



## Emily Nasrallah, a pioneer journalist and novelist

In the early twentieth century, women's interest in journalism was shown in two ways: contributing articles to papers and magazines and founding women's magazines in the three countries of early Arab Awakening: Lebanon, Egypt and Syria. Between 1890 and 1930, about forty women's magazines saw the light, most however were short-lived. Professional journalism for women began in Lebanon and Egypt around the middle of the century. They were engaged as reporters or as editors of the woman's page in well-known papers and magazines, both French and Arabic, and more recently in English magazines.

Emily Nasrallah started her literary career around 1950 by contributing to *Sawt-el-Mara'a* (Woman's Voice). Then she contributed regularly to the magazine *As-Sayyâd* and was registered as member of the journalists' syndicate. Her talent as story writer was revealed when in 1962 she published her first novel, **Tuyour Ailoul** (September Birds) which was a great success and obtained two prizes: the Said Akl Prize and that of the "Friends of the Book". In a rhythmic, vivid style, she describes from a woman's point of view the effects of ignorance, poverty and emigration on a forgotten Lebanese village. Her novel shows a first-hand knowledge and understanding of the village problems and potential. It attacks the traditions which enslave the villagers, and more particularly the women who are used as sacrifices and scapegoats. Their resistance is fruitless, their struggle ends in compromise or in frustration and suicide. This is the theme of her other two novels, **Shajaratu-d-Difla (The Oleander Tree)** and **Ar-Raheena (The Bonded)**, published in 1968 and 1974 respectively. During that period, Emily gave up journalism to devote herself to fiction. Besides the three novels already referred to, she published an allegorical story for young people, **Al-Bahira (The Resplendent)**, which takes up the classical theme of the search for happiness. She has also published collections of short stories including one novel which depicts war-time scenes and reminiscences, **Tilka-dh-Dhikrayat**. Her latest book, **Al-Iqla'-aks-az-Zaman (Sailing Against Time)**, tells the story of an old Lebanese villager who took a trip to America where he visited his children and their families established there for many years. Though he was dazzled by the comfort and glamor of American life, the hero of the story refused to stay with his children and was quick to return to his country where he was

killed by a sniper's bullet. In her novels and stories, the dramatic element is emphasized, a blending of reality and imagination serves to heighten the effect.

The following interview throws some light on her ideas regarding a few particular questions.

- Q. Why does the village play a central role in your novels and stories?
- A. Because I spent my childhood and adolescence in a village and received there my earliest and most lasting impressions. It seems to me that the village has shaped the character of the Lebanese, their roots are there. In the village our true self is revealed without masks.
- Q. What values do you emphasize in your works?
- A. Our national heritage presents a good many values that are worth keeping: faith in oneself, fortitude, freedom and helpfulness. The war has shaken many values but has not destroyed them completely; otherwise Lebanon would not have survived. It is true, however, that many harmful traditions have to be rejected, such as sexual discrimination, the quarrelsome spirit of villagers, religious fanaticism and clannishness.
- Q. The influence of the village is reflected in your style which draws many images from Lebanese nature, and in your use of colloquial expressions in the dialogue.
- A. I only use the colloquial in dialogues reflecting everyday life. The dialogue should be in harmony with the characters' background and personality. The colloquial is more successful in plays representing contemporary life. However, our classical language is evolving so that there is exchange between the colloquial and the classical.
- Q. Are you a feminist?
- A. I firmly believe that it is high time to stop treating woman as a minor who needs a guardian. Freedom is as necessary for the mental and physical health of women as it is for men. Because of the moderating influences which continue to surround us, there is no danger that our girls will be attracted by extreme forms of freedom.

According to Emily, the modern woman is characterized by a sense of adventure and an awareness of herself as a new independent personality.