

A Conversation with May Menassa, journalist and writer on cultural affairs for *An-Nahar* newspaper, Editor of the monthly magazine, *Jamaluki*, and lecturer on women's and cultural issues.

Conducted by Ghena Ismail

May Menassa was brought up in a strict atmosphere which valued discipline and gave scant attention to the development of personal traits and talents. Composing poetry was considered disgraceful, and a conflict developed at home when her elder brother's poetic talent started to express itself. This conflict was resolved only after May's brother suffered from schizophrenia and was eventually placed in a mental hospital. In this atmosphere filled with obligation, responsibility and anger, May found her refuge and salvation in writing.

Ms. Menassa studied literature in the *Ecole des Lettres*, and it did not occur to her then that she would work in the field of media one day. However, Ms. Menassa's captivating presence could not but be noticed, and she was eventually asked to work in the field of television. She worked in television for eight years, but when journalism beckoned, she did not hesitate to accept. "My

work in television did not satisfy my need for free self-expression, which I eventually found on the small piece of paper."

When asked if she confronted any obstacles as a woman journalist,

her immediate reply was that any person who works with sincerity and diligence will not face obstacles. But, if no special difficulties confront women journalists, why do we not have many female journalists in decision-making positions, and why does the percentage of female journalists employed in the field not exceed 30 percent, although statistics show that in the last five years, 80 percent of journalism students are females? Ms. Menassa's surprising explanation was that most of the girls she has tested in her magazine did not know how to write a well-structured sentence, and that, while the man's pen is often firm and sensitive, the woman's pen is weak and spiritless. Hence, she refuses to attribute the difference between the percentage of females working as journalists and that of men to the existence of discrimination against women. She explains that women today, especially in the various non-governmental institutions, are viewed and treated just as any man is. "The woman has excelled in the field of advertising. She can be the president, director and owner of many advertising companies. It seems to me that the girl was created for art, more so than for journalism." However, Ms. Menassa asserts that we shouldn't generalize, because if one picks up *An-Nahar* newspaper, for instance, one will see many articles signed by women.



May Menassa, journalist for *An-Nahar* newspaper in Lebanon.

Although Ms. Menassa believes that a woman should be liberated, she thinks that journalists' efforts should be directed towards liberating the society as a whole. "You cannot liberate the woman

without liberating the man and enlightening him.” A man, according to Ms. Menassa, needs to understand that women’s equality to him implies that she is ready to shoulder equal responsibilities. Then he will feel relieved rather than threatened.

Hence, awareness is needed and obviously awareness is part of human development. So, how does Ms. Menassa view the media’s encouragement of sustainable human development projects in Lebanon? The media in Lebanon, according to Ms. Menassa, is highly sensitive and daring. Journalists cover a wide variety of areas and participate in different conferences and seminars. “However, media is, of course, only one of society’s different tools responsible for promoting human development. It cannot effect a real change unless the Lebanese Government assumes action. The Government is the real school, and when it is absent, we are left to live with the law of the forest.”

Nevertheless, if Ms. Menassa was to evaluate Lebanese journalism, she would affirm that it is genuine journalism, of a calibre that one rarely finds elsewhere in the East. “The editorials of Ghassan Tueni, publisher of *An-Nahar* newspaper, are capable of moving a country and arousing the drowsing consciences of many people.”

But will the Lebanese print journalism remain so daring? Doesn’t Lebanese print journalism fear being subject to legislation similar to the proposed audio-visual reorganization?

Ms. Menassa acknowledges the presence of such a fear, since she believes that Lebanon is no longer a completely democratic country. However, she is not discouraged. “Let us have a look at Russia and the communist countries. Although repressed, freedom could not be totally destroyed. It was present in the prisons, in the Gulag, and in Siberia, and this repressed freedom led to the birth of valuable and important writings which were eventually published. Whenever and wherever a totalitarian ruling system existed, it eventually collapsed and people were finally able to convey the truth.”

No legislation, according to Ms. Menassa, can threaten journalism, because the voice of truth always prevails. However, she fears that in the event of a regional political settlement, words will no longer have meaning. “We may get so wrapped up in our talk about money that we neglect art and literature.” But, she often tries

to quiet these fears by noting that art is still growing in America, the leader of the capitalist system, so we need not worry.

In the light of dramatic regional changes, the role that journalism can play in safe-guarding a Lebanese national agenda and identity, according to Ms. Menassa, is to continue what it writes now and not to prostitute itself to others. “I fear that most literary prostitution takes place when the pen writes against the good of the country. I and a few others will continue to write for the good of the country, for the sick cedar tree. We will continue to write about the village poet who is on the verge of death, yet no one is paying attention to him or her. We will continue to write about culture, humanity and music. This writing is beautiful and innocent and cannot harm anyone. We do not want to attack anyone. On the contrary, we want peace and security.”

Since development implies the presence of a strong relationship between education and the labor market, what is Ms. Menassa’s evaluation of the journalism curricula currently taught at Lebanese universities and colleges, and what is her advice to journalism students?

Ms. Menassa thinks that the curricula are good, but to be more effective, both the teachers and the students need to be as devoted as they can be. Her advice to students would be that they consider themselves primary school students again and carefully learn the principles and rules of the language. “Students should cultivate their minds, read, and go beyond the two-line news event. They should view themselves as educators and consider any article they write a ‘school’.”

Finally, Ms. Menassa feels satisfied with what she has accomplished, because she was able to give in the difficult circumstances (during the war) as well as in the normal ones, and hence she succeeded in developing emotional bridges with the people. Very often people stop Ms. Menassa on the street to tell her how they felt after reading one of her articles. Ms. Menassa’s articles do not only have an impact on the average person, but sometimes they influence people in power and hence motivate them to take a certain action. “Do you know how it feels to learn from the Minister of Agriculture that what you have written about a farmer made him feel that this farmer should be awarded? Don’t you think that this is a wonderful gift?”