

Loulwa Abdel Baki: Fashion Designer

(Born in 1965, in Beirut, originally from Ain Bal [Shouf]; currently living in Beirut; recorded in her workshop. Language*: colloquial/educated Arabic; with some English and French.)

My name is Loulwa Abdel Baki. I was born in Beirut and as a child I studied at the Collège Louise Wegmann. I later went to the American University of Beirut where I took a BA in Psychology. Since childhood I'd had the ambition of studying fashion design. From the age of eleven I used to draw designs at home, and invent things. So I went to New York and studied fashion design there, in the Parsons School of Design in Manhattan. After that I worked for two years in a company called Necessary Objects, for 'pret à porter'. Then I moved to another company called Street Life, also for 'pret à porter'. I reached a point where I had to decide my future, whether to live in the United States or live in my country. I felt that my place is in my country, and that I can give a lot to it. I felt that Lebanon needs me more than America. It was a difficult decision to make because I was doing well, I could have had more success in the States. People have more possibilities there than in Lebanon. But I decided against staying in the States and came back to Beirut at the end of 1989, while there was still fighting. In fact the war was nearing its end but no one knew that then. I came back to Beirut with the idea in my mind of opening a shop, and calling it Kalabsha. It would be a shop and an atelier at the same time.



Zeina: Why Kalabsha?

Loulwa: I didn't want a French, or Italian or English name. At that time, names like Linea were very much in fashion. I wanted to give it an Oriental name. Kalabsha isn't a pure Arabic name, but it's Turkish. I think I got it from watching Badri Abu Kalabsha, if you remember him in 'Ghawwar al-Tawshi' and 'Sah al-Nawm'. I found this character very amusing, so I wanted to name the shop after Badri. Kalabsha has other meanings as well, such as handcuffs.

So I fixed up the atelier and the showroom here in Lebanon, on Hamra Street. I worked on my first collection and I held the opening show in the St Georges Hotel, under the ruins. You remember the St Georges Hotel, it was in the city center, in the

middle of the ruins. I didn't feel like doing it in one of the chic hotels. At that time, the Coral Beach was really 'in'. I didn't want to do it there because I don't look at fashion as restricted to one category of person, to one specific class that can afford it and has money. At that time, some of the monied class wasn't thinking about the situation, it didn't care what was happening to the country. The most important thing for them was to dress elegantly and to show off. In addition, I felt that this class hadn't been affected by the war, not at all. I couldn't join that stream, it's not me. As a symbolic gesture I decided to hold the opening of the collection in the Hotel St Georges, a hotel that had been very chic but now was destroyed by the war. We made preparations, lighting the hotel facade with candles which we set in sand bags, and we cleaned up a bit. But we kept it as it is with all the graffiti on the wall, such as 'Abu al-Hol marra min huna' ('Abu al-Hol passed by here'). And we covered everything with candles, it was entirely lit with big and smaller candles, two meters, one meter tall, which were made to order specially for this occasion by a handicrafts shop in Zahleh. We held the fashion show. It turned out to be a bigger success than I had expected. I invited four hundred people, nine hundred showed up. Several international newspapers wrote about the show. The Washington Post wrote a whole page about me - not me, my work. The Boston Globe wrote about it on page one, Reuters mentioned it. In Japan, my name became 'Loulweh'. Antenne 2, TF1, CNN, all wrote something, and all the Lebanese newspapers as well. All the media! It was a success, I was lucky. This helped me to carry on in Lebanon.

Since then, twice a year, I prepare a new collection, one in summer and one in winter. Thank God, I'm doing fine. No only do I do 'pret à porter', I'm also designing costumes for the theater. I designed the costumes for Ziad Rahbani's two plays 'Lawla fushat al-amal' and 'Bil-nisbeh lal-karameh wal-shaab al-'anid'. These costumes were very futurist. We worked in metal, plastic, leather - materials people here aren't used to working with. It was fun, I enjoyed working on it. I also worked with Roger Assaf on his play 'The Bold Soprano', for Jawad al-Asadi on 'The Maids', and a film with Jean Claude Kudsí, 'Le temps d'un retour', as well as Christine Dabaghi's film 'Zeinab wa al-nahr'. Right now, I'm designing the costumes for a ballet. This means the versatility of my design work is not limited to the two yearly fashion collections.

