

An Interview with Hoda al-Namani

Amin Al-Rihani

This interview was published in *Women and the Family in the Middle East* by Elizabeth Warnock Fernea. *Hoda al-Namani* was born in Damascus, lived in Egypt for many years, and now resides in Beirut. She has published four books of poetry.

The fourth and most recent collection of poetry by Hoda al-Namani is her work *I Remember I Was a Point, I Was a Circle*. This book can be considered as a single long poem, divided into separate sections or scenes, each independent of one another yet at the same time complementary.

The poem is a work that springs up from within the earth and from the ruins, determined to search for a new hope, for resurrection amid the specters of destruction and loss. The sections of the poem turn, in a rhythmic succession of episodes, from the lover whispering to her loved one, to the rebellious revolutionary youth, to those in despair turning toward God, to the restive wanderer across the stars.

The lover's words, moreover, are a movement through perplexing questions on paths that lead to the doors of question that cause pain, to return and end in surrender to divine will, or to the will of fate, whose remorselessness is conveyed by the verses. Thus the whispered conversation of the lover is transformed into a whispered conversation of life.

The following discussion of the poem between its author and the critic Amin al-Rihani took place on Lebanese radio on the program «Book of the Week».

Question by Amin al-Rihani: What is the symbolic dimension of the ideas of the point and the circle in your latest poem?

Hoda al-Namani: If we must make explicit the symbolic dimension of these two ideas, the first thing is to get away from the identification of the two words that come from textbooks of grammar and style, and even

from books of mathematics and astronomy...

Amin al-Rihani: The abstract in the poetic imagery, while totally separated from actuality, changes from metaphor into constructive fantasy. How do you explain this kind of abstraction in your poetry, especially in this particular poem?

Hoda al-Namani: Abstraction should never be separated from reality. However much the metaphor exceeds the limits of literary style, rises high, and hovers, there are always invisible lines connecting the image to the object. The connection is embedded in the roots and in the subconscious.

Constructive fantasy is inevitably based upon experience and reality. How do we distinguish between our dreams and reality? There's no difference! They're distinguished only among other people. All experience, any experience, is tangible. How and why do we distinguish between the material world and the spiritual? How can you imprison a poet? You can't. Thought is a bird. Prevent me now from ascending to heaven — can you? Poetry is a part of us. The poet remains above the poetry, around the poetry, within the poetry, grasping with it whatever appears to be escaping from him.

In the same way, misunderstanding can arise from the ambiguity of the symbols. I sometimes use mystic symbols, and these should be comprehended with the heart. I saw them with the heart, because they often penetrate, and they must be apprehended with compassion.

The wing, the bird, the ship, the woman, are all indicators of the soul. The bird might be love, for example, and likewise death, which in its turn is life. The poet is a child playing with words, as a child would play with seashells and with stars. This, in my opinion, is the one great delight of life.