

by Wafa Stephan Tarnowski

Women and writing was the focus of the 1995-96 yearly publication of the Lebanese Association of Women researchers, known as "*Al-Bahithat*." Reading this publication is a requirement for anyone interested in Arab women writers in particular or the subject of women's writing in general. Why do women write? How do women write? Is there a typically "feminine writing" as opposed to a "masculine" one? These are a few of the questions raised by the contributors. More general questions are also considered: What do women write about? Who are the women writing in Lebanon today?

According to Elise Salem Manganaro, Associate Professor of English Literature at Fairleigh-Dickinson University in the US, Lebanese women writers generally come from a well-educated, often bilingual or trilingual background which forces anyone wishing to analyze their output to consider class as well as gender. Manganaro notes that "most of the authors are women of privilege, usually versed in English or French, who left Lebanon during the war years and had the time and space to reflect upon and utilize the war in their narrative, which were then published by presses, often outside Lebanon, and made available, usually to an elite readership, often in the West as well." (p. 170)

But, this sociological description of Lebanese women writers does not do full justice to the complexity of their background and output. I would rather envision Lebanese women writers standing on the edges of several different cultures and using their privileged multi-cultural position to enrich the languages and conventions in which they choose to work. French language writer Venus Khoury Ghatta says in her contribution, entitled "*Le Mentir-Vrai*" (the Lying Truth) that men and women writers of Arab origin have added an "oratorical dimension" to the French language, "taking it down to the street, inventing new words close to those of our mother tongues and becoming story-tellers rather than novelists". These writers, she adds, "carry in their writings their native land, its idioms, its scents and flowers", continuously expanding the French language and enriching it. (p. 48)

The obvious question is, did the Lebanese women writers do the same for the English language? Until now it seems to me that most Lebanese women writing in English are more involved in academic careers and thus write about anthropology, sociology and literary criticism (e.g. Suad Joseph and Elise Manganaro), while the two English novelists included in the selection are Etel Adnan, who also writes in French, and Jean Said Makdisi, who is also involved in teaching. Evelyne Accad, although writing her literary criticisms in English, seems to prefer writing her novels and songs in French first,

then translating them into English.

However, regardless of the language these women have chosen for their writing (including Arabic, of course) they have a lot to say. Etel Adnan believes that "women love words" and she doesn't mean "exclusively educated women" only, but the vast majority of women that she has encountered and still encounters in her life. Women, Adnan believes, need to talk "as a way to keep reminding themselves and everybody around them that they exist." (p. 155) "We can say that women do 'things' to words, imprint them with their will and superstitions, thus falling under their power (p. 157). She gives as an example how, when in love, women tend to believe more what is said to them than what is done, and how "they are particularly susceptible to rumors, to the magic aura of pronouncements, to the shadow side of things half-said, half-heard" (p. 158).

Jean Said Makdisi observes that writing about the world has been a way to appropriate it; writing has made it hers, and has given her a place in it. She felt a sense of rebellion while writing her first book (*Beirut Fragments*), especially since she did it secretly: "I felt subversive: I had a secret knowledge of the world that it did not have of me" (p. 131). She also believes that writing is a "dangerous business" because telling the truth as one sees it, which is the principal function of the writer, "exposes one, not only to criticism, but to the possibility of admitting that one has a position...therefore that one may be offensive." She compares writing to gambling: "you have to put your money down and take your chances" (p. 137). Finally, she believes that women must write in order to "say the world as we see it, however difficult it may be... each one in her own way, but our voices must be heard at last" (p. 138).

It is impossible to do justice to the breadth of the testimonies contained in this publication, including literary criticism, poetry, drama criticism, journalism and academic analysis, written in three languages, and including men writing about women writers. As Editor Mona Takieddine Amyuni mentions in the preface, the committee responsible for selecting the writings felt like "children on Christmas Eve with gifts coming down to us through the chimney, mirroring the rich spectrum of people who responded" (p. 18). The aim of this publication was for Lebanese women to "speak up in order to be heard", to "understand, reflect, and analyze each other's experiences, problems and research", but mostly, to stand "outside the circles of power", to speak for "many silent people", and hope to "mobilize the potential of other writers and researchers, especially among the young" (p. 19-20).

If that was *Al-Bahithat's* aim, they succeeded. If I can count myself among those aspiring Lebanese women writers, I indeed felt motivated, inspired and encouraged to continue in the footsteps of remarkable women such as Andrée Chedid, Claire Gebeyli, Venus Khoury, Laure Moughaizel, Nazek

Yared, Daisy Al-Amir, Samira Aghassi, Evelyne Accad, Etel Adnan, Jean Makdisi and all the others. I admire Claire Gebeyli's total dedication to the art of writing, comparing it to a "cult" or a sacred craft, and describing herself as a "worker of the word" (p. 53). I agree with Venus Khoury when she says that writing is a way for women to "break taboos" and to "tear themselves from a clandestine existence" (p. 47). I wholly agree with Samira Aghassi that writing is a way to reach oneself and others and enter the public sphere, no matter how personal or subjective the writing may be (p. 27). I was convinced by the way she compared writing poetry to looking through a microscope and being able to see all the particles of herself she couldn't previously perceive without it (p.29). I also admire Nazek Yared's honesty when she says that as an Eastern woman she finds herself unable to write freely about sexuality, because of the way she (as most Arab women) was brought up (p.63). I

became aware of the censorship problems that most Arab women writers have to face when they tackle sensitive issues such as religion or politics and the need to apply "self-censorship", as Yared calls it (p.64).

Finally, I understand Andrée Chedid saying to Evelyne Accad in an interview that writing is like "something haunting you, that you don't want to escape from. We feel ill at ease when we don't write...a kind of malaise and anguish" (p. 221). But mostly, notes Chedid, writing for men and women alike should aim at "integrating the whole" at "universalizing" instead of writing for a narrow political view or within a folkloric vision. She quotes Michel Leiris as saying: "A work should be rooted and uprooted at the same time" in order to have universal appeal, and a writer needs a good "dose of solitude" in order to create (pp. 223-224).



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