

Loubna Haikal: By Way of an Interview

Interviewed by Saadi Nikro

The following text is based on an email interview with Loubna Haikal, a novelist and playwright living in Sydney. In what follows she responds to some questions and themes Saadi Nikro asked her to consider, in late 2006.

I assume that English is probably your second, or perhaps third, language, and consequently will always have about it a flavor of estrangement – in the sense that the conventional aspects of its representational capacities can never be presupposed or forgotten. I wonder what effect this has on the way in which you approach the language and the themes you explore in your writing, especially in your recent novel *Seducing Mr Maclean*. This of course has some bearing on a central theme in your writing – that concerning identity. But before getting to this difficult, and no doubt productive issue, do you feel that your writing in English has had some bearing on how you have translated your sense of self-understanding from a predominantly Arabic-language culture to Australia?

English is my third language. Having learnt to speak it in Australia where I migrated at the age of fourteen, that language which represents the dominant culture came to represent my foreignness.

I wanted to use the English language to write my novel because I wanted to address the dominant culture. I used it in an unconventional way, not in the way a native speaker would but in a Lebanese way, because in the novel I was addressing the issues that have to do very much with language

and identity and culture. And so I wanted English to include the cultural baggage, the cultural history, and other themes to do with culture and language that the characters in the story were dealing with. I did that by using cultural metaphors that were familiar to the Lebanese reader and at the same time addressed the dominant culture. Through metaphors the English language became relevant and inclusive of the thoughts, emotions, experiences, and culture of the Lebanese characters in the story.

One of the major themes in the book was how language confined the identity of the protagonist to that of a foreigner. For a long time she had no tools to express her past self. In practical terms, in every day life, she had to mimic accents, facial expressions, idioms, study what remarks and responses worked and which ones didn't. That was an important part of playing it safe as a foreigner. She became an impersonator adopting verbal responses that may not have been a true reflection of her inner self and state of mind. She had to fit in, in such a way as to become invisible. Though invisibility was essential, it was also a form of dying, leading to the atrophy of her other identities and other selves. She all along experiences a discordance of voices, a discordance and disconnection between her inner and outer selves, between her inner emotional self and the expressed visible self.

This new constructed outside self, that was the product of the new language and its confines, was a stranger to the inner self that could only be heard away from that new environment, but whose voice became an ever diminishing irrelevant whisper, and at one stage unrecognizable. Language was a major source of conflict for the unnamed protagonist in all her dealings and negotiations with the new world she had migrated to.

My own relationship with the English language had a major influence on my writing initially, and in particular in this novel, *Seducing Mr Maclean*. Initially I felt a certain timidity towards the English language. I felt like an intruder, appropriating a language that wasn't my own and at the same time using it as a tool for satire: satire, in writing, being the ultimate expression of power. So not only was I appropriating the language but also the right to criticize and be heard, reaching not only my own Lebanese community but the Australian community at large.

That was a very empowering but at the same time risky task. The risk to offend, the risk to speak about the issues that were taboos, that one would not and should not divulge, because they belonged in the private domain of the Lebanese culture. But I felt all along that literature that took no risks was not literature that was worth reading. Literature, fiction, and more specifically satire have to illuminate spaces that may be uncomfortable or awkward to look at in real life. Satire searches for problems and exposes imperfections, intentions, and hidden agendas.

I wanted to tell the story in such a way, using the voice of the exotic and speaking back, addressing the dominant culture. In a nutshell, the book is about the exotic talking back. Through that peculiar voice of a new way of using the English language, I wanted to express to the dominant culture that yes we do understand you, we understand your cultural baggage, and I wanted to reflect back, at times in a politically incorrect way, the gaze of the West towards the East.

I suppose I wrote the book in English with a Lebanese accent. This was a major landmark, a

transforming liberating moment, where I could be inclusive of all the identities the protagonist was exploring, whereby her inner and her outer selves would reconnect, and all the other contrived, imposed identifications would be deconstructed and eventually rendered obsolete.

