

# ALJADID

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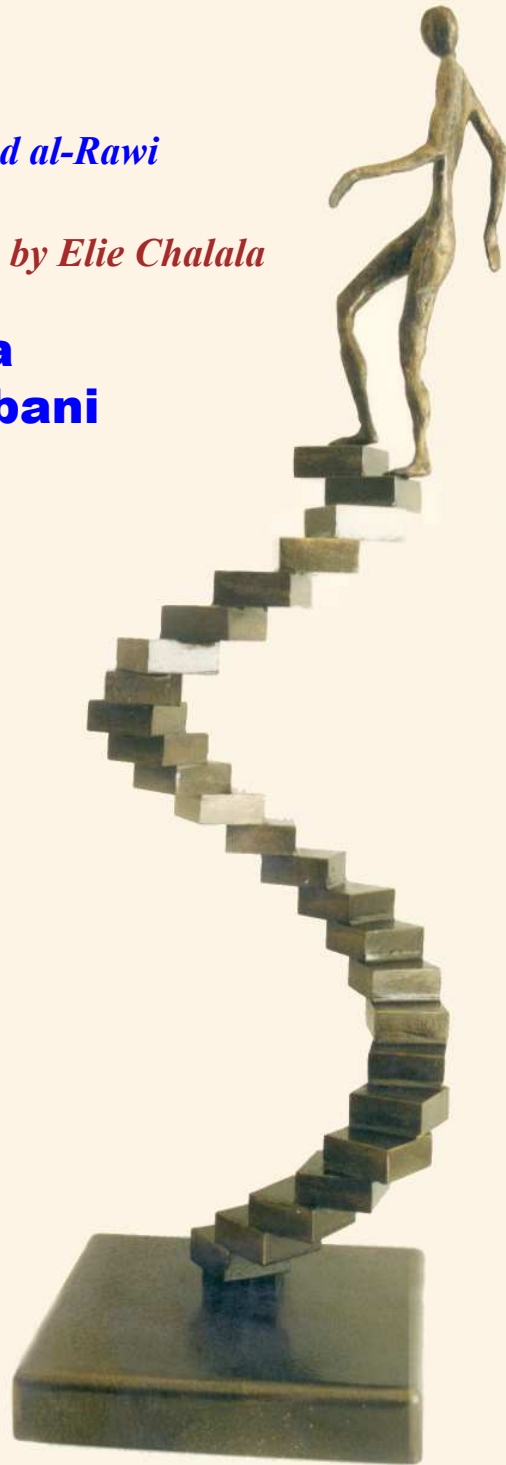
## IN MEMORIAM

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## Failed Ideology Stands in as Alibi

BY ELIE CHALALA

*If you want to light a cigarette and can't find a match, burn down the whole nation.*  
– Deltely Mehlis

Deltely Mehlis is the former head of the UN International Independent Investigation Commission that was established to investigate the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri; the above quote comes from a theater script that was later adapted – or rather maliciously modified for political purposes – into a stage comedy with an alleged collaboration between Syrian poet and playwright Mohammed al-Maghout and a fellow Syrian author Mahmoud Abd al-Karim. In fact, al-Maghout wrote the original script well before Hariri's assassination, which means that this provocative quote and other lines that refer to Lebanon were added perhaps by the “co-author” of the newly revived script. For this reason, those who are familiar with al-Maghout's intellectual works balk at the use of his name, especially when the original script had nothing to do with Lebanon or Hariri.

While the quote is from the comedy “*Qiyam, Jlous, Skout*” (Stand Up, Sit Down, Shut Up), the metaphor of burning down an entire nation if you can't find a match to light your cigarette has been widely used by those sympathetic to the Syrian cause, including politicians and the media, to attack the Mehlis Report, which accuses Syria of being involved in the assassination of Hariri.

The statement is not merely a line of comic dialogue, but rather a widely

accepted and employed metaphor used as an argument against the Lebanese and world communities, which insist on finding the killers of Hariri – and perhaps those of journalist Samir Kassir, political activist George Hawi, and parliamentarian

providing a cover-up for murder, deception, and distortion of the truth, just as it has in the past, in Syria and elsewhere in the Arab world. This ideology is being used yet again to justify assassinations in the name of the



The late Gibran Tuweini carries the coffin of Samir Kassir, a former columnist for An Nahar newspaper who was assassinated a few months before Tuweini himself, An Nahar's publisher, was assassinated.

and publisher of An Nahar newspaper, Gebran Tuweini, as well. I find myself more interested in the popularization of this reasoning than in the sick humor that marks the comedy.

What immediately comes to my mind is ideology, the chauvinistic nationalism that demotes the individual and subjugates him to the nation and the state. This ideology is making a comeback, despite its failure in many Middle East and Arab countries and despite major changes on the world stage that stress the importance of individual freedom in the face of state repression.

This ideology is back to perform a cruel and inhumane function; it is

national struggle against imperialism and Zionism.

What can explain the comeback of such an ideology even after its failure to inspire and guide social and political development in Syria and elsewhere? One explanation is the political predicament of the Baathist regime in the face of international pressure and the lack of viable political alternatives to deal with its situation.

Syrian officials and Lebanese apologists have resorted to ideology as a weapon to ward off international pressure on Syria for its alleged involvement in

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# TV Documentary Series on Nezar Kabbani Presents Poet's Life as Sanitized, Commercial Spectacle

BY MOHAMMAD ALI ATASSI

A few months ago, a private Syrian television company began shooting a 30-segment television series about the life of the great poet Nezar Kabbani. The television company plans to air the program during the month of Ramadan. The series has been creating much tension between the production company, Sharikat al-shark Lil Intage Alfani, and the heirs of the poet, who refuse to relinquish Kabbani's copyright to the production company. The family has turned to the courts to stop the filming, but it continues, nonetheless, in more than one country in the Arab world and abroad.

The family protests both because they weren't consulted, meaning their rights as inheritors were not respected, and because the writer of the series, Yola Bahnisi, and the screenwriter, Kamar al-Zaman Aloush, are inexperienced and lack true knowledge of Kabbani's life and poetry, according to the family. In addition, the actors who portray Kabbani at different stages of his life know very little about the poet. They have neither researched his writings nor attempted to learn his personality. Some of them cannot even speak in the Damascene accent, the poet's native accent.

The production company claims that the essence of the problem between the two parties is purely financial; the children of the late poet rejected the company's offer and demanded an outrageous amount instead. The family has vehemently denied such claims.

Despite the fame, devotion, and popularity he received during his life and since his death, Nezar Kabbani has remained a controversial poet. The idea of airing a television series about his life during Ramadan, regardless of the family's position, raises questions and doubts as to whether the series will be able to convey Kabbani's rebellious nature and his challenge of social and political beliefs, both of which are themes in his poems. Also, it is unclear whether the series will be able to narrate Kabbani's story in a way that highlights the significant aspects, including Kabbani's special relationship with his mother's city, Damascus, and the legendary and heroic funeral with which he was honored, without falling prey to vulgar television culture and the widespread consumerist forms that exist in today's dominant Syrian television drama.

Though it is premature to pass judgment because the series has not yet aired, we can predict that there will be a discrepancy between the televised persona of Nezar Kabbani and the actual person – that this televised version will be as distorted as is Syrian television's dramas on the Damascene life and the Syrian home. At a time when real life in Damascus is being destroyed – a destruction reaching even to what little remains of the home

– Syrian television is attempting to recreate the home and life itself through television series, which are, at best, folkloric: full of superficiality and spectacles.

## False Divinities

In April 1999, on the first anniversary of the death of the poet, a book project appeared titled "*Kitab fi Jarida*" – "A Book in a Newspaper." This book was a series of selections from Kabbani's poems collected by his daughter, Hadba, in coordination with the general supervisor of the project, poet Shawqi Abd al-Amir. "A Book in a Newspaper" was a monthly supplement. It appeared in most Arab countries, distributed by local Arabic newspapers under the sponsorship of UNESCO.

Notably absent from the project were some of Kabbani's most celebrated poems. These "missing" poems had become distinguished features of his career. They had imprinted their courage on and awakened the memories of several generations of Arabs, so their omission created much debate during the supplement's publication. Some of the notably absent poems include "*Nahdaki*" (Your Breasts), "*Khubz Hashish Kamar*" (Bread, Hashish and Moon), "*Hubla*" (Pregnant), "*Al-Qasida al-Sharira*" (The Devilish Poem), "*Balqis*" (the name of his wife), and "*Al-Sira al-Zatiyya Li Sayyaf Arabi*" (The Autobiography of an Arab Executioner).

The UNESCO project, because it was dealing with several Arab censoring authorities and was publishing for a broad audience, had pressured some of those in charge of "A Book" to exclude Kabbani's most important poems merely because the poems might still offend the political, religious, and sexual modesty of certain conservative Arab groups. If this was the case with the UNESCO project, one can only imagine the "necessary" omissions if Kabbani's life is made into a television series. The production companies not only want to tell Kabbani's story to millions of viewers during Ramadan, but also are determined to make a profit. Therefore, they must tread carefully to avoid having the series banned by Arab satellite stations, which are funded by Gulf money. The director of the series, Basil al-Hatib, made this statement: "We intend to make the series available to a large segment of viewers without causing any embarrassment or offense, but we do so on the condition that we do not have to leave out Kabbani's courage, which will be illustrated in the series."

Of course, because of the schizophrenia of dominant Arab television culture, it's possible for millions of viewers to see Haifa Wehbe's breast, Maria's legs, and Rubi's backside, and to hear Nancy groan, but it's impossible to find poems like

Kabbani's ("Oh Samra, pour your brown breasts in the world of my mouth...") on the small screen, as they would constitute a violation of morals and the laws of language and written culture, which were mummified years ago as though they were sacred and divine.

### The Damascene Identity

Nezar Kabbani is a distinguished poet, and one sees in both his poetry and personality multiple influences and sources of inspiration. His poetry is often associated, in Arab contemporary culture, with women and love, yet he is also known for angry political poems, which were written in the wake of the 1967 defeat. There is yet another side to Kabbani: the permanent Syrian presence. As a Damascene poet, Kabbani was influenced by the many faces of Damascus – as an identity, as a set of conservative norms, as a different lifestyle that continually seeks liberation – and this city had a particular, important place in his life and a great influence on his poetry. It might prove to be impossible, without challenging much of the social and political prohibitions dominant in Syria today, to use television to confront the relationships that connected the poet to Damascus.

Nezar Kabbani lived most of his life away from Syria, and he rarely returned. Nonetheless, this city that affected his childhood and youth remained a part of him, influencing his poems until the last days of his life. During his career, Kabbani never passed up an opportunity to talk about his personal Damascene identity and to relate to it through his poetry. He was always careful to differentiate between the accepted beliefs of the Damascene people, and his experience from the point of view of a troubled individual.

The city of Damascus is present in the poems and prose of Kabbani, not merely through the elements of the Damascene home, domes and minarets, bazaars, food, sand, plants, and spoken accents, but also through the rebelliousness that this conservative city aroused in Kabbani. This rebelliousness is noticeable as early as the publication of "*Kalat Li Asamra*" ("The Brunette Said to Me"), which the young poet published with his own money in 1944, earning Damascus' wrath for quite some time. Kabbani wrote his book "*Kisati ma al-Shair*" ("My Story With Poetry") about this experience. "When 'The Brunette Said to Me' was published in 1944, it caused deep pain in the city, which refused to recognize its own body or dreams. The poem was a thorn in the side of the city that had been drugged, lying unconscious for the past 500 years, eating in its sleep, loving in its sleep, and having sex in its sleep."

