

Special Features

Rose Ghurayyib

Ghena Ismail

“Fruitful action means one concentrated on a useful task, performed in a quiet atmosphere, free from noise and artificiality ... People absorbed in work, intent on thoroughness and creativity, find no time to ruminate on hatred and to contrive intrigues ...”

These words written by Rose twenty years ago best summarize her life story characterized by continuous work and immense productivity. Learning about the author's great contributions, one inevitably wonders, “When did she have the time to write all of this?” The author who started writing songs, articles and poems since she was at school has distinguished herself for a very long time as a pioneer critic and writer of books for children and adolescents in the Arab World, when both criticism and writing for the youth and children were not given due attention in Arabic literature.

Before conducting the interview with Rose, I looked through *Al-Raida* magazine of which she was editor and consultant for nine years to seek information about her. All I could find, though, was a footnote to one of the articles she wrote when she was editor. I looked in other resources as well and was greatly astonished to find that only three interviews had been conducted with the writer throughout her lifetime. When I saw Rose and told her how surprised I was by this, she smiled and said that she had always hated publicity.

To use the same quotation from Plato that Rose used in one of her editorials for *Al-Raida*, “Love consists of two solitudes that meet, salute and encourage each other”, one could say that Rose is one of those few people who value solitude and independence. For Rose, “a ferociously independent woman” as the director of the French Protestant College described her, solitude is needed for building self independence; however, this never implies a rejection of socialization as many people “wrongfully assume”. She explains that in life everything is built on the unity of two contradictions: Solitude and sociability, rationality and emotion, freedom and restraint. “People are mistaken when they think I am asocial. I have mixed and interacted with people of various surroundings. I have travelled a lot and taught in several institutions ... I've been to Iraq, Palestine, Egypt, France, Russia, Spain and Czechoslovakia ... I taught in Iraq for three years and at the Protestante College in Beirut for 10 years ... I taught in Saidon for four years and in the Junior College for nine years ... As a teacher I got to know my students closely ... You've got to know and understand people in order to be able to write about them...”

Close friendships are against Rose's principles since they violate the essence of independence she has always sought. She quotes Gibran Khalil Gibran's words: “Stand together .. but leave spaces where the wind can play.” Rose's experiences with friends were not successful. Most of those whom she trusted disappointed her: “I had a teacher whom I viewed as a role model, but discovered later that she was vile. This experience along with others taught Rose that no matter how close someone is to you, you cannot rely on him or her: “The self is one's best friend.” Rose asserts.

For Rose, independence should be maintained even within a marital relationship. In an attempt to explain the factors that caused her to remain unmarried, Rose mentions first her involvement in learning and education and the diversity of her interests. Secondly, she says that when she was young, it was not normal for women to mingle with men. Thirdly, she lived in surroundings that were very much different from her own. Even though Rose comes from a Maronite background, she has spent most of her life in Protestant-Islamic surroundings (in Lebanon inter-religious marriages are not acceptable by most families.) The fourth reason Rose gives is her health. Rose's diverse interests exerted much pressure on her health: “After a period of hard work, I had to have a break for six months or a year, and this made me question my ability to cope with a career and marriage at the same time.”

Does love have a place in Rose's life? “To me love is universal. I do not have the tendency to attach myself to one person. I am totally against allowing myself to be too close to someone to the extent of finding it difficult to live away from him or her.” Rose criticizes people who allow themselves to be swept away by love. She recalls, “I knew a girl in Iraq who committed suicide after her beloved abandoned her... Many people are ready to commit suicide for 'love'.” Rose asserts that rationality should always take precedence over emotion.

Rose did not only seek social and psychological independence but also sought economic independence. “At an early stage, I became conscious of the importance of being economically independent.” At the age of seventeen, Rose was studying and teaching at the same time. When she entered the Junior College in Beirut, she paid her tuition fees with her own money, and she has also helped her parents financially.

For Rose, writing has always been an attempt to fulfil a psychological and social need. “Whenever I detect a bad social habit, I like to write about it.” Rose began to write when she was at school, and the Western schools where she studied played a major role in this respect. She recalls from her school experience that a French teacher once suggested that the students write essays on “the season they like”. As Rose chose

to write about Spring, she borrowed expressions from books. However, the teacher explained to her that she should write about her own feelings and personal experiences.² Obviously, the student took her teacher's advice seriously. This is clearly reflected in Rose's style of writing. Although she drew ideas from Western and old Arabic literature, she rejected any form of imitation, seeking to reflect her own feelings and experiences.

Rose's works include several series of critical books, stories, songs, plays, and social articles. "Behind every kind of writing, I had a different motive." Rose who had taught Arabic for a long time, learnt the importance of criticism at a very early stage: "How can you appreciate what you read if you cannot judge it?!" In 1952, Rose published her M.A. thesis entitled **Aesthetic Criticism in Arabic Literature**, considered by many critics a pioneer study in criticism, followed by a study of Gibran's works (1969), an Introduction to **Modern Literary Criticism** (1971), a Biography of May Ziadeh (1978) which is one of the few biographies on an Arab woman writer, a book on Arab women writers and poets (1985), and a book on contemporary feminist movement in the Arab World (1988). Rose, the critic, is described as analytical and objective: "Rose's depth is clearly reflected in her analytical criticism ... Textual reading cannot be isolated from historical reading and linguistic analysis is directly related to psychological analysis. Rose reads the text through her multifaceted vision and comprehensive education."³

