

FROM THE LEVANT TO THE THAMES AND THE WORLD BEYOND

ARTICLE

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I had never heard the term “the Levant” before I came to live in London in 1975. I had fled the war in Lebanon with my two children, my two-year-old son and my baby daughter.

A neighbour in the furnished flat opposite to ours asked me where I came from, and when I told her I was from Lebanon the English woman exclaimed: “How very interesting, all the way from the Levant to England.” When she saw my bewilderment she guessed that I did not understand what she meant by the term “the Levant”. I still remember how, excusing herself, she entered her flat and emerged holding a dictionary. She flipped its pages and read to me that the meaning of “the Levant” was: where the sun rises in the east and where the land rises out of the sea. I gasped before I let her continue. “Oh, I understand. You meant the large area near the East Mediterranean region (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Greece, Anatolia and Egypt).

I have always seen my life as a carriage journey, taking me along different kinds of roads – smooth, rough and slippery. It took me from Beirut to Cairo, the Arabian Gulf and London. It enabled me to interweave first-hand experiences with a comparative and multicultural outlook. The very first journey was to my childhood: “I remember my thoughts would be miles away from the people and things around me, something that filled me with warmth, patience, peace of mind and even a little happiness. I'd converse with an illusion, which really meant writing.”

When I first sat down to write I was surprised by how much it took out of me. Yet thinking about writing was pleasant and gave me a sense of reassurance. It drove away the bitter cold that nestled in the wings of the house and the heavy wet heat that bespoke cockroaches, big and small, and bedbugs concealed in bedclothes. It was like the water I would see pouring from the spout of a jug into my mouth. Everything around me captivated me and stirred feelings in me; from the various types of shoe polish my father would line up around him to the tin of Turkish Delight being opened with a puff of the fine sugar particles flying like a magic cloud, from the engravings on wooden furniture to the designs on the tiles which looked to me like faces... to the white mothballs that would crumble in the summer heat and spread like salt crystals over the Persian rugs...

Back then books for me meant the dark black letters on the yellowing pages of the only book in the house. Which was the holy Koran lying serene in drawers. They evoked humility and tears and reminded me that my father, who used to pull his leather trouser belt taut and threaten to beat me, was a trembling dove before that book and its black letters.

The other books found their way to me, like school books, one of which used to send shudders through me when the pictures printed in it in black and white seemed to me to imply something terrible, possibly a crime. Hence, the girl holding a watering can and watering the flowers was standing in the middle of a forest where branches nearly strangled her as if a sorceress had summoned her in the night, as opposed to the caption next to the picture, which read "Huda went out into the garden one morning..." Other books, other sentences, contained stories, marvels, curiosities, descriptions and phrases that my mind could not just fold away or bury under other sentences. They would reverberate in my head as they were written down or I would read them.

My favourite books were children's adventure books such as *Kalila wa Dimna*, an 8th century Persian folk tale recounted by two jackals named Kalila and Dimna.

This was the first book translated into Arabic from Persian and it contains all the basic principles of life in the form of lessons to be learned, all presented through the voices of animals.

I became obsessed with reading books, less interested in school and homework. Arabic writing classes were the only lessons to make me feel alive. I would wake up for, and welcome, my daydreams. I even started writing. I found myself defaming my step-mother, describing her as a scorpion with a deadly sting and a crab that ate its offspring in one gulp!

Then, one evening, at the age of fourteen, I found myself sitting apart from everyone else and writing. My father had allowed me and my elder sister to spend a whole week with our mother, who was spending the summer in the mountains with her new family. There I felt an urge to put down on paper a particular voice. I was in a steam-filled bathroom when I saw the branches of a tree almost touching the round, high window. I heard my mother's beautiful, tender voice singing. I wanted to register the unusual feeling of beauty and warmth that overcame me.

I was sixteen years old when I wrote a short essay for the student's page in the *Al Nahar* newspaper. I described how my brother followed me and when he saw me sitting with a friend in a coffee shop he took me by the hand and pulled me home.