The poem "*Khubz Hashish Kamar*," which the poet published

in 1954 in *Al Adab*, a Beirut-based magazine, also caused a tempest in Damascus, reaching all the way to the Syrian parliament. It may even have cost him his job in the diplomatic corps. He writes in the same book: "Damascus also hit me with stones, tomatoes, and rotten eggs when I published my poem '*Khubz Hashish Kamar*.' The turbans who called for hanging Abi Khalil al-Kabbani demanded my hanging as well. And the beards who are stuffed with the dust of history had demanded his head as well as mine."

But Damascus remained addicted to the poems of Kabbani, at times, secretly, at other times, publicly. The poem "Balqis," which Kabbani wrote in protest of his wife's death in an explosion in the Iraqi Embassy in Beirut, circulated within Damascus as the most beautiful secret pamphlet written by the poet. Kabbani insisted on reading "The Autobiography of an Arab Executioner" during his last evening of poetry presented in Damascus in 1988. The people of Damascus celebrated this poem as they had never celebrated a written text before; the whole audience exploded in a mixture of warm applause and anger, and this response prompted those in power to cut the poet's visit short.

According to Kabbani, something in the Damascene identity tends toward rebellion, violating prohibitions, and challenging or ignoring the role of the state and the community. This theory is clearly demonstrated at an important and well-known moment in the history of the city: his funeral, which took place in Damascus on May 4, 1998. The funeral became a Damascene wedding and protest at the same time, and it is unimaginable how a

television series could reproduce this event.

Nezar Kabbani died in London on April 30, 1998 and his body, accompanied by his small family, reached Damascus the evening of May 3. The official preparations for his funeral began, and it was agreed that prayers would be held in a mosque located in the suburb of Abou Rumaneh. Then, Kabbani's body would be transported by car, passing through the street that carried the great poet's name, to the cemetery Bab al-Saghir, past the walls of the old city.

The youthful crowds, which in the beginning totaled less than a thousand, succeeded in taking the body from its official entourage of cars. They carried him in a spontaneous demonstration from the street of Abu al-Rumana to Jisr Al Rais, all the way to the Syrian University. There, thousands more university students merged with them in the streets from Al Nasr all the way to Bawabat Salahia, where even more residents of the old city took up the call. The mass crowd and the dominance of the youth awakened the feeling of resistance, as they showered the coffin with rice and jasmine. The crowds, in turn, began to shout, among other phrases, "Throw off the



Nezar Kabbani by Zareh for Al Jadid

flowers of the officials and shower Nezar with jasmine.” Nezar was wrapped with the flowers. The ever-swelling crowds began to sing “Decorate Al Marja” and “Al Marja belongs to us,” in reference to Al Marja Square (Martyrs’ Square), which lies at the heart of Damascus and is one of the city’s most important symbols.

The owner of the television production company claims to have the ability and the right to “Take the hand of the poet and make him rise up from the grave and bring him back to life.” But with Kabbani’s funeral, the youth of Damascus have already immortalized the poet and paid farewell to him as a beloved hero. **AJ**

*Translated from the Arabic by Elie Chalala*

*The article appeared in Mulhaq An Nahar. Translation and publication is by permission from the author*

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## Ideology as Alibi

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the Hariri assassination; this speaks of desperate measures in desperate times. Syria is doing whatever is needed to ensure the survival of the regime. Unlike the former Iraqi regime, which abandoned secular nationalism and Baathism in 1990 after the first Gulf war and embraced an Islamic ideology, Syrian leaders cannot embrace an Islamic ideology because the Baathist leadership has been warring with Sunni opposition for more than three decades.

Reform and openness, which are demanded by some of the Syrian opposition, could be an alternative to adopting this intolerant ideology, but these steps would strike at the heart of Assad rule, which remains a closed authoritarian regime that resists any attempt at political liberalization. Thus, with Islamism and political liberalization out of the picture, chauvinistic nationalism becomes the only alternative. Syrian officials hope it will wash away the regime’s sins and seal the ranks of the population with the collective goal of fighting Western imperialism.

A second explanation of why a chauvinistic ideology remains useful to the Syrian regime is found in the Arab and Islamic culture. This culture, according to Adonis in a lecture he delivered at the American University of Cairo in November 2005, remains monotheistic. This monotheistic tradition reproduces itself in other ideologies, including pan-Arab nationalist ones that legitimize themselves through Islamic Arab culture.

The utility of nationalistic ideology has been maintained through exclusion and the use of violence. In the same lecture, Adonis notes a correlation between violence and monotheism that exists in all monotheistic religions, including the Islamist monotheistic vision, in which the fate of the Other – the one who is different or the dissenter – is exclusion and death.

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## Assia Djebar: Immortalized Sycophant or Courageous Humanist?

**BY LYNNE ROGERS**

Assia Djebar has broken new ground as she is the first Muslim North African woman to become an “immortal” or life-long member of the prestigious French Academy, founded in 1635 by Cardinal Richelieu during the reign of King Louis XIII “to protect and monitor the French Language.”

Her acceptance of the honor has reopened the divisive controversies surrounding colonialism and cultural integrity, as well as the worn yet still valid issue of North African writers writing in French. (The only previous African to be admitted to the academy was the Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor in 1983.) Djebar’s award reiterates the French Academy’s inclusion of Francophone literature.

A writer whose works are more readily accessible in the West, Djebar herself expressed the wish that her award would encourage the translation of more Francophone writers into Arabic. As a poet, essayist, filmmaker and novelist, Assia Djebar reveals in her works a consistent and intelligent concern for individual human rights in Algeria. Although she writes in French, she pays respectful homage to her Berber roots. She has influenced contemporary Maghreb and Beur writing by broaching taboo subject matters with the intellectual rigor of her academic training as a historian and her poetic style that refuses generic boundaries. Her election to the Academy and her unofficial position as the poster child of Western feminists should not detract from her artistic talent and unwavering commitment to human rights.

The Academy’s recognition of Djebar follows a list of previous prizes for her writing and cinema including the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1996, the Frankfurt Peace Prize in 2000, as well as awards from Montreal, Belgium, Vienna and Italy. Her status as the first Muslim Algerian to belong to the Academy follows a litany of “firsts” for Djebar. Born Fatma-Zohra Imalayene in 1936 to an Algerian Arab father and a Berber mother, Djebar broke tradition to attend the all-boys school where her father taught French. In a well-known passage from “Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade,” the first novel in her quartet, Djebar’s narrator describes the thoughts of their veiled village neighbors as the father holds the little girl’s hand on her way to school: “From the very first day that a little girl leaves her home to learn the ABCs, the neighbors adopt that knowing look of those [who] in ten or fifteen years will be able to say, ‘I told you so!’ while commiserating with the foolhardy father, the irresponsible brother for misfortune will inevitably befall them.” The little girl’s acquisition of the French language and the



experience of going to school isolate her from the other veiled women yet also allow her dreams of love and freedom. Contrary to the benevolence of her father and the naïve goodwill of the student, the neighbors' suspicions of impending doom seem to predict the Arab criticism of Djébar and the Western rally behind her feminism as proof of Islamic barbarity.

Later, the young school girl, the future student of Louis Massignon, became the first Algerian woman to study at L'ecole Normale Supérieure in Sèvres. Her participation in the student demonstrations supporting the Algerian struggle for independence in 1956 resulted in her temporary expulsion from the French institution and provided the inspiration for her early fiction. In 1958, she married Ahmed Ould-Rouï, who belonged to the Resistance and whom she later divorced. During the war, her brother was imprisoned in France for his Resistance activities, and Djébar worked as a journalist in Rabat. She completed her Doctorate at l'Université Paul Valéry de Montpellier and has since been awarded several honorary doctorates. She taught at universities in Algiers and Morocco before coming to the United States to teach, first at Louisiana State and currently at New York University. In 1980, the poet Malek Alloula became her second husband; they have since divorced.

Djébar debuted her long and productive literary career in 1957 with her first novel "*La Soif*" (Thirst). At the suggestion of her first husband, she took the pen name Assia Djébar (irreconcilable) to hide her identity from her father. However, through some error, her name was spelled Djébar, which translates into "healer." This name appealed to the young writer and she has continued to use it. Both "*La Soif*" and her second novel, "*Les Impatients*" (The Impatient, 1958), deal with the problems of Westernized Algerian females negotiating the restrictions imposed by traditional Islamic society and the friction of French culture.

Like Fatima Mernissi, Djébar does not perceive the oppression of women as inherent to the Muslim faith but rather as a social distortion of power. Her third and fourth novels, "*Les enfants du nouveau monde*" (Children of the New World, 1962)

and "*Les alouettes naïves*" (The Innocent Larks, 1967), deal with the Algerian struggle for independence as well as feminist issues. Early criticism reproached Djébar for her privileged focus on women's rights rather than the larger injustices of colonialism and disparaged her realistic representation of tensions within the liberation movement. Later critics came to appreciate her attention to personal relationships as an indicator of societal health. (Given the current political situation in Algeria, her equating the cavalier dismissal and subsequent oppression of

the women who fought for independence with the suffering inflicted by colonialism seems eerily clairvoyant.) At this time, Djébar took a 10 year sabbatical to study written Arabic and turned her artistic energy towards cinema. She continued her focus on Algerian Berber women in the two films, "*La Noubia des Femmes du Mont Chenoua*" (Fits of the Shinoua Mountain Women, 1979) and "*La Zerda et Les chants de l'oubli*" (The Zerda and Songs of Forgetting, 1982). Despite her efforts in Arabic and her cinematic recordings of Berber, she continued to write in French, publicly proclaiming, "French is my house." She broke her narrative silence with her celebrated "*Les femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*" (Women of Algiers in their Apartments, 1980).

As in her later work, "*Les femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*" juxtaposes the oral testimonies of Algerian women with the canons of Western orientalism. In this work of short stories, Djébar utilizes her unique position as a trained historian in her recreation of the story behind the Delacroix painting, effectively taking or giving the last word to those silenced females living behind the veils. In her quartet, Djébar self-consciously blurs the generic boundaries between history, autobiography, fiction and film, sharing her process of discovering and remembering with the reader. The first work, "*L'Amour, la fantasia*" (Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade, 1985) weaves together an impressive mélange of written and oral historical memoirs describing the violent colonization of Algiers



Assia Djébar by Alicia Hall for Al Jadid

from both a French and Algerian point of view interspersed with her coming of age memories of colonial Algeria. This elaborately constructed novel refers to the repeated motifs of Beethoven's "Quasi una Fantasia" and the Arab "fantasia," the ritualistic firing of rifles to signal war or celebration. Her narrative orchestrates a chorus of pain that resonates throughout her work.