I don't know if you think it's important, but what I want to say is that it was very crucial for me to make clothes for everyone. We were emerging from a war, and I think people can't afford to show off, what we need to do is work to improve the country. I'm depressed because this isn't happening, I'm not seeing people doing anything. This is the time to work and be productive, to be strong, and try to become 'modern'. I don't

*[The word language here refers to the language used by the speaker]

find this atmosphere in Lebanon. I feel that people are giving more and more attention to appearances. People don't know where to situate themselves class-wise - are we middle, are we lower, are we upper? They're mixed up. Everybody wants to be upper-class, it's a total confusion. Everybody must have a Mercedes, everybody must wear diamonds, everybody has to be seen in the best places. They spend all their money in seconds, just to show off. And a big part of my work has to do with 'showing off'. I'm trying to change this a bit if I can. Okay, it's very nice to have clothes, it's nice to feel good in one's body. But this isn't everything. That is why the clothes I make - I'm not

advertising here - are not expensive. Anyone can afford to buy them. They aren't clothes to brag about. My work is characterized by its simplicity, it's not decorated with beads, it's not overloaded. It's not dressy and expensive. I don't think of woman as a princess, the way they used to think before the war, that she's a princess and everything she does should fit this image, that she should be pampered, that she should have a chauffeur. No, I think that women should work and produce, because life is



tough now, the days of the princess are over. We can't go on being pampered and acting like spoiled brats. That is why my clothes suit the type of woman who has ambitions, who has other things to do besides pleasing her husband, or waiting for him to come home. I am trying to create clothes in which a woman looks nice, feels good, and looks beautiful as well. We don't have to put a veto on beauty, there's nothing better than beauty, whatever its kind. But clothes aren't everything.

Unfortunately I still find a lot of women who have nothing on their minds but what to wear, how they will appear in the morning. It's more important how she feels, not how she looks. She doesn't care how people find her, she's empty inside, the most important thing for her is how to look, how to appear. I don't understand why. I think this is a mistake. Women should forget how people look at them because people change every minute. Today they say a woman is cute, the next day they say she is old, no one will look at her. What will be left for her? Nothing but crying over the past. No, I don't think people here have hobbies, things they really want to do. For me the most important thing is hobbies, work, things you find important. Here they don't have this, they have lost everything.

For me the present period is worse than the war, it is the decline of Lebanon. Maybe I should not be talking this way. The rest are giving hope, but for one to have hope there should be work, change. I'm not seeing this. I'm not witnessing depth of vision, neither from the government nor from the new generation. The new graduates don't have jobs, they've lost hope, you have no future unless you have *waasta*, (connections). They are not focusing on their personality, on their strength and their capacity. It is not their fault, it is the fault of the people who are hiring them. A person will get hired, whether he can do the job or not, because his cousin works there. I am not saying that everyone is like that, of course I cannot generalize, but this is the majority. Some people are really trying to make a difference. I don't know if you have questions to ask?

Zeina: It is you, your own life, your own story that I am interested in.

Loulwa: 'These are my feelings'. My art -- if you want to consider my work as art - it's maybe commercial art because I am selling it - but if you consider a part of it as art - 'it cannot but be engaged'. I can't do something if it has no meaning. It has to have a meaning, it has to be practical, it has to have a purpose.

Zeina: You as a person who started your own business, how do you perceive it?

Loulwa: I perceive myself as a person who struggled a lot to reach where I am now. When I first opened the shop, women were completely against it, they refused to wear clothes 'made in Lebanon'. It was out of the question. I worked hard to offer them an international standard at the same time 'made in Lebanon'. They were against me, I was a bit 'contre-courant' when I started. I named my shop Kalabsha, people were against it - how unclassy it was! I wanted to name it this way, because I believe in being oneself. I didn't want a French name because I'm not French, I'm Lebanese and Arab. If I'm going to speak about me, I have to talk about what is around me. I can't talk about me just like that. I am an ordinary person who is working like any other person. I don't consider myself as an exceptional artist, or unique as a person. I'm ordinary, simply ordinary. I have a certain talent that I'm using to benefit myself - of course - and the people around me. This is my way of earning my living. This is what I do. I can't just work only to earn money. I have to look around, see. For me to be happy, people around me should be happy. One cannot be happy if the people around one aren't satisfied with their lives. Don't take me as an extremist, but there's a certain atmosphere I dream of living in, an atmosphere where you feel comfortable, where you're a decent Lebanese citizen, and you have your value in this country. This is what I'd really like to have. I don't know how to talk more about me. Do you want me to talk about fashion, how to cut the tissues? I can't tell you how I react to a piece of tissue, the fashionable color of the year. I can't tell you because all this has become part of me. I feel it but I can't explain it. I don't know what else to tell you.

Zeina: Tell me anything about your recollections, your memories - you started straight off with your profession.

