

# Quote, Unquote

**B**ut, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction - what has that got to do with a room of one's own? I will try to explain. When you asked me to speak about women and fiction I sat down on the banks of a river and began to wonder what the words meant... The title women and fiction might mean, and you may have meant it to mean, women and what they are like, or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them; or it might mean somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light. But when I began to consider the subject in this last way, which seemed the most interesting, I soon saw that it had one fatal drawback. I should never be able to come to a conclusion... All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point - a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved."

*(Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992 pp. 3-4)*

"Who are the Beirut Decentrists? They are a group of women writers who have shared Beirut as their home and the war as their experience. They have been the decentred in a double sense: physically, they were scattered all over a self-destructing city; intellectually, they moved in separate spheres. They wrote alone and for themselves. They would not conceive of their writings as related to those of others, yet their marginal perspective, which gave insight into the holistic aspect of the war, united them and allowed them discursively to undermine and restructure society around the image of a new center."

*(Miriam Cooke, War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War, New York, Syracuse University Press, 1996 p.3)*

"Several Arab women writers that I know (including Layla Ba'albakkī, Hanan al-Shaykh and Emily Nasrallah), have expressed their irritation at the way in which Western feminist critics have appropriated their works and manipulated their contents to serve a feminist agenda that is largely alien to the authors themselves. They are disturbed not only by what they perceive as the antagonistic, overtly anti-male stance of some feminist critics, but also by a sense of frustration that their writing is somehow being marginalised, almost ghettoised, into a female literary enclosure in which they are disenfranchised from mainstream literature. They complain of not wanting to be known as 'feminist' writers, but just as writers; not wanting to be renowned for their stance on women, but for their general outlook on life as well as the calibre of their prose;

not wanting to receive critical acclaim for their abilities to highlight inequalities between the sexes, but for their skills in depicting a broad spectrum of inequalities, injustices and contradictions in the Arab world and beyond."

*(Mai Yammani, Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives, London, Ithaca Press, 1996 pp. 133-134)*

"Just try writing for a few days. ... Start tomorrow. Put your moisturizing cream away, get up an hour earlier and sit yourself down with a pen in front of a blank page. And bring some patience to the task. Lots of patience. Suddenly, things will happen. The page will come alive, your brain will click into gear, your body will be energized and your ideas will come together. Writing I tell you is the best remedy for all kinds of crises, all types of wrinkles. The only thing it really can't cure is greying hair. You'll have to use henna for that. ... Write for an hour everyday. Anything. Even a letter to your local electricity company to tell them the light outside your house isn't working. You've no idea what an effect this daily exercise will have on your skin: the grimace at the corner of your mouth will disappear; the line where you knitted your brows will fade; your eyes will widen; and, with all this, inner peace will come."

*(Fatima Mernissi, Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory, London, Zed Books, 1996 p. 1)*

"Women who remain in abusive situations tend to manifest 'battered woman syndrome,' a set of symptoms that appear together or separately. ... The syndrome develops through three phases: tension; aggression; and reconciliation, better known as the 'honeymoon' period. The continuity of these stages becomes a behavioural cycle - the 'cycle of domestic violence' ... The first phase is characterized by a gradual increase in the tension, small acts that generate friction and conflicts between the couple, such as insults and physical abuse. ... Physical, sexual and psychological abuse are characteristic of the aggression phase. ... In the reconciliation or 'honeymoon' phase, the abuser asks forgiveness, cries, begs on his knees, tries to help the victim, shows her all sorts of consideration and remorse with gifts or promises to change. This is the moment in which the woman is positively reinforced to stay in the relationship. There are no tensions or violence, so she sees the 'good side' of her partner, believing that she can help him change his behaviour."

*(Communiqué issue 2, April - September, 1997 p. 1)*

"The beauty of the girl, a being who (as you so beautifully say) 'has not yet achieved anything,' is motherhood that has a presentiment of itself begins to prepare, becomes anxious, yearns. And the mother's beauty is motherhood that serves,

and in the old woman there is a great remembering. And in the man too there is motherhood, it seems to me, physical and mental; his engendering is also a kind of birthing, and it is birthing when he creates out of his innermost fullness. And perhaps the sexes are more akin than people think, and the great renewal of the world will perhaps consist in one phenomenon: that man and woman, freed from all mistakes, feelings and aversions, will seek each other not as opposites but as brother and sister, as neighbors, and will unite as human beings, in order to bear in common, simply, earnestly, and patiently, the heavy sex that has been laid upon them.