The second text, a modern and pessimistic response to the romance of "A Thousand and One Nights," "Ombre Sultane" (A Sister to Scheherazade, 1987) focuses on one narrator drawn from her previous novel. Isma, a liberated, Westernized divorcee, returns home to reconcile with her daughter and to befriend her husband's downtrodden second wife. As Isma chose Hajila, the second wife for Isma's ex-husband, the novel explores the complicity of the educated elite in modern Algeria. Like Djebbar's later narrators who openly wonder at their physical as well as emotional desires, Hajila's defiance, after her drunken husband rapes her, exposes her sexuality and abuse with a liberating honesty. In the third novel, "Loin de Médine" (Far from the Medina, 1991), Djebbar focuses on the beginnings of Islam to

recognize the political and theological contributions of early Muslim women. In "Vaste est la prison" (So Vast the Prison, 1995), Djebbar returns to the intricate structure of "Fantasia." The novel's title extracted from the Berber song, "So vast the prison crushing me/Release, where will you come from?," alludes to the multilayered prisons Algerian women have found themselves in, yet the novel also cherishes the solidarity women find amongst themselves in the various prisons. Her latest work, "Le Blanc de l'Algérie" (Algerian White, 1995), addresses the inhumane rampant killing currently committed in Algeria today. Again relying on re-creation to complete the historical rendition of a political event, the exiled Djebbar mourns the loss of her friends by assassination, fatal illness and car accidents by imagining their final days.

Although early Arab critics accused Djebbar of concentrating on the superfluous female frustration of the middle class, Djebbar's work clearly exposes the crippling brutality of colonialism, the hypocrisy of the patriarchal elite and the demonic intolerance of fundamentalism. Throughout her work, the military power of the French assisted by indigenous collaborators crush the Algerian heroes and heroines while the glorious young freedom fighters deteriorate into petty domestic despots. The tragedy of today's Algeria looms as a graphic reminder to the Arab world of the repercussions of oppression. As a voice of Algeria, Assia Djebbar dexterously and sympathetically enters the dangers of self-examination. Her colleagues, who diminish her achievement as a reward for merely reiterating stereotypes in the language of the colonizer, not only overlook her complex and imaginative aesthetics, they repeat the deafness that Djebbar writes against and reinforce the rhetoric of power. **AJ**

### Three Poems by Ghada Samman

#### A Rebellious Owl

Why do I write? Perhaps because my alphabet  
Avenes itself against the oppressors  
Who try to shine their shoes with my inkwell  
And this blue wine that just spilled upon my paper  
Seems to me the alphabet's blood  
So take it ...drink it ....

For ink is sobriety's wine.

#### An Owl Whose Heart is in Beirut

I still love you,  
In spite of it all  
For, at your shores I learned  
How to drink moonlight from a seashell.

#### A Revived Owl

Every time you embrace me  
I become a virgin again,  
I feel it is my wedding night!

– *Translated from the Arabic by Noel Abdulahad*  
From "Dancing With the Owl." Manshurat Ghada Samman, Beirut, 2003.

### Ideology as Alibi

*Continued from page 6*

The individual in Arab-Islamic society, Adonis adds, is marginalized by institutions that kill subjectivism in favor of the nation, the group, the religion. Thus it is no wonder that the Syrian regime and its Lebanese apologists have no qualms about positing the killing of Hariri against the nation, which, in a sense, is about to be burned down by Mr. Mehlis as he actively pursues Hariri's killers. Following this logic, even if Syrian leaders have been implicated in Hariri's death, they deserve protection and exoneration since they are in charge of the affairs of the nation and therefore embody the nation! What is the value of one individual, important as he might be, when compared with national interest?

Aside from rational bewilderment at the "wisdom" of Syrian leadership, which uses an ideology associated with colossal failures, the reality of the current state of the Baathist regime has almost backed Syrian leaders into a corner. There seem to be no alternative strategies available to them except this nationalistic ideology with its assumed logic that the interest of the individual is subject to that of the nation – and that the leaders, naturally,

*Continued on page 20*



# Don't Apologize for What You Wrote!

BY CHARBEL DAGHER

To whom is the acclaimed Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish talking in the title of his new collection, "Don't Apologize for What You Did"? Is he speaking to the same person as when he published his last collection of poems in 1995 – "Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?" Was he referring to someone other than the subject of his latest opus, or to that person and someone new at the same time?

If we were to compare both titles, we would find more than one possible reading as there is more than one person to whom the poet may be alluding. The act of leaving the question open by alluding to the possibility of more than one interlocutor is typical of a new kind of poetry, and of a new breed of poets – those who master the art of implying multiple meanings to their words.

One could ask these same questions about the title of Darwish's latest collection, which, likewise, requires more than one straightforward explanation. While it might seem the poet is making a direct statement to someone, is the writer perhaps considering this for himself, rather than requiring it of his audience? Does the title on the cover reflect what the poet says in his book? Is there someone other than the general audience as a whole to whom the question is directed – and is the cover meant to influence him or her?

I raise these issues because I believe there is an underlying chasm between what the title carries in its political and popular meaning and what the poems express. The title seems to entertain a private dialogue with the self.

The person who is speaking in this latest collection acknowledges a change between what he has been and what he has become, as suggested by the remark, "don't apologize for what you did," which ends with "don't apologize, except to your mother." The youth is no longer the child who once sat upon his mother's lap. The poem later says, through the mother's voice, "I am the mother who gave him birth but it is the tempestuous winds that raised him." The youth is apologizing, as he has reached maturity, an apology which only the mother can accept and for which only the mother can proffer forgiveness. This is an implicit admission of an *ablacatation*, to use a psychological term: that the man has matured following the sounds of the wind more than through the notes of the lullabies his mother sang.

Here, apology reveals a mature act which might benefit many – including Darwish's readers, mainly that it is life that educates us, not our mother's lullabies, not stories told by grandfathers, nor wise advice bestowed by elders. This means that life is ever-changing, free from pre-existing rules, with each of us caring for himself or herself, while facing life



Mahmoud Darwish

through darkness and brightness, and at the same time resisting obedience, submission, and asceticism.

In this collection, Darwish has distanced himself from his previous works such as "I Long for my Mother's Coffee," "Man," "The Roots," "The Olive Tree," and other poems. Since then, there has been a kind of rupture or split in the self, for example in "I walk as if I were another."

Darwish's poetry is evaluated here through a dialogue with its meaning: he divulges nothing, merely hints. He tries not to compromise the message and yet he doubts its basis. The title, with all its restrictions and orders, appears in stark contrast to Darwish's inner message, thus creating the chasm to which we alluded earlier between the title and the poems. The collection lies in this space between assertion and doubt, between the particular and the general, between the self and the public.

On a formal level, the poems create another contradiction, this time between sound and meaning. The poems are written using prose, thus giving a more active and less formal style to the work. In one of the most beautiful poetic confessions, the Palestinian poet transcends traditional structures, and borrows from a new kind of poetry. For the sake of meaning, he favors a free structure over the practice of ending each line with a rhyme – and sometimes ending the stream of words with a period in the middle of the line rather than at the end. Such choices appear in contradiction to traditional poetical canons and hint at the poet's opposition. This near abandonment of the rhymed poem in favor of a prose structure is an innovation he experimented with in his "*Jidaryiat*" but takes further in this collection.

In the end, the "apology" referred to in the title turns out to be the most absolute beautiful proof of renewed change, which is expressed in this collection through the dialogue with the self – not from pre-existing or fixed and formal poetical rules. **AJ**

*Translated from the Arabic by Carole Corm*

## Jawad al-Assadi: Director Returns to Iraq to Find Nothing the ‘Same’

BY REBECCA JOUBIN

*You were born and raised in Karbala, a city revered by Shiite Muslims. Can you recall the first moment theater touched your life as a child?*

The religious rituals of Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram, took on a special significance in Karbala and inspired my childhood. I was from an extremely poor family and my parents had very few means of entertaining their six children. Sometimes my father took us to the public bath, and at other times he and my mother depended on the city's traditions to keep us busy. Perhaps it was the days leading up to the 10th day of Muharram that instilled the love of theater in my young soul. The yearly preparations for the re-enactment of Hussein's murder brought the community together and transformed the city into a fantastic theater production. There were constant sounds of religious poetry, wailing men and women striking their chests, homes in mourning decked in black, candles lit across the city, men riding horses and drawing their swords on one another, and multi-colored processions of musicians playing trumpets and cymbals. Sometimes I participated in the events and at other times I simply stood in silence and marveled at the spectacle. Without a doubt, the astounding colors and the visual composition of the passion plays created early on an inherent connection in my mind between visual arts and the theater.

*Those who are familiar with your work note the innate link between visual and performing arts in your work. Could you tell us more about this dominant trend in your productions?*

Yes, the connection between the theater and visual arts is fundamental to my work. I approach the stage as an artist approaches an empty canvas. I take out my brush and begin to paint a composition on stage by relying on both the spirits and bodies of my actors. On the empty canvas my brush strokes combine elements of light, body, color and sound. Then I act as a sculptor; sometimes I choose to unify the bodies, only to pull them apart suddenly, and then I meld them together again. For me, the achievement of harmony on the canvas and the inspiration of the actors' sensitivities invoke poetry infused with magical colors.

*The year 2004 was a significant one for you. You received the prestigious Prince Claus Award for Theater Achievement and, more importantly, you returned to Iraq after 28 years of forced exile. Tell us about your impressions of your long-lost homeland. How did the experience influence your work?*

After a lengthy exile, I returned after the downfall of the dictator. As I entered my homeland, I was shattered by how war's ruin had replaced the beautiful landscape, just like that, without any semblance of shame. I lamented the fact that the madness of Saddam's regime had piled the country's rich mythological traditions alongside heaps of garbage which lined the street corners. But what shook me most was how the demon of religious authority had imposed itself on society and destroyed centuries of progress, and how fanaticism had single-handedly turned the country back into the dark ages, a feat even greater than that which the Taliban had managed.

**“When I think back to my childhood in Iraq, I remember women as strong. Women were free. They did not wear the hijab; they showed their beauty with pride. But when I returned to Iraq the absence of women on the streets dismayed me.”**

When I summon the phrases scattered throughout the diaries of the Iraqi people, I see the death of happiness and the sundering of all hope, the untamed power of money, and the constant thievery that destroys the spirit.

My return to Iraq was like a descent into a dark dungeon of hell. As a defense mechanism, during my stay in the violent atmosphere of a country that no longer existed, I recorded my impressions. Based on my own experience and disillusion, I wrote a play titled “Years Elapsed Without Me” about two musicians, Shehab and Sophie, who return to Baghdad full of hopeful dreams for their country and the desire to participate in reconstruction. But they become devastated when they learn that their new country had been scarred and transformed into a large oven that burns both beauty and bodies. Even on the personal level they cannot find a glimmer of hope. Shehab realizes that his family is not the same family he left 30 years ago. His siblings only think about money and their own interests. They no longer see Shehab as a human being; in their eyes he has become a walking bank with dollar signs pasted onto his figure. To make matters more aggravating, he has even lost his loved ones to the worst of religious fanaticism.

