

An Interview with Jean Makdisi, Professor of Humanities at L.A.U., and author of the book *Beirut Fragments*, about a course she taught entitled "Women in Media and Communication".

Conducted by Ghena Ismail

GI: What was the primary objective of this course?

JM: I had done a lot of reading about the feminist movement, which showed me that in the Arab World we are often confused by what others are saying, both about themselves and about us. Hence, I thought it was important for us to develop our own theory based on our actual experiences and to move away from what others say about us in particular, or about women in general. In our small classroom, I wanted to test some feminist ideas and concepts. That's why the readings were from a very wide variety of sources. There were some French readings, some American readings, some English readings and a lot of Arabic readings. Besides the readings, I screened several films for the students. I was trying to test the theoretical arguments that have been created somewhere else, to see how or whether they apply to women in the Arab world. Having a class comprised of young women who were new to the idea and who were hearing all these questions and theories for the first time was exactly what I wanted. People who have thought a lot about the issue would have read about it, and if they had read about it, they've already been influenced by other people's theories and perceptions. I wanted to have a clean reaction, and that's what I got.

GI: But there were older women in the classroom, too. What about them?

JM: I was especially happy to have this mixture of different ages and experiences. Every age has its own experience. When you're young, it is the question of your father and the way you view your future. Issues seem clearer and simpler. When you are older, the challenge you face is the actual experiences that you've had, with all their complexities, which muddle the view. What is very clear when you are young becomes more complicated as you grow older. That's why I found it terribly important to have older women and younger women together in the same classroom.

GI: What was the main difference between the reactions of the younger students and those of the older ones?

JM: The younger students were more rebellious, more demanding, and more critical of society. They were full of enthusiasm and sometimes anger, which I appreciated; I believe that we can't change the world unless we are angry.

GI: You said that you wanted to introduce the students to a wide variety of material so that they could reach their own conclusions. Certainly, though, you already had a certain theory or conclusion in mind, didn't you?

JM: The only thing I had in mind, and still have in mind, after several years of working on my book is that much has been written about women in the Arab World and there is still a lot of misapprehension and miscomprehension. In fact, I often wonder how some people here can talk as though there is no problem, and I find this appalling, especially in light of some of the laws we have. It seems to me that there is a lot of injustice. Of course, there is plenty of injustice in society in general. However, I think that the situation of women is a particularly nasty one, because inside society there is an extra "layer" of nastiness to women. Returning to your question, what I had in mind then was that I didn't want either the students or myself to be influenced by reading or hearing others' views. I wanted us to begin from scratch and to formulate our own ideas. This is why I asked you to carry out independent studies about how women were represented in advertising. You all discovered almost the same thing: Most advertising focused on female sex appeal.

GI: It focused, too, upon motherhood.

JM: Romanticized motherhood, of course.

GI: Yes. All of the women, even the housewives, were young and beautiful, and a male voice was used even in those advertisements which were directed at women.

JM: As the course title suggests, I wanted the students to find out how women were represented, how people were looking at women and how women look at themselves. I wanted you to figure out whether we, as women, look at ourselves the way others look at us, and whether we do that because we assume that this is the way it is. When you start to criticize and analyze how women are represented in the media, especially in advertising, you get a very definite sense that a vision of our being is imposed on us from the time we first open our eyes.

GI: What was the topic that aroused the most discussion in the classroom?

JM: Women and health. Unfortunately, we don't think enough about the medical establishment and about the relationship of women to this medical establishment, which is

largely a male establishment. Even if there are women doctors, they are only a part of an entirely male dominated profession. Obviously, when you speak of health, you're not only dealing with individual doctors, you're also dealing with hospitals, pharmaceutical industries, and huge industries such as health insurance, which women have to cope with more often than men do due to the nature of the woman's body, of course.

GI: How did this topic concerning women and health fit into the course?

JM: You discovered in your study of advertisements that women had to be young and beautiful. However, not all young women are beautiful. There is also a feeling that once you become older you are no longer a woman. This is a terrible thing to impose on women, that you are a woman from the age of 12 until the age of 45, and this is part of the representation. The whole issue of women's health in relationship to the society and in relationship to women's view of themselves, and therefore, other people's views (including those of the advertising industries, health industry and the cinema), are interrelated and are part of women's representation.

GI: Why did you want your students to focus, in their independent studies, on how women were represented in the medium of advertising in particular?

JM: You can be a genius, but never get published, while you find some horrible writers who have been pushed ahead by advertising. Advertising is a weapon, an instrument of power. Hence, a critical understanding of it is absolutely necessary. I wanted my students to look at the advertisements and see what they are doing, how they manipulate people and how they make one think about one's self. A magazine or a TV program which is not well advertised or which doesn't have advertisements doesn't survive. Hence, advertising is enormously important.

GI: The classroom was comprised solely of female students. What is your comment on this?

JM: I'm very sorry about this. It was certainly important to have men in the classroom, but of course, I have no control over who registers for the course. Also, don't forget that this was a brand new course about which students knew nothing. We needed, perhaps, to have a campaign of some sort to arouse the interest of students and to tell people that the time has come to take a course simply for the pleasure of thinking about things. Nothing that concerns women doesn't concern men as well. So, I'm very sorry there weren't more men, and I'm very sorry there weren't more students. Anyway, I didn't foresee a huge enrollment. In such a course, it would have been good to have twenty or even fifteen students only.

GI: How do you evaluate the course on the whole?

JM: I enjoyed teaching the class a lot, and I felt we had a very strong rapport. We had some arguments, which is fine. I am a great believer in argument.

GI: Knowing that you have enjoyed the class a lot, I feel encouraged to ask you about your evaluation of the young women's views. You've said they were rebellious and angry, but how deeply analytical was their thinking?

JM: I was very impressed by the fact that you responded so critically. I was impressed that what you said were not *clichés*. A lot of *clichés* are being chucked around all the time. However, when I heard you arguing some of the points, you were very critical, articulate and confident as well. You only said what you had to say and not what you thought would please the teacher, and I felt very proud of you. As you get older and you are hammered by the advertising and media messages for 30 or 40 years without questioning them, you gradually adopt their vision and it eventually becomes part of you. As for you, having thought about the meaning of these messages or images at an early stage, you have become immune to them or at least aware of their implications and the expectations they are indirectly instilling in you. One of these expectations, for example, is that we all have to look like Claudia Schiffer, the most famous and attractive model in the world. However, not all females are Claudia Schiffer. Females have different bodies, different figures and, of course, different personalities. You really got this point and were critical of it.

GI: Finally, have you learned anything yourself from the experience of teaching the course?

JM: In all courses that you teach or study, if there is debate and discussion, you learn. Sometimes, I was surprised by some of the reactions to something I thought was obvious. It is always healthy to have your thoughts and beliefs challenged. During and after the course, I became more certain that we do have our own experiences and that we all have a great potential. It's not that I ever doubted that we did. However, each generation of women, mine as well as yours, need to think hard about what they want, and the only way we can think hard about what we want is to think clearly about our own situation. We need to figure out: "Do we have a problem?", and if we agree that we do, the next step should be defining our problem. The only way to do this is to critically think and not simply parrot what other people are saying. We should not use the *clichés* about how intelligent and capable the Lebanese woman is. If we do, we'll be implying that we don't have a problem. So, you need to think. Any course on any topic can make you think if you are really intelligent, critical and willing to use your mind and analyze what you're reading.