I was imitating the writer Layla Baalbaki, who was famous for spending hours in out-door cafes in Beirut, and whom I wanted to be like even before I had read her famous book *I Live*. My article caused a stir in our neighbourhood. My brother was delighted and congratulated me, overlooking the fact he was the target of my criticism.

When I finally read *I Live* I understood why the book had shaken me to the core.

Lena, the narrator, exposes the corruption and hypocrisy that arise in a society that is both matriarchal and patriarchal, unequal and moralistic. She feels that individuals have to fight against a range of influences that seek to entrap them.

Baalbaki's style broke new ground and began a literary revolution in language, with short sentences flying like sparks in every direction, unusual imagery and large doses of anger.

At 18 years of age I managed to secure six interviews by playing tricks on the politicians, sold them to newspapers and hopped on a plane to Egypt in order to continue my studies.

Feeling totally independent. I plunged into the mystery of the new place, people, new books because of the new smells, new river, and new relationships.

I started writing my first novel, *Suicide of a Dead Man*, which I based on the pain of menstruation. However, I realised that the critics would slaughter me, especially two women reviewers who were extremely prejudiced against women's writing; they condemned any work that didn't fit into certain categories, such as those of politics, or "social issues", and considered all women writers to be frustrated females who wrote to express their lack of fulfilment through love and marriage. They were convinced that as soon as a female writer found these two, she would put her pen aside.

As a result of these prejudices, I found myself changing menstruation pain into a muscular pain, and the female "I" of the first person narrator into an aged man who falls in love with a sixteen-year-old girl. This girl makes him feel impotent instead of bringing him happiness. His impotence is a result of his strong beliefs that a man has to control women in every situation.

People thought that I was courageous to write such a bold novel. As far as I can see, I came to writing relatively free of taboos, inhibitions, intellectual and political fixations. How did this happen? As soon as I was 14 years old, I no longer had the same restrictions as most of my friends. I found that I wasn't subjugated to patriarchal power but all alone with my imagination and intuition, especially that my father was not leaving his praying mat after my mother left home to marry her lover.

In spite of a so-called religious upbringing, our house was open to all contradictions. Prayers and emptiness at night when my father was home, while in the daytime, laughter, gossip, quarrels, and the subject of sex on the lips of all women from my grandmother, to relatives, to our neighbours.

Besides the lack of family structure, which helped me recreate myself, Beirut also stood by me and helped me. Beirut was the oasis of freedom in the heart of the darkness of other Arab cities. Beirut was like me – without structure and restrictions, with arms open to all cultures, tolerating all political, religious views, and social standards.

After my book was published and I became a journalist and a bride, I felt I was in a state of total clarity for the first time in my life.

This clarity rocked me like a child and took me back to my first senses. I started shedding layers leaf by leaf, like an artichoke, and met my buried self. It is a marvel how much of life is stored in the memory, and it was as if my soul, rather than my five senses, was engrossed totally in hearing myself again at such close quarters. This led me to write my second novel, *The Praying Mantis*.

However, I did not experience this self-doubt when I was writing it. I was no longer aware of the critics. Out of the corner of my eye, I could only see the sympathetic characters weaving the narrative. My main character, Sara, was critical of religion, which she blamed for snatching her father's attention away from life. She tried to free herself from its influence and grip.

Mentioning and talking about religion in this novel was expressing a woman's struggle to break out of all forms of social confinement, because I believe very strongly that religion in some of the Arab countries, especially Lebanon, had become a culture in its own right. Religion influenced our way of life and made us become the people we are whether or not we are believers. Both Islam and Christianity can often be patriarchal in practice and shape the family and the behaviour of members. Feeling totally paralysed in London, where I fled to because of the civil war, I decided that only writing would keep me sane and balanced. I wanted to understand what was going on over there in Lebanon.

Dare I thank the Lebanese Civil War for awakening in us our dormant truth? Like an X-ray analysing our buried human relationships in the darkest corners of our homes and souls.

Dare I thank the Lebanese Civil War for forcing us to make a stand: either to become universal and worldly, or to stay hanging to our rigid traditions and sectarian differences, which were themselves the seeds of war.

