

Arab Women Writing in English

Saadi Nikro

*with you
i pressed the
rose you brought me
into one of fanon's books.
it has no odor now.
but
i see you. handing me a red
rose and i remember
my birth.
- Sonia Sanchez, Love.*

As the title indicates, this issue of *Al-Raida* is informed by the theme of Arab Women Writing in English, presenting essays, short stories, personal reflections, and poetry. Accordingly, the File includes mostly creative writing by Arab women living and working either in or outside the region.

In the spirit of many of the contributions, the title should be approached both descriptively and conceptually – as a reference to the identity and work of certain writers, and as variable terms that are creatively and critically explored in respect to the signifying residues and capacities they historically imply, carry, and structure. This is to say that almost none of the following pieces takes for granted or leaves unexamined Arab, English, Writing, and Woman, but rather explore how these terms involve specific contexts implicating certain objectifying/subjectifying constraints and limitations, as well as productive sites engaging acts of resistance, counter definitions, alternative stories, and narratives.

Some of the articles evoke an experience of travel across geographical locations and cultural landscapes. This is explored not only through an existential focus, but also through the way in which languages and cultures are creatively negotiated, practiced, and employed towards an understanding of self and circumstance, very often in the context of how one is constrained to experience their self as Other. Arabness comes to be deflected through a learning and practice of english languages, so that womanhood comes to be foregrounded as sites of containment and emergent articulations of counter-narratives, or else personal and social experiences that can be told and heard. Whether their first, second, or perhaps third language, many of the contributors approach english as a thick texture carrying the momentum of particular cultural and political sites of production.

Thus, it may be more accurate to speak of english languages, as the very tenor, folds, and experiential motivations of both self and language implicate a variable proliferation of difference, very often in tension with the way in which difference is constrained by established forms of practice and signification. In this respect, Arabness is transformed from a symbol of identification to the articulation of narratives that imply not so much knowledge of self and circumstance, but public sites for the telling and sharing of stories.

How, we can ask, does one enter a language and approach a sense of understanding of self and circumstance? How does one translate their experience of Arabness into another language whose signifying capacities will always tend towards distortion? Part of the answer is to realize that it is not so much a question of distortion, but rather an exploration of the capacity of language to enable, as I have said, the telling of one's dilemmas, dispositions, preoccupations, and interests. This is to say that the very rhetoricity (I borrow the term from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) of language does not merely inscribe particular constraints, but also the potential to creatively explore both residual and emergent terms of self – and other – understanding.

It has been particularly encouraging to receive articles from different geographical sites, such as Europe, North America, Australia, Lebanon, and the region – which gives the present issue a comparativist focus. Not only do the contributors juggle different languages as they develop their compositions in english, but also negotiate different genres, such as memoir and travel, poetic prose and verse, or else critical and creative writing. This constitutes a certain richness, I feel, and I have come to regard the issue as a site for an exploration of how english languages can be approached as an experimental engagement with the intensity of form, using parody and allegory, paradox and irony, reflection and expression, as ways in which to develop a more intimate understanding of self and circumstance.

Another interesting aspect of this issue concerns how our contributors translate themselves into sites of reflection, inquiry, and articulation, whereby selfhood is approached as a complex web of influences, experiences, and negotiations that can be valued as historical processes of cultural and intellectual exchange. Very often this can be achieved by thinking or writing in a second or third language, whereby its very conventionality affords a playful engagement with its capacity to work as a network of signification, rather than simply a vehicle for ideological explanation. The political, in other words, comes to have value once it travels through the way in which the personal is articulated in experiential terms.

The relationship between self and language is nicely articulated by one of our contributors, Dima Hilal, in her poem “homecoming”: “/how do I slip back into a language?/ like clothes once familiar,/ a second skin,/ now outgrown and uncomfortable/.” And if language is central to belonging, as the poem suggests – “/Arabic still on my tongue/ a dream tangible,/ indelible, real/ spelled out in my mother tongue/... reverberating with the ecstasy of belonging/” – then it is also central to unbelonging, or rather significant for the way in which belonging or unbelonging have always to be somehow processed and articulated. Another contributor, Suheir Hammad (whose work is also addressed by some of the critical articles), constrains english to appreciate how its texture may not well enough translate or bear across: “/bas/ rendering

wa detention wa rendition wa redemption marginal scarab scurred broken arabic bonded trumpet hearted spinning word/ bas/."

Or as Loubna Haikal, in her contribution, says about her novel *Seducing Mr Maclean*: "One of the major themes in the book was how language confined the identity of the protagonist to that of a foreigner," an experience that impels the protagonist to explore the tensions brought about by this confinement. In the process language is politicized, as a site of both power and desire, in terms of confinement brought about by stereotypical terms of reference, and a parodic mimicking that works to foreground the conventionality of such terms, so that subjectifying implications of english and other languages are unraveled. In her contribution, "The Importance of Music in my Writing and 'Engagement'," Evelyne Accad poignantly addresses this rhetoricity: "...when I search for authenticity, for the real me... I search for the *mot juste* mixture of many different voices, in various languages... playing a symphony... to recreate the hidden face of the world."

Mona Takieddine Amyuni captures this rhetoricity, what she calls "intimacy," in her piece "The Intimacy of Words," especially in her poem which she presents as an epigraph. To quote only a few lines: "/on the wings of words/ entrust them/ with my secret desires/... I don't want to carry/ any more/ all alone." Amyuni carries herself through reading and writing, engaging the Civil War as a variable experience drawn through a language practice that cannot but expose history as messy and incomplete, whereby contingency is valued as an opportunity to hear and tell otherwise. Also included in this issue is an article by Roseanne Khalaf, on her creative writing class at the AUB, on how her female students wrote and negotiated their developing sense of sexuality – attentive to "the transformative power of discourse and personal writing."

As some of the other articles indicate, the way in which Arabness and womanhood came to be experienced in North America after September 11 involves a variable site of forces that are both different and similar to forces preceding this major event. Ghia Osseiran and Carol Fadda-Conrey, in their respective contributions, address how the work of Arab-American women poets engage the aftermath of September 11, as its symbolic and interpretive implications reverberate across North America and into the Arab region, especially Iraq and Palestine. Both writers demonstrate how essentializing interpretative strategies construed through binary frames of reference narrow identity down to a set of static, symbolic associations – according to the logic of "us and them." This has some bearing on Zina Alani Mougharbel's contribution, in which she suggests that western readers of Arab women's english writing and translation are all too eager to consume stereotypes of oppression, victimization, and violence, rather than engage the more explorative aspects of such writing.

And yet this is not to deny the value of contesting and negotiating constraints and traditional expectations. In her article, titled "A Bracelet on the Wrist of Time," Ibtisam Barakat, in keeping with our theme, relates this to the practice of language: "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." As language is confronted with its rhetoricity, foregrounded as a site for the production of value and significance, it is constrained to entertain its potential to mark out lines of escape, articulating the variability of Arab women's agency as a fracturing force for telling otherwise.

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