*Since you were exiled from Iraq in 1976, you have gone on to direct numerous plays, including: “The Rape” (1992),*

## Interviews

*“Variations on the Ward” (1993), “The Maids” (1994) and “Women of War” (2000), and your works have been performed and have won wide acclaim in Rome, Tunis, Beirut, London, Guttenberg, Paris, Damascus, and Valencia, Spain. Yet, during those years you still expressed a longing to return to Iraq one day to perform a theatrical production. In 2004 you made this happen. You presented your internationally acclaimed “Women of War,” which you both wrote and directed, in the name of the Gilgamesh Project for Art and Culture. What exactly is the Gilgamesh Project?*

I returned to Iraq filled with high aspirations of participating in rebuilding my nation through culture and, in particular, the theater. After the fall of the fascist regime, I planned to establish the Gilgamesh Project to support the burgeoning talent within a new Iraq. I had no sponsors, but this was my way to give back something to my country. I traveled to Iraq with the intention of performing the play “Women in War,” previously presented in Rome in 1998 and then in Kiev, Ukraine in 2002 with Russian actresses. It had always been my dream to bring this play to Iraq, and under the auspices of the Gilgamesh Project, I accomplished this with three brilliant Iraqi actresses. We worked under the most appalling conditions in a small center in Baghdad with no electricity, no decoration and with the constant sounds of bombs and airplanes ringing over our heads. Danger surrounded us and we were not naïve to the fact that at any moment we could be killed. Each day we met at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad we realized that we were lucky to have the chance once again to gather together and rehearse. At one point the son of one of my actresses was kidnapped. After one week of desperate searching, we found him and paid a high ransom to free him from his captors. Thankfully, in the end, despite the instability of our situation, we did manage to present “Women of War.” Afterwards, I invited the three actresses to perform the play in Poland and Algeria.

Unfortunately, due to daily murder and crime in Iraq, the Gilgamesh Project is currently on hold. But it is my intention to continue it one day in the future, when circumstances permit.

***From the work you have done with “Women of War” it is clear***

***that the role of women is central to your creative canvas. Is there any difference in the role of women in your pieces before and after your return to Iraq?***

When I think back to my childhood in Iraq, I remember women as strong. Women were free. They did not wear the hijab; they showed their beauty with pride. But when I returned to Iraq the absence of women on the streets dismayed me. If they strolled the streets, whether Muslim or Christian, they were shrouded and frightened of harassment. It saddened me to see women completely veiled even at the Academy of the Arts. I was horrified by how the unbalanced return to religion has contributed to the subjugation of the position of women, both internally and externally.

In all my works I call for the freedom of women and the presence of women is strong, for they are the basis of the nation. In “Women of War,” an internal conflict dominates the lives of the women exiled in Germany. Here my female characters are torn between their dreams of returning one day to Iraq and the realities that face them. In my works composed after I returned to Iraq, the position of women is still dominant, yet now their inner conflict takes place within Iraq itself and relates directly to issues of freedom in the newly formed society. In “Years Elapsed Without Me,” for example, one of my characters is an extremely religious, veiled woman. She wants to be free, but at the same time she is tied down by the dictates of her religion, vanquished from the outside as well as from within. She is engaged in a bitter conflict with herself and the other, with herself and her place in the new Iraq.

***You are currently residing in Damascus, directing rehearsals for your new production, “The Baghdadi Bath,” an autobiographical work. Could you tell us about this play?***

I will present the production “The Baghdadi Bath” on December 15, 2005 in Damascus. This play is about two brothers, Hamid and Majid, who are bus drivers for a bus that circulates between Amman and Baghdad. The play takes place during the

*Continued on page 17*

# Randa Chahal: ‘Always This Running Away...’ Filmmaker’s Complex Identities Spawn Thematic Dualities

BY BRIGITTE CALAND

Randa is a friend. A real friend, someone who you are certain will be with you when you need her, someone who will surprise you by her attentions, her consistency, and her own way of making sure people she cares for are fine. But Randa’s priority is being a mother for the three wonderful children who surround her. Her daughter, Nour, studies art and lives in the same building; her eldest son, Pierre, studies in London; and her youngest, Ulysse, remains with her, at home, attending a middle school nearby. Around her, various friends form a tribe that looks beyond nationalities, languages, and cultural backgrounds. Her house and garden are open to visitors who stop by, often with no notice, joining her for tea, lemonade, pastries, or a casual meal.

Randa’s credits as a filmmaker include “Lebanon of Another Time” (1981), “Sheikh Imam” (1985), “Screen of Sand” (1992), “Our Imprudent Wars” (1995), “The Infidels” (1996), “Civilized” (1998), “Souha, Surviving Hell” (2001), and “The Kite” (2002).

On a cold Parisian afternoon, the final weekend before starting the production of her film – she will start shooting the first months of 2006 – she sits in an armchair in my office and sips hot jasmine tea. She shares freely: “My reasons for filming are rooted in Tripoli, the town in Lebanon where I was born and grew up. I was stuck between two activities: going to the movies, or going to the beach. It was a traditional and rather sad city, and I was an unusual young girl who was lucky to have exceptional parents – open, literate, and conscious of the world around them. We used to discuss global issues, human rights, and the well being of others. They guided the three of us, me and my siblings, towards reading and making thoughtful choices. They helped me so much. I was privileged to grow up in a Sunni environment with extremely supportive parents who used to encourage me, saying: ‘Go ahead, you can make it, nothing can happen to you, surprise us.’

“I felt so confident. One day, while traveling on a plane, a wing caught fire and people on board were consumed with panic. Except for me. I just thought to myself, ‘My parents will not let anything happen.’ In time, as they aged and the situation

was reversed and I took care of them, all my childhood fears resurfaced. I took on the role of a parent, and I no longer felt protected. I was present at their surgeries and the three of us – my sister, my brother, and I – now mothered them.”

Randa continued: “When I was 13 or 14 years old, I saw ‘Blow Up’ and it was a revelation. When we left the screening I told my father ‘I want to do the same.’ At that time he did not discourage me, but later, after I finished high school and left for France, he suggested that I aim for a job that would allow me to be financially independent. I pursued medical studies for one year,



Randa Chahal

after which he recognized that this was absolutely not for me.”

With a tender smile, Randa mentions the relationship between her parents: “My father used to say that he married my mother because the Communist Party asked him to, to get her out of jail. She had been imprisoned several times, because, although quite young, she was the chief editor of the Iraqi party newspaper. So, I suspect he must have gotten her pregnant three times in a ‘comradely’ way. He was Sunni. He used to love life, beautiful objects, and beauty in general. She was somber, like most Iraqi people... I feel sorry for the Americans who did not check where they were putting their feet!

“My mother left Iraq and never was able to go back. She mourned Iraq from a distance. She did not travel because she did not enjoy traveling. She suffered when I left Lebanon, but she did not stop me from leaving. She felt making films was not a serious job and would have loved for me to write, as I once did for *As Safir* newspaper. I wrote in Arabic; they liked my style, but used to correct my grammar. Dad loved going to the movies. We used to have intense discussions about the scripts and the technical approach a director would take. I knew I would become a filmmaker in Paris.”

Randa’s pessimistic view of the film industry today is imbued with a nostalgic eye towards earlier times, when Hollywood

and the proliferation of visual imagery was not subordinated to market demands.

“Today, the filmmaking industry has changed quite a bit. Images are common now, and we have an over-abundance of footage. Everyone has a camera, whether digital or video. Before, creating images was a difficult task. I remember how excited I was the first time I put my eye to a lens. Now there is such a demand for images... I feel manipulated by the situation, by imposed choices, by the images that continuously spill forth, by the marketing, by the need for commercial success. Most of the time, one must produce at such a rate that there is not enough time to think about the work being done. I don't feel free. But I do think that all this is going to settle. There is such a gap between the movie I produced and shot 17 years ago and the one I am producing today. If you don't play the game, there is no place for you. Everything needs to be basic. Hollywood has decided to make movies for the lowest common denominator. Those in charge of the industry believe that no one understands nuance, so everything is overly emphasized. Films are made for the masses.”

Randa adds, “I went recently to see ‘Chicken Little’ and found that it, too, had been made for the simple-minded. You quickly understand that the character has a problem with his father, but they say it so many times that my son looked at me and asked sarcastically, ‘Mom, did you understand that he has a problem with his father?’ ‘Fantasia’ is so far away. During the past 40 years, the industry has regressed a lot. All movies seem the same; all the scripts are simplified.”

Reflecting on the complexities of an identity informed by both Arab and European cultures, Randa imparts a critical perspective on filmmaking in France: “To get into the European mainstream, you need to swim in the mainstream. It is narcissistic and fundamentally concerned by its own history; there is no place for anything else. If you are not born French, you must talk about the suburbs, even when you live in a residential and elegant district in Paris! The newspapers have praised Abdel Latif Keshish so much, and in such a colonialist way, that I wonder what he will be able to do now, because he is not part of this mainstream.

“I am Middle Eastern, but I don't want to be the Arab that makes movies for the Arab. It is a difficult process, because, unlike writing, the film industry requires a great amount of money before a movie can come to fruition. It took me two years to get away from the language of my family – Arabic – and to speak to the neighbors in their language – French. In French, for instance, you ‘work on the loss of someone,’ meaning, you try to overcome and forget. In Arabic, you remember. In Arabic, often one word is enough to explain a feeling, a situation, while in French most of the time you need a group of words: to burst into laughter, to let go of, to take the neighbor's tongue.”

A thematic duality – between her mother and father, France and Lebanon, herself and her husband – persists as Randa contemplates the future. “I am not complaining; I am happy with what I have accomplished. But today I question the place I have here. And I think I don't have a place in Lebanon. I think about my mother who lived as an exile. When she died, I had the feeling she died as a political, sentimental, and unreconciled

exile, since her last will was to be buried in Iraq. We have not been able to fulfill her wish yet, and this is another form of exile. But Lebanon is not an option. I say it with no complaints – it is just a thought. I think about what would have happened had I stayed there. After living here for 30 years, I feel more and more distant from France and find I am getting closer to something more genuine and authentic. I don't see myself getting old in France. I am comfortable neither in the position of intellectual jetsetter, nor in the position of Middle Eastern intellectual. I think

it comes from my background. I am born from a mixed marriage. Both my parents were communists. We used to drink from crystal glasses brought from Bohemia, us the children, with the peasants rather than with the elegant guests. There was constantly this duality, this battle. The same happened with my marriage. I married someone out of my environment who had concerns other than mine. Today I am single and divorced and have developed cancer, which, hopefully, I have overcome.”

During her bout with cancer, Randa said she always had nightmares. “Like this friend of mine who lost three of her six children in terrible accidents. She used to have nightmares, every single night, and when finally she was able to name her fear, her nightmare, she lost her brother. My nightmares stopped when they removed my left breast. I was told that the left breast is connected to the image of the Man. I used to have terrible nightmares and used to tell them to my parents, to my lovers, and to my children. Today it is over, most probably because I dealt with this duality. I am finding my place.”

With her unique accent and great sense of humor, Randa considers where she wants to settle and grow. “But there is another issue about this duality I need to solve: the place where I wish to live and grow old. I do think that we have a choice. You and I have a choice. And this is what makes things harder. Nothing forces me to accept the system, the cold winters. My accent always makes me feel foreign. When I enter a store, or anywhere, when I talk I can see people's eyes perpetually asking ‘where is she from?’ but I have the same feeling in the Keserouan, or in Fakra. It took time to build my complicity and intimacy with my French friends. My godchild remains amazed by my accent, and I often tell him, ‘You will remember it later and you will love it,’ and the young people I work with laugh about it.