Dare I thank my cowardice and passion for life, which made me flee Beirut, leaving my loyalty to my country behind and not getting entangled in the war in any way. Nevertheless, I found myself involved in the war and in another war when writing *The Story of Zahra*. I began the novel by taking the war not simply as a dramatic, fictional setting but a matter of fact, a state of mind that could be accepted or rejected but never questioned.

My main character, Zahra, faces two wars, the civil war in the actual world around her, and the private war against the rule of the archaic. She opened a window into the life of an Arab family that was far removed from that of the idealised portrait – the mother has a lover, the father beats his wife and daughter, the uncle is attracted to his niece, Zahra, who got married in Africa, left her husband and returned back to Lebanon.

After living in a man's peace, which threatens and frightens her with its male savageness, Zahra enters the man's war of fighting and using weapons against each other and where they speak a common language, albeit one isolated from women.

Zahra lives in the midst of the war. She is sheltered behind her silence, or her screams, or wild laughter. She sees what is happening in the streets – murder, theft, sniping, people constantly being expelled from one area of the city to another. She visits the sniper, Sami, who lives near her aunt's flat. He sleeps with her a few times. She becomes pregnant, then he kills her.

Was Zahra really insane when she found in war the only way to diminish her own, personal problems? The war put a smile on Zahra's face, it allowed her to fall in love, to be fulfilled as a

human being by being involved with someone who resembled her life, despite his being a sniper, a killer.

My husband's work took me from London to Saudi Arabia. When the stewardess announced that no more alcohol would be served in the few hours before we landed at the airport in the desert. When the hot air hit me in the face as I went down the steps and I saw men in long white robes trying to ignore the presence of women in a way that made me feel uneasy.

When there was no sign of women except the ones in black abayas – moving, hurrying around, disappearing. I found myself among women like myself, from other Arab countries or foreigners, being driven around in cars, not venturing to walk alone in the streets. A collection of short stories, *The Desert Rose*, grew in no time, and the seeds of a new novel, *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, were planted. They were growing by the second, and finally I understood the contradictions of the place in which I was living.

They became the real heroine of the novel. Men controlled the women though they lacked curiosity about them. Sexually, emotionally and mentally, the men appeared to hold the power. A trivial decision such as whether to open a window required their approval. Sex was another area of contradiction. Men denied it, or pretended to deny it, but their obsession with it was glaringly obvious.

Sex was the great taboo and yet it floated in the air everywhere. It could be triggered even by the sight of a box of sanitary towels on supermarket shelves.

I was torn between rejecting the restrictions and welcoming them as a source of alienation. I saw myself living in two worlds, each feeding off the other. The more frustrated I was in the everyday world, the more inspired I became as I was writing *Women of Sand and Myrrh*.

I was encouraged by a false long-ceasefire and a false hope that the war was over. We left Saudi Arabia to go back and live in Lebanon, but a few months later we had to flee to London, which eventually became our second home.

The late Edward Said once wrote about how to write literature, how to preserve its frugalities and also its tough-minded individuality in the inhumanity of war in a way that the international media, academics, ideologies or whatever can never understand what was going on, or how to deal with it. I don't mean here the description of battles but the stress on the human and its fragile psyche while facing a life threatening situation and thus coping with the question of death!

After writing *The Story of Zahra* I was determined not to write again about war in my fiction. I didn't want to be frozen in time and obsessed with the tempo of war again, while present-day life and other worlds were waiting to be explored. What made me change my mind was the fact that Lebanon had become a demon's playground; a bleak, black name for lips to utter.

On each subsequent trip that I took to Lebanon I discovered that Beirut was no longer the Beirut I knew, or the Beirut I dreamed of. When all that one remembers about one's city no

longer exists, the memories are both hurtful and precious – they could dissolve at any time. I cherished them, and tried to hold on to them as best I can.

I thought by recalling the past, before the war, in its fullness and richness, it could help the people in facing the present and its madness and endow them with humanity and endless capacity to celebrate life and engender joy despite the ravages of war.

Apart from showing multi-sectarian Lebanese society caught between the west and the Arab world I questioned the old feudal landlord system, which was dissolving as the armed hands, the foreign intruders and soldiers, the drug cultivators and pushers invade and put an end to the old pastoral life.

