: from Saskia Jaim, a young woman from Boston University; to Edith Pearlman, a well known American writer of short stories; to Rosanna Warren, a famous faculty member formerly at Boston University and now at the University of Chicago; to Tova Mirvis; to Margot Livesey. All these Western women

have been asked similar questions to those posed to Middle Eastern women writers, and their answers follow.

Western Women Writers 2011

Saskia Jaim and her work (*Urine Lane* appears on the website <http://womenwritersoftheworld>) comes from a father and mother who are writers, and grew up with the written word as part of her environment. She has felt from an early age that writing demands an openness of one's mind to experiences around oneself. This openness is wonderful and allows one to see things from many different perspectives. There is nothing sacred in one's life – this is one lesson she has learned. Starting at an early age she was a constant note-taker, and this is one way she may still begin a story. Yet Saskia would advise younger people to find something else to do...besides writing. One can have a much gentler life if one is not a writer! But if one is slated for this profession, persist.

Tova Mirvis has persisted, despite having children. She was always a heavy reader, and her home was filled with books. Most Western writers claim that books influenced them from a very early age. Tova feels today that having parents who were supportive of the arts gave her the confidence to become a writer – she could take the chance to try something very impractical, as if she failed there was always law school. Growing up in a very small community of orthodox Jewish people in Memphis, Tennessee has influenced her writing since. She always wanted to write about community and what it means to be an insider and her living situation afforded her the opportunity. Taking issues from the outside and using things that are inside herself, she has been successful in creating novels of interest including *The Outside World*.

Tova does not believe writing is for everyone, but she feels it is about the pursuit of the 'human emotional truth' and the writer can go beyond it even when people don't want to listen. "The writers' job is not to provide answers but to ask the hard questions."

Edith Pearlman knew early on that she wanted to be a writer – she was an avid reader herself. She was praised for her student work but she was not encouraged to write. Edith is mainly a short story writer, a successful writer, and yet she maintains that rejection never stopped her. She never could financially make it on her own, and still today with her success the situation has not changed. She is married however – and lives with her husband's income. Quiet and privacy are important. She started writing in the basement, near the furnace, when her children were young. Gradually she moved upstairs, as they moved out. Stories may come from a dream; an observation; an anecdote; or something entirely invented. *Binocular Vision* is one of her short stories collections which won the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Edith feels that a certain struggling in one's life, when one is writing, might be a benefit. Another Western writer Margot Livesey – a Scottish woman – agrees. Her interview is interesting, as she is a successful writer like Edith Pearlman and yet does not live on her own book publishing success. Margot was not a natural writer. At an early age she wanted to be anything but a writer: working for Oxfam, Amnesty or another non-profit organization was very

appealing. Becoming a philosophy professor was another prospective profession. Her parents were both appalled at her choice of the profession she chose, and died before they saw any success on the part of their daughter.

Margot Livesey supported herself early on with various grants from different organizations geared towards writers. She is published at the moment, but feels that even if she were not published she would continue writing. Regarding subjects covered -- Margot tries to find an intersection between personal preoccupations of her own and public concerns. The subject for one of her books *The Missing World* came to her because of news surrounding a woman who had lost part of her memory. Repressed memory and the inaccuracy of memory became a subject of interest to her, around which she created a story.

In terms of writers and finances: it seems that in Canada writers are extremely well supported in a number of ways. Many writers can stay afloat financially without teaching. In the United States the primary source for writers is academia. It is the Universities and colleges that keep most writers afloat financially. In Britain many writers work in journalism, television, radio, print media to supplement their income. These are three different models, coming from three different worlds. Lastly, Margot's advice for young writers is: don't enter academia even though it may make you feel like a grownup and it may seem seductive as you are part of an intellectual community. "Teaching is a dreadful job if you want to write because there are no clear boundaries, it is incredibly demanding, and it is poorly paid. Do anything BUT write! So...learn to drive a bus, learn to mix drinks, learn to milk goats."

Conclusion

Stories are some of the most effective mediums to reflect everyday life in any culture, and that is why distortions of any culture can be dangerous. Not only because such distortions are oversimplifications or flatly inaccurate, but because cultural misapprehensions can drive public attitudes and policies in unexpected and destructive directions. Writing fiction thus extends the life and reach of a culture, and writers telling these stories recreate everyday life. A good way to learn about a country is to read its fiction, and when the life of real men and women surface in this fiction, then audiences worlds apart can relate to them.

Writing, indeed, is a passion, and so is reading. I have mentioned some names and some works of women writing around the world. You can read further about them and about their works on the websites that exist. You will broaden your understanding of another culture if you do so. Good writing is seductive and educational at the same time. It can mean that one becomes part of a small group of persons who are involved in the same thing. Often they are intellectuals. Whether one lives in the West or in the Middle East, writing gathers readers from various cultural backgrounds and provides them with the wisdom of these stories.

In addition to publishing woes and successes and companionship, Arab and Western women writers share a good deal. Themes in their writings include: pride; women's place; dreams; death; jealousy. Certainly the preoccupations are common, but more important are the hard questions writers on both sides pose to us to ponder. We might not always want to know about other cultures and concerns, but it is baffling to ignore ones posed by our own writers. These questions are always relevant to our lives--the real lives of those writers, and the lives of those around them.

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January 16, 2014