

International Women's Day

Women in the Novels of Daisy El-Amir and Emily Nasrallah

Beirut University College,
March 8

The Institute for Women's Studies in The Arab World again honored women on their International Day with special attention to women in the novels of two leading female novelists. Daisy Al-Amir, of Iraqi origin residing in Lebanon, and Emily Nasrallah, of Lebanese origin and currently residing in Egypt, are the two Arab writers. Invited to participate in the ceremony, the two novelists discussed the image of women in their writings and read extracts from their books.

The authors differ in many ways, while Emily Nasrallah's novels reflect ethereal women, heavenly rural settings and portray the conflict between traditions and self-fulfillment, Daisy El-Amir's, concentrate on urban situations in which women are proud fighters, who hold their fate in their own hands. "I like the women in my stories to be proud and arrogant; women who do not compromise themselves and who despite certain weaknesses or disadvantages, preserve their integrity at the end." Daisy El-Amir felt that any other presentation of women is discouraging and hinders their development. To her women, integrity and dignity are the most important factor for achieving equality. She explained that her novels were short stories and therefore the plots revolve around a specific and profound theme or event and do not include too many characters. "The woman is the leading character, although men are not excluded from basic roles and influences. Women have chronic fear and men chronic domination and thus



left to right: Daisy El-Amir, Dr. Nazik Yared, moderator, and Emily Nasrallah

my stories portray the interaction between these two situations." she explained. "I do not profess to analyze or suggest laws and solutions for there are no laws that guarantee happiness nor are the people influencing women's lives the holders of that happiness. I believe that women must train themselves to be independent, self-sufficient and to stand up for themselves. And this is what I try to bring out in the female characters and the plots in my stories."

The struggles of the women in Emily Nasrallah's books are more painful. "I cannot say that I concentrate on only one image of women. They take on many faces, even within the same plot." Unlike Daisy El-Amir, Emily Nasrallah gave her analogies by reading small excerpts from different stories of hers. She emphasized the conflicts women face, and how they deal with them, confront them or escape from them. The ending of each story

illustrates the various ways in which these women, given their limited resources, break the physical, social and mental boundaries which limit them. In her first story, the heroine was rebellious against traditions that kept her from her ambition to explore the world beyond the boundaries of the village. In another story the heroine feels she was betrayed by her lover when he left her behind because he was suffocating in that village. She then decided to marry the first man who would take her away and consequently get her closer to relinquishing her first love. Hence, she lived in a fantasy because she did not directly confront the situation and the circumstances which prevented from following her loved one. In leaving by virtue of another man she was submitting herself to someone's will and was not independent. In yet another story the heroine falls in love with a man who comes from a family with lower status, and is killed for daring to violate basic rules.

The Rights of Women in Lebanon

Situation and Perspectives in the Context of National Reconstruction

The two authors spoke of the struggles women face in improving their lives and widening their horizons. Daisy El-Amir's women are arrogant and reject subjugation, while those in Emily Nasrallah's work are helpless victims. However despite their differences, to both authors, these women, with different characters, surroundings and circumstances confront the different forms of the same submission in a variety of ways •

R.A.H

The authors' books that have been translated to English are:

Emily Nasrallah

1. Birds of September. First published in 1962, women her three Arabic literary prizes and is now in its seventh edition.
2. Flight Against Time. (1991)
3. A House Not Her Own. Stories From Beirut (1992)
4. Also contributed to Miriam Cooke's War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War (1991)

Daisy El-Amir

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)
6. All the short stories in the collection entitled On the Waiting List (1993).

UNESCO Beirut, March 29-31

It was a three day panel discussion organized by UNESCO. The purpose was to analyze the present conditions of women in Lebanon and consequently, devise program(s) which would secure women's share in national reconstruction and their effective participation in development. Prominent figures attended the Conferences such as Ms. Wasila Tamzali (1), Head of the UNESCO Committee for Women's Rights; Mr. Bahij Tabbara, the Minister of Justice; Ms. Bahia Hariri, Cabinet members of the Lebanese Parliament, as well as Ms. Saliha Sanqar, the Minister of Higher Education of the Syrian Arab Republic.

The panelists, most prominent feminist groups, scholars and researchers in the Lebanese women's movement presented their findings(2) and shared their observations, thus identifying problems and suggesting solutions. The first day's panels included a paper on Women's Legal rights and the call to ratify the Convention of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women by Lawyer Laure Moghaizel; and Women's Education and Access to Education by Dr. Amani Kabbara Shaarani. The second day's panels reviewed issues concerning the Lebanese Woman and the Labor Market by Mona Khalaf (3); Women's Health by Dr. Ilham Kallab Bsar; Women and Culture by Dr. Noor Salman; and Women's Participation in Politics by Dr. Fadia

Kiwan.

The panelists, realizing the controversies and the volumes of reform and development needed to preserve women's rights in Lebanon, prepared a list of recommendations to be presented to UNESCO and other organizations in addition to the Lebanese government. The last session which included finalizing the resolutions was chaired by Ms. Saliha Sanqar, the Minister of Higher Education of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Although women's concerns are gaining momentum on the national agenda, the burden of implementation lies in the hands of the women's groups and the scholars who contributed to this panel provided they are financially assisted and the work is properly distributed •

For more information contact: UNESCO, Beirut Office, Ministry of Education, Beirut Lebanon.

(1) Coming up in the next issue of Al-Raida: A special interview with Wasila Tamzali, head of the UNESCO Committee for Women's Rights. The interview includes her observations on the controversies raised in the panels and the quality of feminist debates in Lebanon.

(2) Summaries of papers presented at the Conference will appear in the next and future issues of Al-Raida.

(3) The paper on The Lebanese woman and the Labor Market by Mona Khalaf is summarized on page 14-17, by permission from UNESCO, Beirut.