

Nazik Saba Yared: Teaching During the War

Dr. Nazik Yared is an Assistant Professor of Arabic at Beirut University College. She previously taught Arabic for many years at one of the most prestigious secondary schools in west Beirut. She is the author of several books of literary criticism and of a novel, «Nuktat ad Daira», which tells the story of a young woman caught in a conflict between her love for a man and her love for her career.

Al-Raida asked Dr. Yared for an account of her experience as a teacher during the war. This is what she said:

Being neither a psychologist nor a sociologist, it is only as an ordinary High School teacher and College instructor that I can talk about my students during these ten years of war in Lebanon. Moreover, the two institutions in which I teach are in Ras - Beirut, probably the district of Beirut least affected by the war and the students belong mainly to the upper and lower middle class, and are therefore more privileged than others.

At high School

Before the war our pupils came from all over Beirut; but due to the danger, and very often the impossibility of crossing from the eastern to the western part of the city, the pupils who came from the eastern quarters were replaced by children who lived closer to the school. They were a mixture of Christian, Muslim and Druze. A happy mixture. Is this also true of the other schools with mixed students? I cannot tell. But in the school in which I taught, the Muslim, Christian and Druze boys and girls worked together, played together, and went out together. Of course they had discussions influenced by their parents' political and confessional beliefs; sometimes there were heated discussions, at other times closer to joking banter, but never did they spoil the healthy comradeship between them.

In fact, the war loosened many ties and reinforced others. Classes were very often interrupted by the shelling of residential districts. Parents would rush to the school to take home their children, and

sometimes we had to close for several days. Still, my pupils never studied as hard and as seriously as during these years. It was not only that they wanted to make up for all the lost school - days; but being in class and studying was part of a normal life in a world around them gone mad, and they clung to that last straw of normality. More; school became a haven for them an escape from fear in the bomb shelter, from the boredom of being cooped up in an apartment with nothing to do. Outside school most parents were afraid to let their children leave home to visit a friend or for any other activity deemed «unnecessary». Usually, youngsters do not like being in school, but the war in Lebanon made school the dearest thing to our youngsters. On «quiet» days they would show up at 6.30 a.m. to play basketball or football before entering class; and after classes were over, they would linger on and on, postponing as much as possible leaving friends and classmates they were not sure of seeing again the following day. And with the disappearance of entertainment from the city, they created their own entertainment - another excuse to remain at school after classes were over. They formed theater and music clubs, gave plays and concerts. And since they were guided by their teachers in all this, teachers and pupils became bound by new and closer ties. I will never forget the farewell parties that the graduating class gave their teachers at the end of each year, and I never destroy the letters and cards I still receive from pupils I taught years ago.

Also the material taught in class acquired new and different meaning. The Physics teacher, for example, was asked to explain the theories and rules related to the velocity and curves of the various bullets, rockets, shells and similar projectiles. Arabic Poetry and prose connected to the political and tribal strife in the Omayyad period, or other historical events of the past, became suddenly interesting as they were viewed from the angle of contemporary strife in Lebanon. And, naturally, the pupil's language and vocabulary changed, unfortunately influenced by the violence and vulgarity that accompany any war.

And then, of course, there was the loss and pain we teachers felt when we read texts in class about

natural, historical or archeological sites in a Lebanon most of our pupils had never seen, or had forgotten from the days of their childhood. And much worse was our moral dilemma over severe punishment for lying or cheating pupils who experienced the moral and social chaos around them, knew that harmless citizens were being killed by the thousands or had even sometimes seen innocent people murdered before their eyes and knew the murderers went unpunished. No matter how we tried to defend the moral principles we were implementing I do not think that these youngsters were really convinced of their practical value. It is this which makes me worry most about the future of our country.

At University

My experience as instructor in a University College proves that I have every reason to worry. Here I am dealing with adult young men and women who came of age during the war. Most of them belong to, or sympathise with, politico - confessional parties that have accentuated fanaticism, hatred and bigotry. Most of them will not accept ideas or attitudes that differ from their own. Higher education is no longer a quest for knowledge and a search for truth, but a way to acquire a degree, whether deserved or not. (But then, who got only what he deserved in those last ten years?) Therefore, any means are justified to get the necessary grades for that degree: arousing pity, arguing, cheating, and last but not least, threats. What is horrifying is those students' total lack of any sense of responsibility: whatever is amiss, they are never to blame; the fault lies always with others. That, and those young minds immersed in violence: No matter what example I ask them to give in class, they mostly cite something related to violence. In this, at least, they are not to blame.

Black as this picture might be, there are nevertheless a few wonderful spotlights that brighten it: I think of the student who still conscientiously reads every reference book I recommend; of the one who comes to me after class to discuss this or that point; of that other one who asks for more material by and about a poet whose poems he/she liked; of the student who gives me the prose or poetry he/she

wrote privately, asking me to evaluate it; of the students who go on giving us excellent plays in spite of the difficulties they have to face.

It is those students who still make teaching a wonderful experience, and who give us a spark of hope for the future.