Beirut played a big role in shaping our personalities, whether culturally, emotionally, artistically or politically. Beirut was a way of life for the Lebanese and for all Arabs with a free soul. It was either the meeting point of Eastern and Western culture or the conflict between them. It was the carrier of History, not just of Lebanon, but of the Arab world. By demolishing the heart of Beirut, we transferred the Arab dreams into nightmares. Moreover, is exile the answer? Is it defensible? Or is it obligatory to remain in Beirut?

When I moved back to London in 1982, I very quickly took to the rhythms of English life. But my imagination refused to join me, stubbornly remaining in the Arab world. At the time, every day I sat down to write I wondered to myself: how could I, as a novelist, survive without being inspired by my life, by the place I am living in, by London. I started to take trips to various Arab cities and towns whether in the Middle East, The Arabian Gulf or North Africa – It was as if to reunite me with the other half of myself which had been left behind. Those long and short trips emerged in my collection of short stories I *Sweep the Sun off Rooftops*.

But the question arises: can I continue to find inspiration in the years that framed my own experience of growing up in the Arab world. Can I still rely on those provisions, that well of deep water reserved within me, and what about that Arabic smell? Is it going to stay in my nostrils? Can a seed of literature grow from a plant that's uprooted and re-planted in another soil? I wonder whether, if I still delve into the same larder, the provisions are still fresh, or whether they've gone stale as a result of the lapse of time, and the heat.

By pure coincidence my writing began to focus on London when I was asked to write a short story on Englishness from an outsider's perspective, followed by a commission to write two plays, *Dark Afternoon Tea and Paper Husband*, which were inspired by Arabs in London. After writing the short story and the two plays, I felt that the Atlantic wind had blown away all the clouds and shown me clearly that I actually live in London, in the West, and that it has an influence on me. In my fiction, places become characters, and now my new character is England, in particular London.

I was an Arab living in London and that I had volumes to say about subcultures and living in two worlds at the same time.

Questions of exile and of the relationship between the East and the West surround me all the time, everywhere, even when I'm crossing the street. I cross the street as a foreigner, and as an Arab, and as an English person as well.

When I decided to write a novel about Arab immigrants in London, I was one of them. I saw us all suspended between a past, epitomised by a homeland that was lost forever, and a present that seemed like an illusion in which we tried to assimilate ourselves. Writing about this diaspora was like shifting between farce and heart-rending sadness.

The flood of Arab immigrants into London continues, for economic and political reasons. They come to save their skins or have a better life. Arab visitors also head to London for medical treatment, education or summer vacations. I learned a lot about them by direct contact, whether in Earl's court or Edgware Road and Mayfair and discovered that in their newly-adopted country these immigrants had recreated a version of the country they had behind. I called this novel *Only in London*. I know how it is to live between two cultures, East and West, and between two languages, Arabic and English. These differences are still a constant source of fascination for me, holding me in suspense in anticipation of the unknown.

I remember when I read Stefan Zweig's novel *Beware of Pity* in Arabic translation. I thought the protagonist was a cat and I was surprised to read that cat opened the fridge and took out a bottle of water. That was until our neighbour Ali, who lent me the book, told me that the translator should have translated the man's German title, *herr*, as mister, instead of translating it as *hirr*, a cat.

But when I moved to London to live between two languages, I rediscovered the magic of Arabic, though I did see the odd grey hair appear on the head of my translator as she wrestled with sentences such as

«قلبي صار يضرب كأنه لابس قبقاب»

(My heart started to throb, as if it is wearing clogs), or

«منشان رجلين الله حللي عني»

(Oh, for the sake of God's two legs, leave me alone).

I love the emotional charge of Arabic. It's so dramatic and theatrical – both in its written and spoken form. Listen to these two lines from the pre-Islamic poet Imru'l Qays:

مكر مفر مقبل مدبر معا ، كجلمود صخر

حطه السيل من عل

Wheeling, retreating, chasing, withdrawing

Like a rock boulder that the torrent hurls from on high

The two lines produce precisely the sound of a galloping horse: tac, tac, tac, tac. Arabic, with its rhythm and music, cannot but affect the listener, whether it is delicate or rough, loud or soft, ugly

or beautiful. Living between English and Arabic, and reading the literatures of two languages, is bound to have influenced me. It has added to and expanded my horizons.