Loulwa: Yes, my profession, because what I'm telling you is the *result* of all my thinking, of all my childhood. I grew up in a very open-minded house where the emphasis was on education; not only on education, but also on tolerance of other people, and on not showing off. My father is a wealthy man, but never in his life did he spoil us. He didn't allow us to behave like spoilt children. He looked after our education in every way he could. It wasn't easy, especially when your friends in the school are - no, no, don't put this, I don't want to talk about it. He taught us tolerance, to accept everybody, even those who are against you. We should accept them and discuss their differing points of views with them. My mother taught me spirituality, she is an artist, she has a lot of taste, and this influenced me. My brother is a musician and engineer. My sister is a graphic designer and painter. I am a designer and I also sing. We are a family. I don't know what to say. What do you want? What is important for you?

Zeina: I don't want to lead you in a specific direction.

Loulwa: No, please do, because I forget a lot. Please ask me something.

Zeina: What made you decide to lead your life the way you do?

Loulwa: I don't want to be a sheep. I don't want to follow a stream that I don't know. As I told you, the country badly needs change. I am hearing all these stories, I can't cover my eyes like a donkey, I can't put 'des oeillères'. I have to react and act with my surroundings. I can't bear social injustice, from the time I was a child, I can't. Every time I felt an injustice, I used to say no. Maybe I'm too idealistic, maybe I'm utopian. All of these bad things make me want to work to affect and maybe change the people around me positively, God willing. I am not a negativist, and I'm not saying that everything around me is a catastrophe. No, there are a lot of things that could be improved in this country so that we can lead a decent life. Do you think our lives are decent now? I think there should be more democracy, I don't want to talk about politics, you know how things are. I can't sit all day idle, wasting time and drinking coffee. This won't give me anything, it's useless. If I want to do something I have to have hope, I have to see the hope, I have to do something which makes me feel good and happy. I hope you understand? I don't want to talk about what has influenced me because I don't care about the 'I'.

Zeina: I mean you as a person -

Loulwa: I showed it, I showed who I am. I think I was clear. What do you want me to say? I'm sensitive? I am. Tell me exactly what you want. I like to have fun and laugh. I like to have amusing people around me, who make me laugh, and with whom I can laugh. I like to meditate, it relaxes my nerves. I feel that I'm a person on a journey. I might have a year ahead of me, maybe fifty, maybe more. I have to try to improve, not to stagnate. Improve not only in terms of money, but also in terms of my personality. I have to break complexes, get over all those things which you grow up with, start breaking them bit by bit in order to become a better person. This is what I want to do, so I can have a clear conscience. (pause)

Why I'm telling you all this is that I feel in Lebanon we have to do a lot, especially now. Lebanon is weak in comparison to a neighboring country, Israel. 'This is haunting us day and night, it is taking everything from us'. I feel that every one has to be aware and face up to the situation. We should learn how they think, this is important for me. They want to destroy us. We have to be very aware. We have to know how to defend ourselves. They have destroyed so many things. It's a danger that is haunting me day and night. At least we should be strong. But what I am seeing, the Lebanese people are numb. They have no energy for struggle anymore. They care more about where to eat and drink, how to have fun.

I'd like to be able to influence people and to make them more tolerant. We're a very small country. We are - I don't know - we don't know how many we are. Each community claims that they are the majority. We have so many sects, but fanaticism will lead us nowhere. It will restrict us and confine us. I don't understand how people who have studied in universities, and traveled, and seen the world, can still be fanatical. Fanaticism is fear. I am against that. People here are afraid of each other. On the contrary, they should be tolerant and accept each other. This is how to advance. New York, why is it such a great city? Because it has all the peoples of the world in it - Africans, Arabs, Cubans, Israelis, French, Americans, etc. This city is great because it's a melting-pot for all these cultures. How do we develop and advance? It's by being exposed to other ideas. You learn from others, you aren't God. This is what makes a country develop, this is something that people here haven't realized. They think that if they are from a specific community that they are better than others - of course not! Every community has something good. If we joined them together we would be more advanced. Tolerance is very important, but no one is seeing this. They are afraid, their fears push them away from each other, and they go back to their original groups. This is something I wanted to say.

I have one more thing to add. If the Lebanese people think that they can go on cutting trees and putting up all this concrete, well in ten years time Beirut won't be habitable. In fact it's already uninhabitable. Humans were born to be in harmony with nature. We need harmony with nature to be mentally and physically balanced. The destruction of the sea caused by illegal dumping of garbages and pollutants, the traffic noise and pollution will turn against us. People aren't even aware of this, they have no idea what is happening. I don't know why the schools aren't teaching 'le sens civique'. You are in the Green Line Association and so am I. We need to back up the environmental groups whose voices are barely heard. But this is so important! I want my future children, to live in a country where they can breathe, which won't give them cancer, or an ugly view of life. Lebanon was a beautiful country, and it is getting uglier by the day. (pause) The best thing if one wants to improve the other is to talk; through talk one can make a difference. If you talk, and someone else talks, we will make a difference, have an impact. We cannot stay silent and put blinkers on our eyes.

Recorded and translated by Zeina Misk.