“Do I feel concerned by French politics? I have voted here ever since I obtained French citizenship. My daughter is more

**“I am Middle Eastern, but I don't want to be the Arab that makes movies for the Arab. It is a difficult process, because, unlike writing, the film industry requires a great amount of money before a movie can come to fruition.”**

*Continued on page 17*



# The Place of Origin

BY MOUAYED AL-RAWI

Whenever someone takes me, or I myself journey, to *al makan al-awal*, that is, *the first place*, or one's place of origin, I begin to examine my feelings and ponder the link between me and the land I come from. I wonder about time's secret power, which keeps me tied to a piece of land that I left decades ago.

Whenever I wander through *al makan al-awal*, as if by alchemy the landmarks, the images, the things and the people transform into magical elements, carrying emotions and ideas that alter my thinking and lead me to contradictory conclusions. At times I am overwhelmed; at other times I am more in control. However, I accept these elements as they are so that I can watch them from a distance. Sometimes, I approach the vision from a moral perspective or through an ideological framework, until I realize that the vision needs to be accepted from its own standpoint. This change in attitude limits my perspective, requiring that I look at my place of origin as an entity separate from me, as a place that does not contain me. In turn, this perspective of separation limits my emotional reaction to the place from which I've come and reduces it to a simple love-hate relationship.

Sometimes, to criticize a place is to deal with just a part of it. Criticism demeans a place, leaving out impressions of a full and rich life. My contradictory feelings lead to confusion, and this confusion – an integral part of my relationship with this place – always leads to attempts to comprehend the place's secrets. Thus, every time someone's memory takes him back to *al makan al-awal*, the memory appropriates various colors, as if a rainbow forms upon a past horizon, shining its kindness upon the person who holds his time and place of origin in his heart, while his heart beats and overflows with these memories.

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I have spent several decades away from *al makan al-awal* – for me, Kirkuk – and more than three decades away from Baghdad. Nevertheless, Kirkuk continues to represent an unresolved issue for me. During this time away, I was able to live in other cities and countries, to experience them with wisdom and intelligence, and to acquire an in-depth understanding of them through discourse and awareness. This, in turn, changed and matured me, and made me feel whole. This understanding provided me with rich experiences, favorable and not so favorable, which sometimes turned me into a beggar, sometimes into a hero, and on occasion a conspirator, even landing me in prison! Nevertheless, these experiences preserved my mind's ability to distinguish between choices, to accept one thing and refuse another, and made me face myself as I sought purification.

I consider these experiences as a trial of the self, which responds either by becoming suspicious of life or by yearning to

live in harmony with it. However, my place of origin, in the midst of all the intertwining places and events of my life, continues to beckon me, beseeching discovery and understanding. Often times this call has become an addiction, much as I am addicted to the intimacy of the memories of my childhood world, a world that was open and knew no censorship or caution, a world that was a playground for surprise, free to be absorbed by the mind and the heart. Perhaps it has become a form of nostalgia that, in its wanderings, takes me forcibly to consciousness or to my dream.

Throughout these decades of being away from my place of origin, I have often returned to it in my mind, especially when touched by images or sentiments that call up specific memories. These memories seduce me to recall those images, to decipher their magical symbols, whether they are characterized by the fires of sentiment and wisdom – or by the images of defeat and weakness.

Perhaps this kind of remembering has long engraved those lands in my mind, without the certainty of my love or my hatred for them. These places remain bound to me, and I to them. In other words, we are one, impossible to separate. We live in one another and each time we return to our memories, a new legacy is added, and a stronger love develops.

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## Al-Makan al Awal: Kirkuk

Kirkuk was a universe to me, creating locks and keys, deep oceans and a source of life. At night its stars would come to tell me of other places, of dreams and illuminated banquets. It would bring to me its angels and reveal its hidden spirits so that we could converse.

I see it now; it is far away, on a journey. I always pursue one of Kirkuk's golden carriages in hopes of reaching its throne. On the journey, I am asked to watch through the fog, or dust of the sandstorm which carries the earth's sand and the mountains' rocks.

I don't know exactly what the city, my place of origin, did to me during those early years of my life. However, I surmise that it was not concerned with expanding my horizons, arousing my curiosity, and presenting questions with which to fill the tapestry of my childhood.

I did not object to or condemn what the city offered me. I did not object to its occasional cruelty, nor did I denounce its myths that made my soul sink with fear and dread. I did not lose my childhood innocence in front of men who squeezed life just to survive, looking like giants whose bones had been crushed and whose faces perspired with fever.

As a child, I was like a door open wide to everything without opinion or judgment. When I was older and the pillars of the world and the family, as well as the ideals of society, relationships, and aesthetic values all collapsed before me, I knew that the world was a place where I could learn from the secrets of age and the meaning of time.

What can I write about my *al makan al-awal*, my Kirkuk,



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now that I have grown older and have begun to pass judgment? I changed into a “wise and intelligent man” who follows the laws of the world and society, and cannot, but rarely, live outside their strong-hold, all the while weaving dreams and delusions to escape their shackles. Removed from my childhood and the early life that knew no limitations, I find myself succumbing to dream and delusion. I release my imagination to wander freely

filter of my memories from those early years. These memories cannot be recalled or re-enacted. A man who abandoned his childhood may not return to it, even though writing about one’s origin is enticing and can be a means to draw near to it, to savor it. Yet, writing about one’s origin and experiences is confined to the realm of writing.



“Climbing” (1990) by Monkith Saaid

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as a means to protect myself. Sometimes it returns to *al makan al-awal*, taking me with it.

Kirkuk today resembles many other cities. One can compare it to other metropolises, degrade it, even condemn it. But I do not want any part of that evaluation; and I do not want my consciousness to play a role in this comparison, for consciousness, with its claws of knowledge, would shred the dream that I must have to survive. It is not an option to judge my city or myself, for we are an integrated entity, and thus, I cannot judge “us” with an intellectual or moral perspective, or with any thinking that aims to limit or change.

Childhood does not wish to be bound, criticized, or changed. It wants to confront, embrace, and delve into life; to gather the secrets that its place of origin might reveal, secrets that can kindle the energy for life, full of everlasting joy. That is why now, whenever I want to learn more about Kirkuk, I put aside the

Kirkuk is an old city, established centuries before the Christian calendar began, in a meadow at the center of those rolling green plains that announce the beginning of the northern Iraqi region. The spirit of the city lies in its high and spacious citadel, which was made of clay. The city itself consists of various neighborhoods. Remnants of the old citadel’s walls and entryways still exist today. There are pathways and ladders allowing visitors to literally go down to Kirkuk, which has been built up over time.

Kirkuk epitomizes the passage of time, for one can recall the Babylonians, the Chaldeans, and the Assyrians, as well as the Safavids, the Ottomans, and the Persians. All these spirits live within the confines of the old city, bearing its ruins and its myths. After a hard rain, at the edges of the city, one can find artifacts like broken pieces of pottery or small statues – like little, staring totems, perhaps remnants of the Ottomans who had lived on the

hilltops surrounding Kirkuk. Scattered atop these mountains are old police posts, recalling past soldiers who were left defeated and hungry, begging for food in the streets.

Despite all this history, the city's citadel lives in the present, and seldom do its inhabitants think of the changes of history. They have melded as though one with the city and its history. They climb the stairs to higher ground, which boasts of thousands of houses, narrow streets, and neighborhoods, each with its own characteristics and each carrying the name of an occupation, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or sect, while others bear the names of myths or prophets.

You climb to the citadel and enter Yeddi Quzlor (the Seven Maidens) and the neighborhoods of the sweet-makers, the masons, the construction workers, and the bricklayers, and then to Beriadi and Jeqour, to the neighborhoods of the Christians, the Jews, the Arabs, and the Kurds. These occupations that have survived for centuries, along with the minority neighborhoods that continue to coexist, give the city an ancient look, while expansion and modernization have given the city a special countenance that may not be found in any other city. At the foot of the citadel runs Kirkuk's river, known by the inhabitants as Khassa Sou or the Adheem River (the Great One). This river forks into many smaller branches and is nourished by the rain and the melting snow from the distant mountains to the north and east.

### A River's Angry Display

Kirkuk's river is a devil and an angel at the same time. It growls in the winter and early spring, and whimpers in the summer, with only a few fresh streams flowing between the rocks and the pebbles. Its water is red with the clay from the mountains. Most people stop to watch the river's angry display as it romps and roars, waking people all across the city. People stop to watch its destruction as it sucks most everything it finds along its long journey. It snatches tree trunks and rolls along with roofs of huts, sheep, mules, and other animals, which sometimes slam against the columns of the old stone bridge that separates the citadel from the new city. Often, you see people with solemn faces pointing to an object, even a baby crib, rolling in the folds of the red water. Some years the water floods so high that it covers the stone bridge in its entirety, leaving behind, as it dries, a red sediment that eventually hardens into a ceramic, forming the plates upon which our ancestors carved their words, myths and secrets.

Oftentimes, people of Kirkuk are overcome with sadness for those whose homes and belongings – and possibly even their families and loved ones – were hurled through the red waters to the sea. People in Kirkuk know how vast the path of destruction of this river is, this river that surges to them from the mountains and travels far beyond. They know that there are places and people living away from their city, but they cannot visit them. Thus, they experience a pure and abstract sadness that is not personified; they empathize with others who live far away and sympathize with those who have met similar catastrophes.

### Chanting and Eulogizing

With its flooding, the river recalls the ancient history of Iraq and preserves it in memory. The history of the anger of the two rivers (the Tigris and the Euphrates) and their floods, the floods that have destroyed the accomplishments of several civilizations and, together with wars, fires, and invasions from the north and south, have isolated the Iraqi people, seating them between water and fire, forcing their silence, and imprisoning them in their sorrow as they moan and face their tragic destiny without any attempt to rescue themselves.

I read a chant by a woman who was eulogizing her son. She clutches him in her hands and squeezes to her breast while standing helpless amid burning curtains and furniture. The water is flooding the palace, and the soldiers are fighting and falling dead. After I read the chant, I mused, "Why does the woman cry, chanting and eulogizing her son instead of moving to escape the flood, the fire, and the soldiers, saving herself and her son? Why is she satisfied with mere crying and moaning, drawing and personifying her surroundings with words and with her sad singing? Why doesn't she run away to save her child from death and catastrophe?"

I did not know then, in my youth, what secret power sadness and grief hold, a secret that can paralyze a person, making him surrender to destiny. This is a type of person who recalls his tragedy and relives it time and again, closing all the escape routes so that nothing remains but releasing the sadness through poetry and dark chanting. Thus, death becomes an unavoidable journey that leads one to meet destiny's embrace, requiring nothing but some accompanying rituals. Is there anything more profound than poetry to express the lament of sorrow's journey?

