

# Arab Women Writing in English... A Prelude to Dialogue

Zina Alani Mougharbel

What is more frightening for a writer than a blank page? Better yet, what is more frightening for a female Arab writer than a blank page: an audience indifferent to the content of that page, once it's been filled ... or one intently waiting to read what the author has to say? What if the audience is tenfold larger, multicultural and

from various parts of the world, instead of being confined to the geography of the Arab world? In a world plagued with controversy – smaller than ever, more complex than ever, where every speech about change and democratization brings up the issue of women, their rights and conditions – can the voice of Arab

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The June 6th edition of the *Los Angeles Times*, the leading liberal paper on the West coast of the USA, was unlike any other edition, as it featured in an opening article excerpts from the website of a female Palestinian doctor from the Gaza strip, Dr. Mona Elfarrar (For details see <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-elfarra6jul06,1,3315094.story>).

At the time the US newspapers were closely following the situation in the Palestinian Territories; where the election of Hamas has led the Western powers to boycott the newly elected government, and the Israelis to launch massive raids on the Gaza strip. A new cycle of violence had erupted between Palestinians and Israelis. In this heavily charged political climate where the terms “terrorist,” “fundamentalist,” or “extremist” seemed the most recurrent across the US newspapers, generally more sympathetic to the Israeli point of view towards any crisis, Elfarrar’s insight, in English, quickly appeared first in the *Los Angeles Times*, then in other newspapers within the same week (For details see <http://www.fromgaza.blogspot.com/>).

As a physician, human and women’s rights activist, and mother, Elfarrar’s firsthand English account of the living conditions in the Gaza strip sparked the readers’ interest, provoking deep sympathy from

an audience usually distant from the suffering or crisis befalling Arab or Muslim communities. Even though pro-Israeli articles quickly followed in print, none questioned the account of Dr. Elfarra. It simply seemed that a woman's version of current events, being the traditional victim in History, perhaps even more so in the Middle East (from a Western point of view at least), had more credibility and value than an account perhaps told by a male writer in similar conditions.

The proliferation of books authored in English by Middle Eastern women hitting front shelves in US bookstores, on topics ranging anywhere from sexuality and gender relations, to women's position in Islam, to the question of the veil, suggests an unparalleled curiosity among readers about the general topic of women in the Arab world,

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especially when the published works blow whistles and play the favorite cliché tune of the Arab societies oppressing women. This growing interest in hearing the voice of Arab women stems, partly, from genuine curiosity, as well as a subconscious desire to "liberate" the female Arab victim, especially as the war in Iraq along with the entire vision of a new, free, democratic Middle East, is being questioned and rejected by mainstream America. The existence of such a victim, in need of a Western liberator, can at least justify, in the eyes of the Western public, recurrent interference in the Arab region. It also proves Western superiority over a demoted Arab culture.

In this light, can such interest be utilized by Arab women writing in English to address critical issues? Can writing in English, for Arab women, serve as a tool to improve dialogue?

It seems that Western readers today, when reading the work of an Arab woman, are more likely to see its humanity before denouncing its perceived ideology. In other words, they are more likely to consider a female voice, from a humanist point of view, before judging it from their historical beliefs and ideologies. Ahdaf Soueif for example, the prominent Egyptian English writer, political and cultural commentator, has succeeded in weaving classical-like quality fiction into modern political reality. She tackles critical political issues, directly as well as indirectly, giving the reader a flavor of the Arab conscience. In *The Map of Love*, one specific character's mother is a Palestinian refugee, and in one particular scene the character relates a memory of her mother stopping at a local market and being moved to tears by the presence of a familiar aroma reminiscent of her home town, Nablus in Palestine. Any Arab reader will perfectly understand and feel the emotions of this fictional character, because exile and nostalgia are notions the typical Arab is quite familiar with. Yet rarely does the West look at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the story of a Palestinian Diaspora. Ahdaf Soueif, through her female creative voice, gives the Middle Eastern rhetoric human dimensions, palpable to the Western reader, with feelings and emotions one can only relate to.

The argument can be extended to many other Arab female authors whose works were translated to English, such as Algerian novelist Ahlam Mostaghanemi, Syrian poet and author Ghada Samman, Lebanese novelist Hanan al-Shaykh, Egyptian feminist Nawal El-Saadawi, as well as Emily Nasrallah, Assia Djebar etc... just to mention a few. Yet there's a difference between writing in English and being translated to English, simply because the author cannot be aware of her audience, who may not be familiar with the themes she chooses to explore or the way she presents herself, or even the invisible barriers she chooses to ignore, within which she perhaps confines herself. Some have been given international scrutiny because of the controversial topics they choose to discuss, and not all are fairly representative of Arab women writers and their culture. The Western interest in authors, who address taboos and

denounce the Arab culture, is of course immense and serves many hidden agendas.

“Baghdad Burning,” is merely a collection from a young Iraqi woman’s blog in Iraq (<http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com>), published by the Feminist Press at the City University of New York, with a foreword by Ahdaf Soueif, and an introduction by James Ridgeway, author of many political books and the Washington correspondent of the *Village Voice*. The actual author goes by the name of “Riverbend,” and her identity is still unknown, except for the fact that she is a computer programmer from Baghdad in her mid twenties. These are the details she selected to reveal about her identity. “Riverbend” is simply a female voice from Baghdad. Yet the book was acclaimed by war critics for its candid insight on the Iraqi war, on the current reality, on the insurgency, as well as all the other issues that have made the Iraqi scene far too complex to grasp, despite daily media coverage. Most Western readers, at least in the US, knew little about Iraq before the war.

There is something tangibly human about being a victim, at least in the eyes of the West. Today, more than ever, the rights and living conditions of women in the Arab world is a critical issue, as well as a political card often used for complex purposes. Yet even in the post-September 11 world plagued with intolerance and phobia of the “other,” to the point of dehumanizing that “other,” a victim’s voice is one likely to remain unheard. Can Arab women authors publishing in English rise to the present challenge, and help to liberate not only themselves but also the world from the growing threat of the so-called “clash of civilizations?”

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