The themes explored in the book were in fact those that had to do with the outsider, the alienating experience of losing one's language and milieu and having to recreate oneself in a new context. How does one do that? How does one make moral decisions in the new country when there are no books that spell out what is right and what is wrong, and when one has no access to intimacy, to the inner lives of people, the spaces where decision making processes take place? When the protagonist had spent so much time trying to mimic language and facial expressions in order to fit in and get a sense of belonging, how far should she go in mimicking others' behaviors, values and mores; when should she stop the mimicking process in order to fit in and at the same time feel comfortable and true to herself?

There is an awkward period of transition, a period of trial and error that takes place, before integration of the past self with the new self occurs. I wanted to talk about that in the story and how that affects the forging of the new identity and the shedding of the old one, or perhaps the cohabitation of both. I am not sure if I was able to solve the dilemmas that arose as a result of that, but they certainly are issues that haunted me while writing the story. How does one decide what is right and what is wrong when faced with so many choices, none of which resonate with any past experience of the self?

I also talk about the perception of one's own image when speaking a language. I talk about the hierarchy of language: the three languages, French, Arabic, and English fighting for supremacy, because in a way language colonizes the mind and imposes its own cultural paradigms, slots the speaker into a certain status allocating a certain image to him/her, from where he/she comes to perceive his/her self as such. Does one become the image? I used to get the feeling whenever I spoke French that I was very sophisticated, and my taste in clothes, food, and

books would adapt to the new sophisticated self. Since the protagonist's relationship with the English language was that of a foreigner, I wanted the reader, in turn, to experience that foreignness through the language. I included the metaphors that were familiar within the Lebanese culture, but that disconcerted and induced awkwardness for the non-Lebanese reader. For after all, reading is a form of travel or migration.

Writing the book with a Lebanese accent made the editing process quite an interesting one. As whenever the editor tried to correct the syntax or the metaphor, the meaning and the cultural subtext would be lost. For many, the language in which the book is written seems uncomfortable, even incorrect, and they have the urge to 'give it a good dose of editing'. The reader is made to experience in that language the same awkwardness and discomfort the protagonist felt inhabiting it.

To me, writing with a Lebanese accent is a form of cultural resistance. It's keeping something of my identity and forcing the reader to stand with me and experience the story telling from my cultural perspective. Often I wanted to use sentences without verbs – long sentences with associations and references as told in Arabic story telling, the to-ing and fro-ing between the past and present and between characters, giving the taste of what it is like to live emotionally and spiritually in more than one country and in more than one language.

The themes I explore are exactly those that deal with discomfort, the unfamiliar, making sense of the new language, its subtext, and hardest of all in a new country, understanding the new morality, body language, and silences. How does one construct a new self that fits in that language?

How much of the self does one give up, because one doesn't have the tools in that language to express it, therefore allowing it to atrophy, and what does one replace the old self with?

Language created in a way a new identity that could no longer be translated from Arabic. However writing with a Lebanese accent in English meant

using the language in a quasi, unconventional way, a way that could not be slotted into any genre. I have in the book taken the position of the observer, the innocent bystander.

Coming to Australia as a young teenager was extremely difficult for the protagonist. Language was a major obstacle. She had no tools in which she could represent herself to the other. In a lot of ways, many parts of herself atrophied from lack of nurture and recognition. A strange, inadequate self grew instead – it fitted into the language and she had to acquaint herself with that new person that was emerging, that the language constructed. There was a sort of dissociation between what was really felt and what was expressed, what she was capable of feeling and what she was capable of expressing in that language.

The themes in the book explore the impact of migration – loss of language, friends, invisibility, weightlessness, erasure of the self recognized by others, and having to redraw that self – all having both benefits and disadvantages. How freedom and loneliness merge into one and how under such circumstances one is forced to inhabit a strange self until it can be restored and rehabilitated.