*(Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet, Massachusetts, Shambhala Publications, Inc. 1984 pp. 55-56)*

"Arab women's feminist discourse has addressed universal issues such as education and work, rights concerning marriage, and suffrage, and at the same time has confronted less universal issues such as breaking out of gender segregation. Like women in many other third world countries, and unlike western women, Arab women have typically had to pioneer their feminist expression in agrarian societies, more recently experiencing modern urbanisation, and in societies where religion has remained an important regulator of everyday life and a source of identity. These Arab and other third world societies have typically experienced European colonial rule and/or western imperialist hegemony while Arab women's feminisms were beginning to be articulated. Arab women's feminist voices have always run the risk of being discredited as anti-nationalist or anti-religious. Women in the Arab world have had more complex battles to fight than have feminists in the West with their strikingly different histories and circumstances."

*(Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing, London, Virago Press, 1990 Introduction xxxiii)*

"War, the most dramatic form of violence, exacts a heavy toll on women, rendering them among the most vulnerable social groups in time of conflict. Armed conflicts in Central America, the Middle East and Africa are leaving behind a growing number of civilian casualties, an increasing proportion of which are women. Wars are also responsible for some 16 million refugees, the majority of whom are widowed or abandoned women and their dependent children. These women lead a life of permanent displacement, struggling to survive in overcrowded refugee camps, often with few prospects of resuming normal lives or returning to their countries of origin. War victimizes men and women alike; however, it often serves as a catalyst for social and political change. For example, Kuwaiti women who remained inside their country during the Iraqi

occupation daily risked their lives. 'I have known what it is to suffer for my country,' said one Kuwaiti woman. 'No one can say that I do not deserve the same rights as these men.'

*(Women: Challenges to the Year 2000, United Nations, New York, 1991 p. 74)*

"... over a lifetime, one out of two women will die of heart disease, and only one out of eight gets breast cancer, but under age 75, there are three times more deaths from breast cancer than heart disease, and if you take the smokers out, six times more deaths from breast cancer than heart disease, so it's not an even match. And the breast cancer risk does go up the longer you're on hormone therapy, and if you've been on it for over five years, particularly over ten years, you see an increased risk of breast cancer. ... One of the things we lose sight of is that menopause is not a disease. We're talking about prevention. You may be willing to take some risks if you have a life-threatening disease that you're treating. But if you're healthy, then do you want to risk a life-threatening disease in order to potentially prevent something which you don't even know you're going to get?"

*(Ms. Magazine, July/August 1997, p. 39)*

Here is a strange paradox. Woman instinctively wants to give, yet resents giving herself in small pieces. Basically is this a conflict? Or is it an over-simplification of many-stranded problem? I believe that what woman resents is not so much giving herself in pieces as giving herself purposelessly ... Even purposeful giving must have some source that refills it ... If it is woman's function to give, she must be replenished too. But how? Solitude, says the moon shell. Every person, especially every woman, should be alone sometime during the year, some part of each week, and each day. How revolutionary that sounds and how impossible of attainment. To many women such a program seems quite out of reach ... By and large, mothers and housewives are the only workers who do not have regular time off. They are the great vacationless class ... Herein lies one key to the problem. If women were convinced that a day off or an hour of solitude was a reasonable ambition, they would find a way of attaining it ... As far as the search for solitude is concerned, we live in a negative atmosphere ... The world today does not understand, in either man or woman, the need to be alone ... The artist knows he must be alone to create; the writer, to work out his thoughts; the musician, to compose; the saint, to pray. But women need solitude in order to find again the true essence of themselves: that firm strand which will be the indispensable center of a whole web of human relationships ... Solitude alone is not the answer to this; it is only a step toward it ... The problem is not entirely in finding the room of one's own, the time alone, difficult as necessary as this is. The problem is more how to still the soul in the midst of its activities. In fact, the problem is how to feed the soul.

*(Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Gift from the Sea, New York, Vintage Books, 1978 pp. 46-51)*