Sometimes I hear people asking me why I don't try writing in English, and I reply: "Because I dream in Arabic." Because the Arabic language is like one of my arms and I cannot live without it.

When I hear or read that I'm a British citizen of Lebanese origin, or that I'm a Lebanese living in England, I wonder where I really live. But the truth is that I live wherever my pen and paper are. I don't see living abroad as living in exile because I'm not exiled from my language. I feel I'm interested in what's around me, whether I'm in England or anywhere else. I believe there is no one truth, but every place has its own truth.

Many writers have spoken about this feeling before me, but I will add that in the past it was an ordeal for writers to move away from places where what they said provoked either debate or instant approval.

Time and time again I ask myself what is the role of the novelist?

Are we really saying anything new? Are there subjects yet to be revealed, still hidden from mankind?

On one level the subjects seem finite, conflicts, oppression, tragedies, joy, jealousy, all are visible to us, we all experience them, see them, hear about them and read about them, so what is new? Why, for example, do we comment on this novel or that?

It is the artistry of the writer and his or her ability to tell the story in a unique and magical way that makes us feel we have never read anything quite like it before. I think this is particularly true of the writer Mohamad al-Bisati's novel *Ferdous*, which is a perfect example of beauty of prose and economy of expression, combining a harmonious tempo of writing, which go hand in hand to give us a compelling portrait of a woman called Ferdous. Although the subject is as old as mankind, the way in which the author handles it makes it unique.

I will not go into details about this novel, which portrays the life of Ferdous, a village woman in a totally convincing and enchanting way. I would just like to read to you from the opening chapter, and urge you, if you have not already done so, to read it for yourselves.

"When Ferdous told her husband that his son from another wife tried to sleep with her, her husband exhaled smoke through his nostrils, laughed and said 'Oh, the boy has reached puberty' and he shook his head in amusement and laughed once again. It troubled her to see him shaking his head and laughing in this manner. She looked at him through the corner of her eye, tucked her outstretched legs under her skirt; he was sitting in the mastaba near her house while she sat on a pile of hay preparing the coals for his shish and tea. She wondered what was going on in his mind, maybe he thought she was up to mischief with his other wife and children. She said, 'maybe you ought to have a word with him yourself'. He exhaled profusely saying: 'Oh the boy has really matured; did you see his moustache?'"

Since I was always asked about the role and contribution of women fiction writers to gender issues, I find that female writers do not just use female protagonists, but are competent authors of all genres of literature. They illuminate all aspects of life and society, be it modern, semi-modern, or in the heart of desert towns and cities, in open societies, closed or oppressed ones. They deal with love, sex, polygamy, death, marriage, lesbianism, homosexuality, they criticise and point at the contradictions of the national resistance movements led by men who at home continue to oppress women. They focus on wars, the crises in the Middle East; they examine history and what we have learned from it. Salwa Bakr, the Egyptian novelist and short story writer is a perfect example of this and is known for her tragic-comedy and wicked humour. She once said that "literature, even more than in the West, is the preserve of men, it is up to women today to redress the balance." She added that "women's writing plays a positive role in freeing women and also men." Many other Arab women writers follow in her tradition, they are numerous and talented and they spread from Morocco to the Arabian Gulf and many more exciting new voices from Saudi Arabia.

Let's take a brief look at some other women writers, such as Mary Shelley, whose protagonist was Frankenstein, or Carson McCullers, with no character of particular gender. Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and the prolific *Edith Wharton*, whose infamous male character Ethan Frome remains one of her most well-loved stories. Think of Ayn Rand in *The Fountainhead*, whose protagonists one can argue were not so much human as architecture, philosophy and individualism. These were probably chosen in contrast to the chaos of the new Soviet regime in Russia from which she had recently escaped. George Eliot's *Silas Marner* was, as she said "a story of old-fashioned village life, which has unfolded itself from the merest millet-seed of thought." It is also a very modern novel in that it described the life of a man raising a child on his own – a Victorian single-parent!