This is the past, the past of Kirkuk, with its citadel, its river, and its sediments, that conjures up memories from the sea of time, bringing us face to face with our ancestors. The ancestors who gather in the city, coming from every direction, each carries a satchel filled with memories from his time, and proffers it to whomever desires to see the contents. Gilgamesh and Ankido still wander through the city, and Atoona Bashtam busies himself building his ship in anticipation of the tempest. Inside and outside the citadel, gods quarrel. He who is in the depth of the citadel wants Tammuz to cover him with the darkness of the lowly regions. Gods sharpen swords and build carriages and armor for the citizenry to fight in the wars. Other, kinder gods carve on tablets letters they have received from heaven, and some pave the roads for the procession of vows to bless the city. **AJ**

*Translated from the Arabic by Basil Samara*

*With permission from the author to translate and publish, this essay is adapted from a longer manuscript.*

# Jawad al-Assadi

*Continued from page 11*

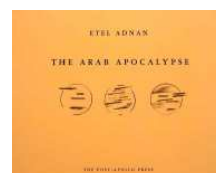
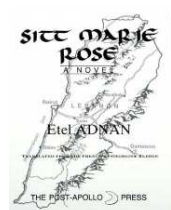
presidential elections, the time for the downfall of ideals. A millionaire has been chosen by the people to come back to Iraq and participate in the elections. He is on Hamid and Majid's bus returning to Iraq, but as the bus crosses over the Jordanian border, he dies unexpectedly. Ironically, when he arrives in Iraq, as a corpse, we discover that he has been elected president. People don't realize that their designated leader has met his demise. At the border, due to issues of security, the Americans wish to search the millionaire even though he is dead. Here, I deal with the reality of the constant humiliation of the Iraqi people. One brother says they should allow the Americans to search the dead man, while the other brother argues that they cannot allow the body to be dishonored so cruelly. Through the personal experiences and insecurities of these two brothers, I wish to address how Iraqis as a whole suffered in the shadows of Saddam's brutal regime and continue to feel pain under the duress of the American occupation. **AJ**

## Randa Chahal

*Continued from page 13*

concerned: she is Parisian; I am not. I still am very much a Mediterranean. You sense it in my movies. There is always this 'running away.' I wonder to myself if it is linked to an incident that happened one day, when my ex-husband dropped me at the border of the no-man's land in Beirut, which was cut in two during the war. I had to run in order to escape the sniper's shooting. When I arrived on the other side, I was safe, but I ran on. A young boy started running alongside me, and while licking his ice cream he asked, 'Why are you still running?' But I think that the cause is deeper than this."

Randa suddenly looked at her watch. It was time to rush off. Her son was waiting for her. She still had to find dessert for his dinner, and in her hurry, she almost left part of her meal in my refrigerator. As she rushed down the stairs, she came back to retrieve the food she was going to share with her daughter that same evening. We had spent another wonderful moment together. And although she usually despises talking about herself and giving interviews, she had generously opened up and spoken about subjects that are so clearly important to her today. **AJ**



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# ‘Seducing America: Selling the Middle Eastern Mystique’ Orientalist Ephemera Collection at UCLA on its Way to Online Database, Book

BY JUDITH GABRIEL

Orientalist imagery has long been appropriated for use in American film posters, cigarette packs, pulp fiction and popular music: scantily clad harem girls, tyrannical despots and turbaned mystics have personified an imagined Middle East in the popular culture, creating an American fantasy that represents the exotic and the erotic.

Hundreds of objects reflecting that imagined realm has just wrapped up its first run at the University of California at Los Angeles. “Seducing America: Selling the Middle Eastern Mystique,” an exhibit of Middle Eastern-inspired ephemera, is about to be launched as an extensive on-line data base complete with music samples, selected film clips and a comprehensive assortment of “Middle Eastern Americana” artifacts such as sheet music, souvenirs, book jackets and consumer goods, many bearing Middle Eastern insignias, and the accompanying advertisements which range from the crass to the cartoonish.

Appropriately housed in the tiled, arch-encircled rotunda of UCLA’s Powell Library, select items from the collection of Jonathan Friedlander, assistant director of the Center for Near Eastern Studies, comprised the display. Objects included comic books from the 1930s, pulp fiction book covers with titles such as “Desert Madness” and “Spicy Adventures,” video games such as “The Prince of Persia,” vintage sheet music for songs including “The Sheik of Araby” and “Rebecca Came Back from Mecca,” photos of topless women on the covers of CDs, fierce warriors on the covers of DVDs, “Turkish” tobacco products, Egyptomania films, and various and sundry consumer items such as Palmolive beauty products, Ben Hur flour, Sheik condoms – and a couple of Shriner fezzes.

The graphics and objects reflected the many images – some lurid, some diabolically savage, and others strikingly

beautiful – that the mysterious East has provided for the imaginations of advertising artists and commercial and packagers, all to hawk the wares of popular culture. Many of the images are crassly commercial, some risqué enough to be deemed borderline lewd,



while others are grotesquely distorted or lampoonish. At the same time, some reflect the skill of graphic designers who turned out cover art with distinctive beauty, incorporating the graceful lines of the region’s architecture and the exotic images favored by the Art Nouveau artists of an earlier century.

But they are all manifestations of the Orientalist image of the “mysterious East” that runs through American popular culture, notes Friedlander, with the distortions and negative stereotyping that continue to manifest their dangerous ramifications in American political posture today. The emphasis is on American, and Friedlander terms it all “Middle Eastern Americana.”

“What is the appeal of this iconography in the United States? The answer is complex,” Friedlander told *Al Jadid*. “Back in the 1920s, the mysterious Middle East represented freedom from the rigid morality of the preceding era, and so it was a popular icon on sheet music for fox trots and waltzes.” Sheet music was a popular medium at the time. Americans bought new songs up with the same enthusiasm that today’s music fans snap up CDs. “The graphic appeal of the front cover design, racy lyrics and catchy dance melodies made sheet music a popular medium at a time when many Americans were taught to read music and play a musical instrument. And with the advent of mass media, color printing and consumerism, and the dance craze of the 1920s, the four-to six-page pamphlet, often strikingly illustrated, had wide appeal,” Friedlander said.

One song tells the story of “Lena the Queen of Palestena,” describing a girl from the Bronx: “She was such a good musician, She got a swell position, to go across the sea to entertain. And so they shipped poor Lena ‘Way out to Palestena, But now I hear she don’t look



## Exhibitions

the same....” Another song of the era, “Abdul the Bulbul Ameer,” which comes complete with ukulele and Hawaiian guitar chord notations, claims that “The sons of the prophet are hardy and bold, and quite unaccustomed to fear. But all of the most reckless of life or of limb was Abdul the Bulbul Ameer. When they wanted a man to encourage the van or to shout hulla-loo in the rear, or to storm a re-doubt, they straight away sent out for Abdul the Bulbul Ameer.”

Friedlander considers the genre to be an important field for study. “Understanding the sheet music requires additional research, according to Friedlander, which will delve into the cover art as well as background information on illustrators, publishing companies, artists, and songwriters.” Research could also be carried out on LPs in the collection. Fascination with “Arabian Nights” imagery led to the production of more than 50 album covers for the various recordings of the Sheherazade symphonies by Rimsky-Korsakoff and Ravel in the United States in the 1970s-80s. “The symphony is basically the same. So how do you sell it? You vary and hype the images.” And for a plethora of “appropriate” images, you turn to the exotic East

But even scripture has been made a part of the exoticization and lure of the Middle East. “From the early days of the industry, American film makers have exploited Bible stories and their appeal to a God-fearing public.” Many fans of the silver screen’s version of the region came from films such as “Ben Hur” and “The Robe,” but even before that, Americans’ perceptions of the Middle East were being shaped by silent era film star Rudolph Valentino as “The Sheik.”

“The Middle East has been a gold mine for industries and businesses that used the iconography to promote their services and products,” Friedlander said, “including liquor, coffee, tobacco, all popular vices in early 20th century America.”

Cigarette packaging and advertising is prominent in the collection. “One of the first entrepreneurs were the tobacco

companies,” according to Friedlander. “From the turn of the century and onward there were numerous brands: Camel, Egyptian Deities, Fatima, Fez, Omar, Pyramid, Salome, and Murad. Middle Eastern iconography was widely and successfully employed to sell tobacco.” The theme may have drawn on an allusion to Turkish tobacco, “but the tobacco was all grown in America.”

It’s been a quarter century since Friedlander himself opened his last pack of Camel cigarettes and laid down smoking for good. But in some way, it was his consumption of nicotine and caffeine that led to his heightened desire to collect



this paraphernalia. “I was looking at the images that were used to advertise coffee and tobacco. And one thing led to another, and it began to open my horizons.”

Since then, Friedlander became an inveterate shopper, ever on the lookout for the exotic images he is bent on analyzing. “I’ve collected books and artifacts and fetishes and videos and everything I could find, in antique shops, especially where I started in Stillwater, Minnesota, and in places like Bakersfield, California.” But closer to home, for instance, in a near-by drugstore, he found paperback books like “Sheikh’s Castaway,” and “The Sheikh’s Marriage Bed.”

Friedlander admits he himself was quite seduced by the images over the years. He is fascinated by how Islam and the Middle East are portrayed in popular culture. “It permeates almost every aspect of American life. You can find it everywhere. And when you start collecting it you see how voluminous and powerful it has become.”

Born in Israel, Friedlander grew up in Brooklyn in the 1960s. He came to UCLA in 1972 to do graduate work in modern Egyptian history, but he got an NEH grant to produce a documentary on Arabs in America. Subsequently, he has published works on Arab workers and Iranian exiles in the US.

“American Orientalism is the other part of the Middle East in America,” he said. “It’s the flip side of the same coin. One way of looking at the Middle East in America is through the perspective of immigration, and the other one through the perspective of popular culture. The collection documents our way of doing business, and how we appropriate images to sell – using Middle Eastern iconography, symbols, themes, and insignias. It’s vulgar in some ways, albeit it’s an historical and contemporary feature-of American popular culture.”

Friedlander will keep on adding to the collection, which has now been turned over to the university, where it will be housed at the UCLA Young Research Library. He’s focusing now on completing the on-line database and a forthcoming book, and conducting intensive research

into various fields within the collection. “The data base provides easy access to the special collection,” he said. Everything in the archive has been scanned and digitized, providing a rich source of the sounds and images he has amassed. Also included in the Middle Eastern Americana collection are Friedlander’s own photographs depicting architecture, pageantry, and the performing arts – notably the popularization of belly-dancing.

“American Orientalism is undoubtedly our own creation and as such it deserves critical study leading to self reflection,” Friedlander said. With the co-option of the images of the East into so many areas of the popular culture, the impact has never been more chilling. “While academia has debunked Orientalism it is still a profoundly influential force, affecting consumer culture and American foreign policy alike.” **AJ**

## **Ideology as Alibi**

*Continued from page 8*

embody the nation. The Syrian regime, meanwhile, benefits from almost a half century of rule, during which they propagated one idea, one party, and an infallible system of government that rationalized killing the Other – the opposition – under the pretext that the dissenters threatened the harmony and balance of society and diverted the state’s energies away from the external “enemy.”

But, is the future of Lebanon and Syria predetermined by this political and cultural predicament? Michel Kilo, a Syrian author, answers this question indirectly in an article published in the Beirut-based *Al Mustaqbal* newspaper on the first anniversary of Hariri’s assassination. He implies that whatever the conditions that empower the killers, the effectiveness of future political assassinations will never be the same. In some cases, “political killing transcends the intentions of the killers, especially if those who are killed remain alive in people’s memories.” This happens when the person who died “represents not just himself, but rather an idea or a higher interest, a public trend.”

