

REFLECTIONS ON THE POETRY OF SUAD EL-SUBAH

by Leila El-Hurr

Suad El-Subah, the well-known Kuwaiti poet, holds a B.A. in Economics from the University of Cairo and a Ph.D. in Development and Planning from the University of Surrey in the United Kingdom. She is the Director of the Administrative Council of The Practical Consultations Office in Kuwait, a researcher and author on developmental and economic issues, and lecturer in a number of respected institutes and universities. Besides her poetry and literary publications, she has authored a variety of scientific writings. She is also a member of several Arab and international non-governmental institutes and coalitions.

Last March 8th, International Woman's Day, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World hosted a poetry recital by Dr. Suad El-Subah. An introductory speech was given by Lebanese writer Leila El-Hurr before Suad El-Subah's presentation, from which we have extracted the following:

"It was within my reach to wear jewelry and behave like a queen. It was within my capacity not to reject, become angry, nor to scream in the face of misery. However, I betrayed the laws of femininity and chose instead the confrontation of words."

This is the only form of betrayal that Suad El-Subah committed. And in so doing, a distinctive poetic voice was born in the Arab World.

The smart child, Suad, the daughter of El-Cheikh Muhammad El-Subah, the President of Kuwait, resorted to words as a way to gain more of the love of her father, who deeply adored her. Initially, she wrote poetry to please her father and then to please her husband. Finally, her moving poems found their way to the public and moved the hearts of thousands of young people. However, the poetry Suad El-Subah most needed to express remained imprisoned within herself.

Eventually, and after much insistence on the part of her intellectual colleagues, Suad El-Subah gave free reign to her emotional turmoil and allowed her powerful poetry to boldly break through, free of all traditional restraints. After producing ten collections of poems, Suad became incapable of controlling



Leila El Hurr, left, introduces Dr. Suad El-Subah to an audience at L.A.U.

the unstoppable flow of her poetry. Since the 1980s, with much excitement and curiosity and with a variety of contradictory feelings, audiences throughout the Arab World followed the development of this poet. But along with the compliments Suad El-Subah received came curses and warnings, too. Many saw her as an agitator encouraging others to break social norms and taboos, thus turning women against men.

However, the Kuwaiti poet defended her right to free expression and continued to publish her thoughts and convictions. Whereas Suad the poet had defied the customs that hinder her society's progress, Suad the woman did not transgress the social norms of the community in her Kuwaiti and Arab environment, neither did she rebel against her family, tribe or culture. Because of this, Suad El-Subah's call for women's liberation gained a degree of credibility which would not have been possible if Suad had isolated herself from her environment, as have so many Arab advocates of women's rights, thus becoming incapable of effecting any real change in her society.

Translated from Arabic by Ghena Ismail