Finally, isn't the writer alone the final arbiter of what he or she writes?

Alone with their subject, beliefs, interpretation, unaware of their potential readership and what is expected of them. Isn't the role of the writer to narrate life beneath the skin and isn't the first condition of writing to be true to oneself?

The only gender in writing is the way in which we express our thoughts, and the context in which we structure our stories.

Finally again, isn't writing the 6th or 7th sense, dormant in the pulse of our heartbeat; isn't writing necessary in order to breath, nourishment and Prozac combined? It is also the dignity inherent in revealing aspects of life we have chosen to portray.

A writer's ears are always eavesdropping on society without being its judge. Margaret Atwood observed that "the only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not by any other person, and not even by yourself at some later day. Otherwise you begin excusing yourself. You must see the writing emerging like a long scroll of ink from the index finger of your right hand: you must see the left hand erasing it. Impossible of course."

And Lebanese writer Huda Barakat, who said: "I cannot see the world except with both men and woman living out their complex and complicated relationships. Maybe writing enables me to allow them both to exist hand in hand together."

Around the year 2000 I was working on the first chapter of a new novel set in London again, when my mother pleaded with me on one of my yearly trips to Lebanon to go back with her to her beginnings and tell her life story. I knew that she wanted me to forgive her because she had left home when I was nearly six years old. I did not want to visit the past; besides I had never accused her of anything. I did miss her when she left home but I convinced myself that places snatched people, and that my stepfather's home had kidnapped her.

When I tried to explain to her time and time again that I was very over-worked and busy, she told me: "It hurts when a piece of wood and a piece of lead both had defeated her."

When I asked her what she meant, she said: "Isn't a pencil made of wood and lead? I was never so desperate to read and write as I am now if for no other reason but to write my life story."

I found myself telling her "Let's begin". Yes, I was ready to pick up a pen. For the first time I was ready to hold up our past against the light.

My mother was ecstatic that at long last she could tell her story, which was eventually published under the title *The Locust and The Bird*.


I thought that I would go back immediately to the novel I had left but I was asked by the British theatre director, Tim Supple, to collaborate with him and re-tell stories from *One Thousand and One Nights*.

I was thrilled to be taken by the hand to my heritage, which I had left behind. After retelling 19 stories for the theatre, which were published in a book *One Thousand And One Nights*, I found myself thanking the legendary Shahrazad for encouraging all of us Arab writers, of both sexes, to use language as we wanted, to explore the sexual, social and political connotations of the story, and to have no hesitation in mixing rulers together with degenerate masochists, and to show women arguing against the clergy and men of religion. It seems that I went on and asked Shahrazad:

I have a question, hundreds of questions, thousands, and yet they are all the same question. Lady Shahrazad, Queen of Wisdom, could you explain to us why, in your day, when the sword was threatening to take your life and that of many others you dared to talk about injustice, corruption and the subject of sex, all of which were facts of life, with great frankness and inventiveness, combining both the real and the imaginary. Linking it with love, with lust, with religious morality, with the deeds of the wicked and the good, always present in the tragic and the happy moments of life; it is in every situation, in every human and animal life.

And to my surprise she replied:

The Tyrannical King turned into a humanist and the best of all men because of love and storytelling.



He had not known how to love; he had been shielded from reality in an ivory tower. His world was limited.

I still remember how I took him by the hand through my tales and drew him into the hands of logic, truth, knowledge and wisdom. I took him back to the day he was first born, when he had nothing but innocence and generosity.

And when the King realised that women were not only there for bed and mischief he started to see them as real, as equal souls, alive, not only flesh and blood, but with thoughts and emotions too.

Writers who are my kin, and yours, use their heartbeats to put pen to paper... I tell you, the pages they write are richer than any civilisation. On them they can start again, build a new place, start a new era, a new country, one that is civilised, peaceful and democratic. The art of writing stories, my friend, is a gift of life to humankind.