

A Bracelet on the Wrist of Time

Ibtisam Barakat

Bead # 1 - Arabic

On my way out of Ramallah, out of Amman, across the Atlantic and into Manhattan, New York, in the summer of 1986, I was crying. It was not because I was leaving behind my mother, my father, my brothers, thousands of olive and fig trees that I loved, and an endless number of jasmine bushes that had become the fragrance of my life. It was because I was going to stop hearing Arabic being spoken around me. For years before this day I had taken great pride in speaking English in Ramallah, a sign of education and prestige. But now it all felt like a pretense. I loved Arabic. I loved it with all of me. If I loved all languages of the world, it would be because, on the inside, Arabic had made me its lover.

But it has not been an easy love as questions often interrupt it. Can Arabic love its girls and women? Can it allow girls and women to speak their hearts and listen to them with all of its 28 ears? Can it untie the *ta marbootah*, cut the rope and set it free forever? Can it allow girls and women to inherit an equal share of meaning when a parent word dies and earn the same amount of joy when a word works all day? Endless questions, beads in a bracelet – black, purple, gold, pink, and yellow – that jingle daily, on the wrist of time.

Bead # 2 - Mother tongue

In my mother's presence, I was wordless. It was her tongue that told me that girls should be always quiet, should never open their legs wide as they stride in the wind, and should never laugh in gigantic gulps, never eat a lot, never say no to anyone, never fight and show anger that makes the veins in their necks pop out like highways, carrying loud and big words that demand a change in the direction of history. My mother's tongue misspelled and mispronounced the truth about girls and women. In my mother's presence, I felt motherless.

Bead # 3 - What others who had lived a thousand years ago said about me

A proverb, *mathal*, is something that at first was said by someone a long time ago. I don't even know who said any of the *amthal*. He might have been an unhappy person, foolish, and did not like girls at all. She might have not known any girls or women, including herself.

But people around me seemed to have endless proverbs to describe to me how a girl is less than a boy in value, how a girl is never to be trusted because she is "weak," and how controlling the lives of girls would lead to social good and to preserving honor. They saw no honor in freedom for me.

Please I want to dance with all of my body and passion... I want to sing... I want to go for a walk all by myself and I do not know when I will be back... the road will determine that... I want to smile at boys that I like and tell you all about them because I do not wish to keep my love a secret... I want to think differently from the way you do and have that be accepted. And I want to read books written by women about women's lives... where are those books?

"If you were a boy, you would have had the right..." he, she, and they said. But... *ham el-banat lalmamat*, they quoted that foolish somebody who had died a thousand years ago and could not have known a thing about the real *ham* of girls facing such words.

Bead # 4 - Private

So I grew up not able to name my private parts that were considered so private I myself was not allowed to touch them. The sex urge proved forbidden, and my life depended on hiding what I had truly felt as though it were stolen jewels.

I found myself loving language. But I discovered that much of language, Arabic, English, and otherwise, was not made by women, and much of it took the shape of chains that were put on the minds of young girls. As the girls grew, often the chains grew with them.

A new language must be invented, new letters must be sent between the letters of the alphabet to wake them up to what had gone on. A new and endless conversation punctuated with girl giggles, tossing of curls, and the tossing away of all the chains on the mind. Some day on the shelves of bookstores in Tunis, Sidon, Cairo, Ramallah, and St. Louis, there will be the Unabridged and Unlimited Arab Woman's Encyclopedia of New Expressions of Freedom. We would give that to our men on the New Year.

We would change the inner thoughts of all libraries that had stood for more than 1900 years thoughtless of women. For such centuries, most of what a woman had thought, felt, discovered, and wished to say was flicked off the record, and so girls had to walk through the generations carrying the wound of discontinuity of women's knowing. We had no page that we could stand on, and from it leap forth into life. Many said that it was God's word to silence women.

Bead # 5 - Religion

"Exactly," I questioned the religion teacher in my high school, "if Allah meant for women to be led but not to lead, to stay at home and not take on the entire world as their home, why would He among ninety nine magnificent names choose *Al-rahman* and *Al-raheem* to top all other names?"

"Because He is compassionate and merciful," she said, "Don't you know that?"

"No. No. I mean both words, both names, chosen by the divine, share the word *rahem*, *womb*, to the root of their meanings. And the womb is the most defining part of a woman's body."

"There is a place in Hell that is reserved for people who ask such questions," she said.

"We are already in Hell, teacher. This is Palestine. I am only asking you a question," I laughed. She and I stared at each other like two stars against a dark night. Neither of us moved closer to the other.

Bead # 6 - Sex, men, and marriage

In my mind I see a man who speaks of feelings with the excitement he speaks of football, and who will cry and not imprison himself in silence behind the mask of strength, and will pick all the figs and pears from trees of beauty and creation, as his woman picks apples from trees of knowledge, and feeds them to Arabian horses.

Bead # 7 - Zataar

Life tells me that a language has in it the heart, hurts, healing, hopes, humor, and history of a people. It says that even when a language is silent in our days, it continues to speak through us. And a language has its own taste that a lover craves. Arabic is *zataar* for me. When I don't hear people speak it around me, I skip the olive oil and the bread. I eat *zataar* by the spoonful.

Bead # 8 - America

In America, my second home, I wish to secure words of love, respect, and equality for all that is Arabic and Arab. I feel my love for Arabic and pride in being Arab fill me. I want an Arab to be equal to her dreams, and to everyone who walks the Earth because I am a woman whose heart has seen the two sides of hope – where the sun rises with ease, and where it must dare to rise if there is to be the faintest light.

Bead # 9 - Personal Palestine

On my way out of Ramallah, out of Amman, across the Atlantic and into Manhattan, New York, in the summer of 1986, I was crying. I was recalling that my family members threatened to kill me if I went to America alone, unmarried. They said a woman must never be in charge of herself in the absence of a man to oversee her actions. They brandished knives. I thought I had to say my final words before meeting my fate. "Many men die for the freedom of Palestine," I said. "Now I know that a woman's body is her Palestine." There was silence. Then a new language was born. They could hear me now.

Bead # 10 - Road signs

They watched me leave for life. They watched me walk away and stay away from them for months. Then they watched me disappear into the years of *ghurbah* and become the first woman in my family to leave alone, and go beyond the ocean of the unknown because she wanted to be free. Eleven years later, I returned. Those who were still home cheered to see me.

"The moment you left, we thought you would be gone only for the day and run back in fear," they said. "You only knew the street from the house to the school; how did you find your way to America?"

"There were road signs," I replied. "Road signs inside of me."

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