Political assassinations in Arab history have been widespread, but according to Kilo, the reaction that followed Hariri’s murder deserves our attention. Prior to the assassination of Hariri, “assassination used to be a political means denounced by a few... But today, it has become a heinous crime denounced by millions of Arabs who condemn it and the parties that practice it, and who demand the punishment of those involved... Thus, political assassination can lead to the opposite of the killers’ intentions, reinforcing a popular opposition that values life and recognizes the necessity that life be protected by politics, because, simply put, life is higher than politics and all of the goals that it justifies.” **AJ**

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## **The Multicultural Roots of Andrea Ali’s Art**

**BY FAYEQ OWEIS**

A ceramic sculptor and a mixed media artist, Andrea Ali wants her art to serve as an educational tool and a political statement. Born in 1978 in Berkeley, California, to an Iraqi father and a Czech mother, Andrea’s work is inspired by her mixed cultural background (Czech/Iraqi/American). The traditional, decorative Czech paintings and the geometric precision of Islamic art and architecture are some of the elements that have affected her work and artistic identity. As Ali explains, the concept of homeland is an underlying thread woven throughout her artwork.



Andrea Ali “Homeland” (2004), Ceramic Sculpture, 40”x18”x13”

Ali graduated from San Francisco State University in 2004 with a BA in ceramics. In a very short period of time, she had participated in over 10 group exhibits in Northern California. She was also a featured artist at the launching of *Zawaya* (November 2003), a San Francisco-based non-profit organization dedicated to promoting Arab arts and culture. The majority of Ali’s works



are figurative ceramic sculptures that reflect her multiple cultures and how she relates to them. This artist describes her ceramic sculptures as layered in meaning including “historical references, personal narratives, traditional cultural elements, and most importantly the manifestation of spirit.”

When the U.S. invasion of Iraq began in 2003, Ali – with family ties in Iraq – wanted to use her art as a political statement against the war. She sculpted 10 bowling pins in the shape of 10 veiled women and paired them with a bowling ball covered with stars and stripes. The installation was arranged so that the 10 traditionally dressed and veiled women were left standing helplessly, awaiting the giant bowling ball.

When the San Francisco branch of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee invited Ali to display her ceramic sculptures during its annual event, Ali chose to exhibit her sculpture “Homeland” (2004), which features a woman with house keys spilling out of her dress. For this sculpture, Ali was inspired by the poems of Mahmoud Darwish, a Palestinian poet who often uses women as a metaphor for the land of Palestine. The traditionally dressed woman of Ali’s sculpture wears images of towns and villages painted on her chest, a symbolic representation of the Palestinian villages that were destroyed in 1948. As for the keys, Ali says, “The keys in the piece come from the stories that I keep hearing from the elders in the Palestinian community. They talk about how they are still holding on to the keys of their homes and farms, even though they had been long destroyed. It is a symbol of the right to return home and a symbol of the fight for freedom.”

Ali also adopts the symbol of the key in her work that deals with the war on Iraq. One speculates that as an Iraqi-American, she also relates the key and its representation of one’s country to the Iraqi people’s struggle for a free and independent homeland. **AJ**

## Adnan Charara’s Art Inspired by Styles, Symbols of Identity

BY FAYEQ OWEIS

Adnan Charara was born in Lebanon in 1962, grew up in Sierra Leone, Africa, received his BFA in Architectural Design from the Massachusetts College of Art in 1983, and now lives in Detroit, Michigan. Charara is a painter, an etcher, a printmaker and a sculptor who works with a variety of materials and employs a number of techniques in creating his works. Some of Charara’s drawings, paintings and sculptures have an African influence, which Charara attributes to his love of the beautiful African rituals and the spirit found within them.

Charara’s drawings and paintings combine styles from different periods, including the European Renaissance, cubism and futurism. His styles present a myriad of scattered faces, often



Adnan Charara “I am an Arab American” (2005). Giclee & Silkscreen, 12”x16”

twisted and intertwined with one another and with a cityscape that reflects the worlds of geometry, poetry and science – chaotic in nature, yet fitting sublimely together. The bodies of the cartoon-like characters in Charara’s drawings and paintings grow from one another. One figure’s hand or leg, for example, serves as another’s face.

In addition to drawing and painting, Charara also creates sculptures of found objects he collects from flea markets. Hundreds of sculptures of such objects are on display in his studio in Detroit, Michigan. Charara is fascinated in particular with hammers, wrenches and other tools. A number of interesting sculptures of hammers can be seen in his studio, including one of a hammer being attacked by nails. Another features a personified hammer with a twisted head, depicting the hammer’s face, which is shameful after hitting so many nails, and yet another sculpture shows a hammer resembling a horse displayed as a trophy for all the good jobs the hammer has done.

His Detroit studio is not the only place displaying Charara’s works. Charara participated in “Re-Interpreting the Middle East: Beyond the Historical Stereotyping,” an international print exchange exhibition featuring the work of 23 international artists. The exhibition commenced as a call for a thematic print exchange by Southern Graphics Council International Conference (2005), and it traveled to galleries in Washington DC (March 2005), Amman, Jordan (August 2005) and Dearborn, Michigan (September 2005). Charara submitted his print “I am an Arab American” (2005) to the exhibition. This piece is comprised of faces arranged in what appears to be an American cityscape scene. As an Arab-American artist, Charara presents his identity through the combination of Arabic and English letters to form the sentence “I am an Arab American.” As he explains, “The writing, a mixture of Latin and Arabic script, is representative both of that transition from resistance to acceptance and the generation, which bridges that gap. It is comprehensible, but not without difficulty, to the Arab speaking American; the one new to the American society. But to the English speaking American, it is still quite foreign despite the familiar (Latin script) already being assimilated. We see the give and take evolving before our eyes.” **AJ**

## Images of Shiite Martyrdom

### Shi'ism: Waiting for the Hidden Imam

Said Bakhtaoui and Mohammad Balout  
First Run/Icarus Films, 2005  
53 minutes

### The Road to Kerbala

Katia Jarjoura  
First Run/Icarus Films, 2005  
53 minutes

#### BY PAMELA NICE

A timely release of two documentaries by First Run/Icarus Films is offering complementary views of Shiism for those interested in the growing influence of this branch of Islam.

“Shi’ism: Waiting for the Hidden Imam” is an historical overview of Shiism from its beginnings through today. (The term *Shiism* refers to the “partisans” of Ali, following his murder and the murder of his son Hussein in the fight over leadership of the early Muslim community). It combines news footage and interviews of Islamic scholars, Shiite clergy and politicians with visuals of the Shiite martyr Hussein.

“The Road to Kerbala” is a personal account by a Lebanese-Canadian filmmaker of the first allowed Shiite pilgrimage to Karbala in post-Saddam Iraq. What ties the two films together is a focus on the central Shiite concept of martyrdom, deriving from the story of Hussein, who was killed in the Battle of Karbala in 680 C.E.

Hussein – the son of Ali and grandson of Prophet Mohammed – is a major religious figure in Shiism, revered because of his stand against an unjust caliph, Yazid, in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Hussein’s paradigmatic story is interpreted as a fight against oppression and injustice for which death is an honorable sacrifice. This story unites the Shiite community, which, historically, has been oppressed in most Muslim societies. (Currently, Shiites comprise roughly 10 percent of the world’s one billion Muslims.) The filmmakers suggest that the martyrdom of Hussein (which has many parallels to the Passion of Christ) may have influenced the ideology of some suicide bombers today.

“Waiting for the Hidden Imam” makes good use of many

images of Hussein in battle, crying, wounded or suffering, whether on posters, in paintings or in television dramas, illustrating the power and omnipresence of this image of martyrdom in Shiite communities. Though portraits of Mohammed and other religious figures have traditionally been forbidden by Sunni scholars, one can see how these portraits of Hussein have contributed a deep emotional dimension to the Shiite experience of oppression.

“Waiting for the Hidden Imam” also explores a major difference between Sunni and Shiite Islam: the role of the imam. Though Sunnis deny that clergy have a place comparable to priests in Catholicism, for instance, Shiites believe in the need for learned and pious imams to spiritually guide Muslim society.



Courtesy of First Run/Icarus Films

They are “the speaking Qur’an,”– necessary interpreters of the Holy Book—according to one scholar interviewed in the film.

Shiites also believe that the last, or twelfth, imam, Mohammed el-Mahdi (who they believe disappeared in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century and has remained “hidden” by God since then) will emerge near the end of the world to bring a reign of justice and peace. Yet the role of imams remains controversial in contemporary Shiite societies. In Iran’s constitution, the ayatollah, or supreme guide, is the ultimate religious and political authority, above all laws and governing bodies. The filmmakers also point out, however, that Ayatollah Sistani of Iraq has a more nuanced view of the interaction of politics and religion.

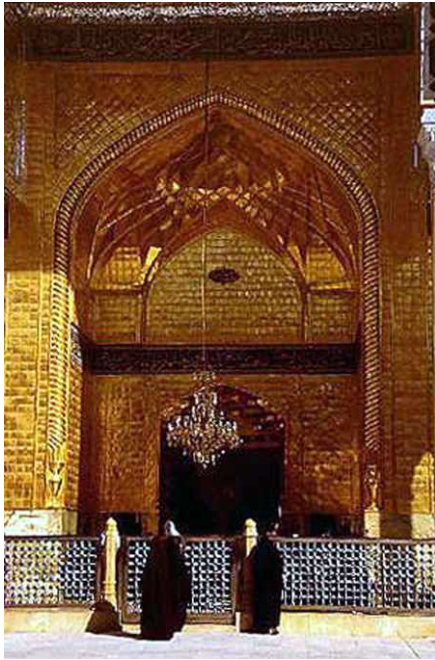
In its exploration of 20<sup>th</sup> century Shiite political movements, this film makes the case that Shiism will be a growing influence in Middle East politics. The Iranian revolution of 1979 created the first Shiite theocratic state. The influence of this state was not only confined to Iran, but has been a major influence in other Arab countries with substantial number of Shiites. Hezbollah in Lebanon, for example, embodies such influence. This Shiite



## Josef Fares Returns to Beirut for Swedish Film 'Zozo'

organization that ousted Israel from southern Lebanon has an established power base in south Lebanon and had become an indispensable player in Lebanese politics. Ayatollah Sistani's influence has grown beyond Iraq's borders. Who knows how Shiism may influence the new Iraqi state?

"The Road to Karbala" documents filmmaker Katia Jarjoura's participation in the annual pilgrimage to Karbala during the Shiite holy month of Ashura. Karbala is approximately 100 kilometers south of Baghdad, and the journey takes three days by foot. The pilgrimage commemorates the martyrdom of Hussein at Karbala and involves a visit



Courtesy of First Run/Icarus Films

to his tomb. Enactments of Hussein's martyrdom are part of the celebrations in Karbala, and pilgrims are seen flagellating themselves to participate in the pain of the martyred Hussein. However, as in "Waiting for the Hidden Imam," the filmmaker counters these images with the opinions of Shiites who reject this ritual action.

Jarjoura gives us a form of immersion journalism, since she does not present her journey as a personal religious experience, but rather as an outsider's observation. She is accompanied on the pilgrimage by Iraqi poet and novelist Hamid al-Mukhtar, who offers his reflections on Shiism, the symbolism of Hussein, and the cult of suffering and martyrdom that has evolved in Shiite religious practice.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of the film is its recording of a specific historical moment in Iraq – in April, 2004, after one year of American occupation. The presence of the U.S. military is often felt along the pilgrimage route; just as evident are the seemingly spontaneous eruptions of support for Muqtada al-Sadr, the young Shiite leader of that time.

