

RIMA ALAMUDDIN

Rima Alamuddin's premature death occurred only 14 years ago (1963); yet, she may be considered a pioneer in the sense that she was one of the few Lebanese or Arab women writers who chose to express themselves in English. Moreover, she was a pioneer in her efforts to create her own original style and to inaugurate personal modes of expression inspired through her knowledge of the English language and modern Western Literature.

Rima drew most of her ideas, from Western Culture but the atmosphere she depicts is purely oriental. The background is Lebanese and so are the characters of her stories and poems, though they may appear in Western dress and adopt Western manners. Her artistry performed an ideal marriage of cultures.

She was born in Beirut, in 1941, of a Lebanese father, Najib Alamuddin, Director of the Middle East Airlines, and a Swiss mother, Dr. Ida Kunzler. She started her education in Lebanese private schools. At AUB, she majored in English and obtained her B.A. with distinction. She then continued her studies at Girton College, Cambridge. While at college, she started writing in English, publishing stories, poems and articles in college papers and magazines. In 1960, at 19, she published a novel "Spring to Summer", written in a realistic style, revealing an acute awareness of people and places.

In 1963, at the age of 22, as she was preparing to return to England her accidental death occurred, depriving her country, her family and friends of a promising writer. Peter Grey, the English critic wrote: "She left behind her more solid achievement than most of us, and although, as a true artist, she would have been the first to wave it aside as mere five-finger exercises in preparation for the next attempt, it has a high and enduring quality."

Besides her novel, Rima left a collection of short stories "The Sun is Silent", with a surrealist touch; and a collection of poems, "Years of Youth".

"Years of Youth" is made up of 15 poems, written in free verse, published with a foreword by Peter Grey, who says, "She was unescapably aware of the great dichotomy, of the fact that tears and laughter are but aspects of the same thing, that mankind "is born to one law and to another bound, created sick, commanded to be sound".

His foreword refers to Rima's wide culture and the rich experience that she was able to accumulate and utilize during her short life on earth.

In analyzing her style, he points-out her understanding of the secret of art which consists in making the far look near, bringing opposites together, giving the illusion of similarity in the dissimilar:

I hoped I would not have to know how tired I would be



A tiredness not lost, and good, as after a long
and arduous work

leaving me free to roam about reluctantly,
a tiredness not altogether tired...

"With What Tenderness", her first poem in the collection, was written when she was seventeen. The accumulation of words in it recalls a confused dream, but the phrase "with what tenderness" recurs between the lines and gives the impression of nostalgia for things past and gone. The reader enjoys the rhythmic character of the measured, rimeless lines, though he may not grasp their meaning.

"There Was a Yellow Rose", the second poem, tells an obscure tale about a yellow rose, a red rose, a dried rose and a blind boy; the whole suggesting a parallel between the rich dreamland of the past and the barren present, stifled by reality.

In "The Pleasure of This Dance", there is an impressionistic recollection of feelings experienced by a young girl at a dancing party. The successive images show the difference between a state of natural, pure elation in the girl, and an artificial stereotyped response in her partner.

The same idea is implied in "The Whisper", which draws a contrast between the sensitive, poetic nature of the girl and the stiffness of the boy, who probably symbolizes for her a rigid, non-understanding society.

"The Whip" differs from the other poems of the collection by its realistic mood. Of this long poem, Peter Grey says, "The whole of this poem is, with its mixture of poetic language and rhythmic parody of modern jargon, her main protest in poetry... and also the realization of the practical, purposeful side of her nature that even poets have to lose themselves in day-to-day work."

So I must get back to my work
Those printed pages, sheets of paper, pens,
and pencils carefully arrayed, that large desk
the familiar discomfort of that brown wooden chair...
I work to work, without it I would perhaps have broken
Somewhere along the way of those black years.

The rest of her poems represent a return to dreamland, announced by a lonely stand in the midst of nature or a silent meditation near a window, which carries her away from the self:

Alone, waiting alone
feeling for time from beat to beat
unquestioning gaze
spreading of self from self to not self
to not self unreached for
unwanted unknown...

Her images as well as her words reflect daintiness and femininity. The word "tenderness" recurs in her poems and with the rest of her writings, recalls that "even and serene temperament" which her friends agree that she possessed. Yet her writings also show "an awareness of beauty and ugliness, joy and sorrow, fulfillment and frustration... a sense of isolation, of loss and longing. She could feel all this, as we all do at times, while living a life that was happy and rewarding in part".

This glance into Rima Alamuddin's work shows, among other things, how talented she was for the career she had chosen, and leads us to believe that she was preparing for a great leap in her artistic hopes. The woman writer planned one thing; Fate ordered it otherwise.

(From a study on Arab Women Poets of to-day by R.G.)

There Was a Yellow Rose

*There was a yellow rose a soft young dewy
yellow rose
I had seen it once I can't remember where
but when I saw it again it was in the hand
of a blind
boy who had picked it especially to touch
me with it
one morning early early
when the lights were beginning to go out
for me but he
didn't know they were beginning to go out
or anything else,
the rose was in his hand it's yellow isn't
it he asked
yes it is you know it is*

*There was a red rose a dark red rose one
that a boy who
was blind had sent all the way from far away
he knew it was red and he knew many
things and I
knew them too
he knew he was blind and he knew he had sent
me a red rose*

*it was a tall slender graceful red rose it stood
for a week in a vase in my room which broke
when I
took the rose out*

*There was a dried out rose one that had been
yellow and
there was a dried out rose one that had been
red and they
were in the same place and they were both
dried out
they had been from a boy who had been
blind and who
had known he was blind but he hadn't
known why
he was blind
now he knows why he was blind or maybe
he doesn't
where he is they don't have roses and
I have no more
vases to break
or hearts or anything else there was
a yellow rose
and a red rose and a boy who was blind
RIMA ALAMUDDIN*