I was very excited to discover your novel, especially how your parodic style encourages a questioning of social stereotypes and the restrictive expectations they often structure.

Do you feel that your own work, as well as Arab-Australian cultural production more generally, has made and can further make a contribution to rendering stereotypes open for discussion and debate?

The structure of stereotypes within the new environmental boundaries, within which we reconstruct the self we bring with us into a new country, become grotesque and verge on pathos. They become exactly that – irrelevant, fear-driven constructions we can inhabit to recognize something of ourselves. But as a form of human behavior this is quite comical – irrational fear leads to irrational behavior, whether at the personal or political

level. As an outsider this becomes quite comical. I suppose I created a character that was an outsider to Australian society, and to a Lebanese community that fears the loss of identity, confusing loss of national pride with integration. While the girl is innocent, a non-judgmental observer of both, she becomes a reflection, a mirror reflecting these two spaces, reflecting one side and then the other until at the end they become one and the same united by a common humanity.

That really brings the parodic aspect to the story. As each character tries to hang to the illusion of what is their identity, they discover at the end that they had been victims of that illusion. The girl has no name for several reasons, mainly because in a new country one feels anonymous, one becomes known as 'that migrant' or 'that Lebanese girl or boy.' The name disappears, for it is often too difficult to pronounce or remember. I also felt that remaining nameless gives her the fluidity of disappearing, allowing the reader to take on the narration as the 'I' in the story. So there is, I hope, a strong identification in the process of negotiation of the moral cultural and ethical issues within the two cultures, highlighting the difference between shame and honor that affect both cultures equally – loyalty and betrayal, love and friendship. By the end of the story I would hope that traditions and the image of what makes someone Lebanese or Australian would merge into common human endeavors and values.

Seduction is a theme that figures strongly in *Seducing Mr Maclean*, and is very much part of a series of tricks foreigners use. Seduction in a way is the tool of countries that are economically weak towards countries that are economically powerful and secure. I suppose for me the girl represents the reliance of Lebanon on the seduction of the powerful in order to be protected and feel secure. The Lebanese seek the approval of the West. Yet I wanted to expose the insecurities of the West we so much want to seduce and mimic. I feel that by the end of the story, both Maclean and the protagonist realize the illusion they created about the Other, and in that way all labels and identities are drawn out of their essentialist associations.

I feel the world in the 21st century is a more polarized, more restrictive world, relying more and more on labels and camps in order to categorize people. It's a world where metaphors are being eroded and language is becoming two-dimensional, losing fluidity and the poetics of ambiguity.

Literature in general plays a strong part in inventing the metaphors, and therefore opening up possibilities, questioning what seems to be defined and circumscribed, and blurring the margins and certainties. Literature should question definitions, labels, and the security of belonging to a camp; it should illuminate the discomfort of a seemingly comfortable setting. Literature thrives when it takes risks, when it speaks about the unspeakable, when it defies political correctness and questions and examines areas that may seem to be taboos. Good literature cannot play it safe, but rather defies and questions stereotypes, values, and labels.

While writing *Seducing Mr Maclean* I was very much aware of the reader's reaction, the Lebanese, Arab, or migrant reader versus the Australian or western reader. I wanted to look at identity and stereotypes and reflect them to both sides of the equation. I wanted to reflect on what makes a Lebanese respectable in the eyes of her own society, thus dissecting our own Lebanese restrictive boundaries and labels. I am not sure how much my writing contributes to the debate about stereotypes. But we need more literature that challenges the stereotypical representation of Arab characters, allowing them to be good and bad without ever becoming anything but normal human beings with the full range and potential for good and bad, without allowing them to become anything less than human. I feel that this was one thing my fellow Lebanese were uncomfortable with: the fact that our image in the West was so vulnerable and so tarnished that anything other than a glowing report about Lebanese characters – heroic, honest, beyond criticism – was yet another betrayal of our Lebanese identity. Stereotyping someone as good can be just as restrictive and comical as stereotyping someone as a criminal or drug dealer.