The writing of stories, songs and plays was triggered by voluntary activities targeted at children and young people. Writing stories, in particular, was in demand and the publishers encouraged it. In 1948, Rose published a series of songs for children entitled **The Childrens' Songs**. This was only the beginning of a profusion of other books - more than 50 target at children and youth-which proved to be very successful because they filled a big gap. Rose likes to re-present old myths and popular proverbs in modern and realistic forms supplementing them with personal experiences. A well known critic in **Al-Hayāt** newspaper described Rose's children's literature as non-traditional: "She has given great attention to imagination, shying away from stereotypical examples and lessons that focus upon direct and passive methods of learning. Rose Ghurayyib's stories drive children to soar in an imaginative world without forgetting that they are living in reality ... Rose Ghurayyib has provided the Children of



"Dreams 2", 1991, charcoal and acrylic. Rima Mardam-Bey

Lebanon and the entire Arab world with a great library ..."⁴ Rose did not only write stories and songs for children, but also composed tunes for them.

In Rose's opinion, Arabic Literature has prospered over the years. She notes the important role emigrant progressive

writers such as Gibran Khalil Gibran have played in this respect. She points out, however, that few of these writers tried their hand on story writing. "Arabic literature, which is rich in poetry, is very poor in stories and plays, and the state of criticism is even worse." Unfortunately, in Lebanon as in all Arab countries, criticism is synonymous with praise." Rose hardly takes peoples' criticism of her books seriously. Her best critic is herself. This attitude: is merely an extension of Rose's general attitude: "I do not care about the attitude of society ... The person who allows him or herself to be influenced by society is inevitably a weak person ... I refuse to behave like 'a goat', acting out of blind jealousy and imitation."

A great part of Rose's literary contribution is related to women's issues. For thirteen years and without any expectation of reward, Rose contributed to the magazine of *Şawt al-Mar'ah*, **The Woman's Voice**, which was founded in Lebanon in 1945. She studied the existentialist theory of Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir and summarized De Beauvoir's, **The Second Sex**.

Rose states that her feminism goes back to the feminist movement that was very strong in the 1930s and was directly related to the presence of Western schools and missionaries. She also refers to her own personal experience pointing out, however, that her parents' attitude was positive and fair on the whole: "My parents encouraged me to pursue my education, and my mother who was very progressive insisted on sending me to a Protestant American boarding school despite the nuns' objection to the idea." This does not negate, however, that there were times when Rose was treated differently from her two brothers. She also recalls that in her days the school curriculum for girls was different from that of boys: "When I entered college, I wanted to major in biology, but I couldn't because my background in the sciences was weak." Rose clearly sensed social discrimination against women in the way her father, uncles and neighbors treated their wives. My uncle used to reprimand his wife because she did not contribute to the family income .. My father got extremely upset with my mother when her parents did not give her the sum of money they had promised her." Rose, who believes that women's oppression in the Arab world is multi-faceted, supports Arab feminists in all their demands; nevertheless, she has never encouraged sexual freedom because she thinks it has proved to be harmful to individuals and to society wherever it was practiced. She adds that the question of sexual freedom has not been fully discussed in books and magazines. (See an article that Rose wrote on this topic in her book *Aḍwā'a 'alā al-Ḥarakah al-Nisā'īyah al-Mu'āşirah*, p.400).

Rose's displacement from Damour in 1976 hindered her writing activities. In the year 1983, and after staying at the Lebanese American University (LAU) for seven years with the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), she moved to the only refuge left for her, a rest house close to a monastery which is isolated from intellectual and cultural activities. According to Rose, this affected her literary input:

"Since the year 1983, I have published only five books."

Finally, I asked Rose, "Do you consider yourself happy?" She shrugged and remained silent for a few moments before telling me: "My life has been a constant struggle. I have always thought that I must develop ... Everyday must bring me some new idea, a new discovery. When I fail I blame myself for the failure." Rose adds that happiness is an absolute value, and therefore it is hard to say that someone is happy: "I can say I am content or satisfied because I followed that path ... the path of development and growth. Life is a quest. One can never reach perfection ... Whenever I accomplish something, I always tell myself, "But it could have been better."

Notes:

1. *Al-Raida* issue #4, June 1978.
2. Campbell, Robert. *A'lum al-Adab al-'Arabī al-Mu'āşir*. Beirut: The German Institute for Oriental Studies, 1996.
3. *Al-Nahār* Newspaper, March 10, 1987.
4. *Al-Nahār* Newspaper, March 10, 1987.

IDENTIFICATION CARD

Birth: Damour, Lebanon, 1909.

Education: A graduate of the American Junior College, (now Lebanese American University), received her B.A., and M.A. in Arabic literature from the American University of Beirut.

Teaching Career: Taught at various institutions, including Sidon Girls' School; Mosul Secondary School, Iraq; the French Protestant College, Beirut; and Beirut University College (now Lebanese American University) where she taught Arabic for over 20 years.

Awards: The Medal of the Association of University Graduates in Lebanon, 1968, the Cedar Order, 1971, the Gold Medal of Education, 1980.

Membership: The League of Women's Rights, 1945-1947, the Association of University Graduates in Lebanon, 1965-1970, the Lebanese Children's Literature Committee.

