

## Daisy Al-Ameer

Half Iraqi - half Lebanese (on her mother's side), writer Daisy al-Ameer symbolizes the woman who has taken the best of what the Arab World and the Western World has to offer women.

Director of the Iraqi Cultural Center in Beirut, Daisy has been living in this city for the last 25 years, suffering and bearing with its inhabitants the brunt of war.\*

It is in Beirut that she started writing (1962), a city which enjoyed a multi-cultural atmosphere. Here she is talking openly to co-editor Wafa' Stephan about her experiences as a writer and as a woman in a country she has adopted but that is not her own:



**Q. How did you start your career as a writer of short stories?**

A. I have always loved literature. As a child I was an avid reader and would read books above my age level. I started writing as a hobby. I had many stories in mind before the first story "The Little Rug" was published in 1962. It was well received by the critics. This made me feel I was not a beginner in the field and encouraged me to continue writing. This year I hope to publish my sixth collection of short stories in Arabic.

**Q. Why did you choose to write short stories and not novels?**

A. I think novels take a long time to write. A novel needs long term planning, patience, and time. I am a person who cannot wait - who has no patience. I have a quick temperament. I do everything quickly. A novel cannot grow in such an atmosphere. I do not possess the qualities needed for novel writing and I find that short stories suit my personality better.

**Q. What are the subjects you have dealt with during your 25 years of writing?**

A. I started writing in the early sixties when I was a young woman. Naturally my interests differ from the ones I had then. I am now a mature woman who has

experienced life. What urged me to write was my extensive travelling which took me away from my home and country. Being away from home made me feel nostalgia, loneliness, homesickness and a longing for my country. These feelings still exist in me today as I am a person who has never settled and I still feel unsettled.

In my writings I am concerned about women. Being a woman I understand them better than men. Women's problems are familiar to me. In our Middle Eastern society there is a barrier between men and women which makes it difficult to understand each other. When I read books by men who write about women I feel it is all wrong. Men see women through their own desires. For example, if a man loves a woman who does not return his feelings he tries to forget her by drinking or getting involved in a political party. In other words he tries to solve his problems in a way I do not feel is right. On the other hand, I can understand how a woman feels from a glance, a flutter of an eyelid, a smile or a sigh. Women for me are an open book while men are the unknown entity, hidden and ambiguous.

**Q. Many of your readers are men. What is their reaction to your writings about women?**

Men appreciate my writing. They acknowledge the fact that I write about feelings in women that they did not know existed. They say "We never thought such

\* In an article written by Daisy al-Ameer in *An-Nahar*, Sept. 13, 1985, she reveals her decision to leave Beirut.

small matters could be so important for a woman". Men believe women have no other interest in life except love and marriage. This is not how I view life nor is it my main concern. Of course women fall in love and marry and children are important to them. However, since I was a young woman, I never believed that man is woman's foremost concern. I am concerned about the social problems women face, their relations with others, how people view them and what they have to say about them.

**Q. What is the reaction of your women readers?**

A. They are content with my writings. They tell me I write about things they cannot express themselves. They say "You have spoken up for us by writing about our problems and concerns".

**Q. If men are not the most important concern of a woman. What is then?**

A. It is traditions that crush the realization of her dreams and her fear of society's taboos and customs. It is also the power others have over her. In a Middle Eastern society everyone feels responsible for the woman: her father, brother, husband, mother, aunts and even cousins. Middle Eastern women are bound very strongly by social customs. They fear gossip and want to safeguard their reputations. All these factors constrain a woman's freedom and do not allow her to be liberated.

**Q. Have you overcome these concerns and problems in your own life?**

A. I overcame them when I grew older. When I was young these problems paralyzed me as they paralyze other women. I was young and afraid. Now I feel privileged because I have the courage which most women lack. I have acquired ways in which to be assertive. One major problem I have not overcome is "existential sadness", not the sadness of falling in or out of love but the sadness of the human condition and the passage of time.

**Q. What caused you most sadness in your life?**

A. Being away from my country - Iraq. My constant travels and the lack of a stable home. It is true that I have been living in Lebanon for a long time, but I always feel I can be posted to another country any time and be obliged to leave. A home means a lot to me. I have always worried about not having a stable home. I am attached to my home and I love it, but at the same time I have never been in a home that I have felt will be mine forever.

**Q. How can a woman find contentment and inner peace?**

A. Work is very vital for a woman because through it she can become economically independent. Work is

fulfilling for both men and women. It is often said that women cannot bear the responsibilities of work. Many women fail to do so because they think that work is a transitory phase that precedes marriage. I believe a woman should not regard work as a transitory stage but should set it as her first goal and have a sense of responsibility and a professional conscience. She should not use her feminine attributes at work and say "I am weak, and I need someone to take care of me". In my job I have worked harder than most men and I realize that men do respect women who work seriously. It is very important for a woman to be respected. Respect does not come easily, it has to be earned. There are certain ways of behavior that lead to respect.

**Q. According to you what is the biggest problem of the Middle Eastern man?**

A. His problem is that he does not understand women. In our society a woman is an actress and the man an actor. All are actors. No one thinks that problems that arise between men and women are of importance. Little matters such as these are always kept private and a problem should not be discussed openly unless it is of a serious nature. In Western societies, men and women are more open with each other, more honest and not afraid of one another or gossip. In our traditional Middle Eastern societies people are concerned in watching what others do and say. Therefore, people retreat into their shells and are afraid to declare their feelings and thoughts. This is a problem one should write about.

**Q. What about the Iraqi woman, how do you assess her progress in comparison to other Arab Women?**

A. I think that the Iraqi woman has progressed a lot during the last 15 years. She has attained her independence and has an identity of her own. The family life of Iraqi woman has changed whereby the woman is free and takes independent decisions, she is independent economically and can reach high positions. The Government has given women many things, it is one of the countries which has given women most. I am an Iraqi woman who has a good diplomatic post. I rarely encounter women from other countries who have the same type of post. I feel I don't need a man to support me. I feel that Iraq is my support.

Books published by Daisy al-Ameer:

1. The Faraway Country that she Loves (1984).
2. And the Wave Comes Back (1969).
3. The Happy Arab Home (1975).
4. The Cycle of Love and Hatred (1978).
5. Promises for Sale (1981).

Her current collection of short stories to be published this year might be titled "On the Waiting List" (1985).