The tension between the American military and the Shiite pilgrims is as obvious as the playing to Jarjoura's camera. In this sort of documentary, in which the filmmaker calls attention to herself as a filmmaker throughout, her role and the imposition of her camera is honestly acknowledged. We are also reminded of the ways in which the media has been so skillfully manipulated for political ends in the Middle East since 1979. **AJ**

### Zozo

Directed by Josef Fares  
Memfis Films  
102 minutes, 2005

BY JUDITH GABRIEL

"Zozo" was Sweden's official selection for Foreign Language Film at the 78th Annual Academy Awards. Set during the Lebanese civil war, it tells the story of a Lebanese boy whose family is waiting for their papers to emigrate to Sweden to join the boy's grandparents, who had already settled there.

On the day the documents are delivered, Zozo's mother Ward (Carmen Lebbos) sends him on an errand. As soon as he leaves his apartment building, it's shelled, killing both his parents. After Zozo's elder brother Dav (Jad Stephan) disappears to join the fighting, Zozo's only choice is to take his passport and ticket and try to get to the airport on foot, along with his pet chicken and a young girl he encounters along the way. He makes his own way



From "Zozo"

to Sweden alone, to be embraced by his grandparents who had settled there earlier.

When the scene shifts to Sweden, Zozo has to deal with being the newcomer in the midst of a typical local school, where the other schoolchildren have no inkling of what he has been through. Despite his overzealous efforts to fit in, Zozo finds himself at the receiving end of more senseless aggression from an older schoolyard bully. But ultimately, although he is haunted by loneliness for his mother, he makes a place for himself. The actor portraying Zozo, 10-year-old Imad Creidi, delivers an exquisite and nuanced performance, and he learned to speak Swedish – his fifth language – in just 10 days.

This is the third film from director Josef Fares. His previous two Swedish made films – "Jalla! Jalla" and "Kops" – were comedies, and although "Zozo" shows the tragic horrors of war, it has comedic moments, many of them stemming from the role of

*Continued on next page*

CD REVIEWS

# Traditional Arab Sounds via Urban Electronica

BY JUDITH GABRIEL

With Maghrebian and Arab roots as a general starting point, a crop of new CD releases exemplify the music's transformation as it passes through the spectrum of contemporary urban pop electronica – techno beat Arab music, trip-hop electro trance, jungle, lounge and

## “Zozo”

*continued from previous page*

the pet chicken, or in the loving gruffness of the salty Lebanese grandfather played by Elias Gergi.

Fares, who also wrote the script, himself was born in Beirut and emigrated to Örebro, Sweden at the age of 10. He began making films at the age of 15, and has directed several shorts. The shooting of “Zozo” marked his first return to Lebanon in 17 years, and many scenes were shot in his family's former apartment, which is now abandoned. The entire section of the film set in Lebanon packs a powerful and tragic wallop in its nightmare-like war zone scenes, with much of it enhanced with computer generated images.

The musical score by Adam Nordén uses a sad piano and duduk to balance the European and Arabic elements of the story, as well as an occasional guitar, a string ensemble and a choir.

In mid-January, the film was an official selection in the Palm Springs International Film Festival, and was the opening film at the Scandinavian Film Festival in Los Angeles. It also screened at the Toronto International Film Festival and the London Film Festival. **AJ**

chillout, coming from musicians in the recording capitals of the Arab world, as well as the immigrant suburbs of European cities. No matter what technological changes the music has undergone in these contemporary, trendy genres, its traditional origins continue to speak loud and clear.

From Putumayo World Music comes “Arabic Groove,” “North African Groove” and “Sahara Lounge,” three compilations that feature the best artists from both the traditional and the techno genres of Arab music renditions. Established in 1993, Putumayo's CD jackets feature the distinctive art of Nicola Heindl, whose colorful, folkloric style represents one of Putumayo's goals: to connect the traditional to the contemporary for its target audience of “cultural creatives.”



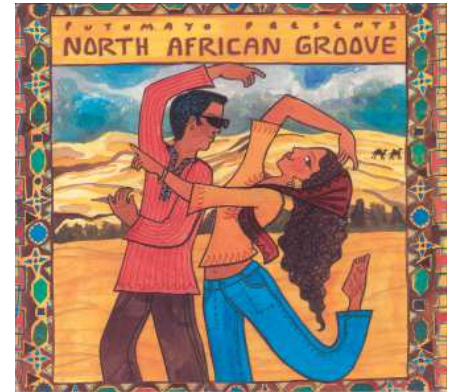
### ‘Arabic Groove’

“Arabic Groove” is a collection of tracks from North Africa and the Middle East, revealing the ways funk, hip-hop and dance have blended with Arabic music to create new sounds, representing the music filling nightclubs from Paris to Cairo. This compilation includes Abdel ali Slimani's unreleased single, “Moi Et Toi,” which speaks of dilemmas that northern African immigrants face when living abroad. The song's opening rhythm is typical Sufi, then abruptly shifts to reflect the song's theme of culture clash.

Also on the album are selections by Amr Diab, the first Arab artist to win a World Music Award, as well as Morocco's Abdy, Lebanon's Dania, Libya's Hamid el-Shaeri, Natacha Atlas, Fadela and Sahraoui, Khaled, Cheb Tarik, and others.

### ‘North African Groove’

Echoes of history can still be heard in the rhythms and melodies of North Africa's popular music, the record jacket notes point out. And while the electronic drum beats and other Western influences are clearly apparent in this modern genre,



the local sound is defined by traditional instruments and singing techniques.

On “Montuno Noreño,” the Cuban-Algerian band Jomed combines Arab-Andalusian music and *châabi*, a popular song form that is one of the roots of Algerian raï. Algerian raï superstar Khaled's “Aïcha” – a French-language track released in 1996 – was the first song by an Arab artist to hit number one in France.

The compilation also includes numbers by performers who have made Cairo their home: Samira Saeid grew up in Morocco's capital, Rabat, and after becoming a star at home, she moved to Egypt. Cheb Jilani, one of Libya's biggest stars and a growing presence in the rest of the Arab world, also moved to Cairo. Nubian Mohammed Mounir moved to Cairo in the 1970s to study art, and began performing songs from his region. His success helped pave the way for other Nubian artists. He was also one of the first Egyptian artists to be heavily influenced by Jamaican reggae.

### ‘Sahara Lounge’

Putumayo's “Sahara Lounge” is a mesmerizing album of laid-back fusions of traditional Middle Eastern melodies, rhythms and instrumentation with electronica, hip-hop beats and remixes.



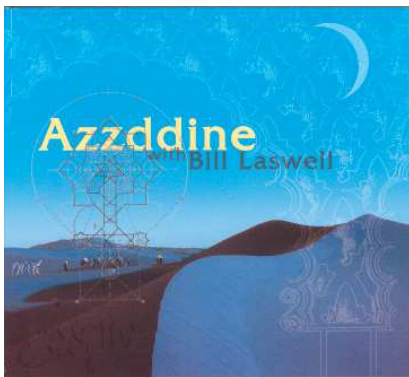


Algerian *rai*, Berber music, Sufi chants, and Egyptian *al-jeel* meet styles known as dub, trip hop, break beats and funk. It's eclectic, and the music of the region lends itself well to the treatments.

The compilation includes six rare and previously unreleased tracks, including the work of the Lebanese electronica duo Soap Kills. Ramin Sakurai's collaboration with Iranian artist Shiraz has never before been widely released, and is one of the best numbers in the album. Nabihya Yazbeck's "*Astahel*" has never been available outside of the Middle East until this release, and Bahia el-Idrissi's "*Arhil*" has been heard only by those few who managed to get a hold of his rare Dutch release.

### 'Massaft'

"*Massaft*" combines Berber blues, *shaabi*, *melhoune*, chill-out and trance sounds created by Azzddine Ouhnine, a blind oud player and composer from Morocco; along with the bass grooves of American musician and producer Bill Laswell, the *balieu*-French (spoken



in the multicultural suburbs around the major cities of France) and the rapping of Algerian singer Boualem, as well as the calm melodic oud and vocals of Azzddine,

with the slight distortion of the vocoder, the smack of electronic percussion and other elements of computer programming.

### Amira Saqati 'Destination Halal'

After more than 11 years of collaborations with diverse artists, Youssef el-Mejjad and Pat Jabbar finally released their third album, "Destination Halal" under the name of *Amira Saqati* (Moroccan dialect for "a piece of something.") The



recordings were made in Marrakech during Ramadan 2004, under conditions as *halal* – ritually pure – as possible.

The group was founded by members of the successful Moroccan underground trance band, Aisha Kandisha's Jarring Effects. The group blends Moroccan and North African music traditions (*Rai*, *Gnawa*, Berber music, *Jeel*) with Western dance and ambient sounds. Synthesizers and samplers sit alongside violins, mandolin, flute, *rai*-type vocals, and some electronic rhythms. **AJ**

## Contemporary Art

### Paintings by Zareh

[www.artistzareh.com](http://www.artistzareh.com)

## contributors

**Malek Abisaab** ("Treaties Trace Emergence of Region," p. 35) is an assistant professor of Modern History of the Middle East at the Institute of Islamic Studies and the history department, McGill University.

**Adonis** ("In the Shadow of Politics, in the Light of Truth," p. 32) is a prominent Arab author, poet and critic.

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**Sami Asmar** ("Tawfiq al-Basha (1924-2005): Passion for Modernizing and Popularizing Instrumental Arab Music," p. 44) is a NASA physicist, a co-founder of a classical Arab music ensemble in California and director of Turath.org, an online educational organization. His articles on Arab music have appeared in this magazine, other publications and books.

**Mohammad Ali Atassi** ("TV Documentary Series on Nezar Kabbani Presents Poet's Life as Sanitized, Commercial Spectacle," p. 4) is a Syrian author and critic. His articles and reviews appear regularly in An Nahar Literary Supplement.

**Brigitte Caland** ("Randa Chahal: 'Always This Running Away...' Filmmaker's Complex Identities Spawn Thematic Dualities," p.12) is a Los Angeles- and Paris-based writer, translator and a contributor to this magazine. She translated Edward Said's "Out of Place" into French ("*A Contre-Voie*," published by Le Serpent a plumes (2002)).

**Charbel Dagher** ("Don't Apologize for What You Wrote!," p. 9; "Not Every Death Is Worthy Of Death," p. 27) is a Lebanese poet, critic, academic and author of several books on Islamic art.

**Mohammad Dakroub** ("Issam Mahfouz (1939-2006): Recalling Poet, Playwright,

*Continued on page 43*

# Questioning Basics at a Time of Decline

## Black Region

By Adonis  
Dar As-Saqi, 2005

### BY JOHN NAOUM TANOUS

Questions about the origins of this world and the principles of survival amid historical currents haunted me as I read Adonis' latest book, "Black Region" – a great book, not for its voluminosity, but rather for its depth and varied thought. The title

foretells of darkness, referring to hatred and loss of freedom; it reflects the void of totalitarian states and theocracies, and the dominance of rigid social and cultural norms.

It is no exaggeration to suggest that this book is one of the most important works written by an Arab since the beginning of the renaissance almost 100 years ago. It is a book that disquiets its readers, forcing them to confront current

events with ancient historical roots such as terrorism, the veil, the crisis in Iraq, technology, East-West relations, globalization and the role of Beirut. Nowadays, analyses by intellectuals, especially those covered by the media, appear simplistic when compared with Adonis' fundamental analysis, which re-examines accepted facts and assumptions.

In fact, Adonis began his daring intellectual project with his thesis "*Al-Thabet wal-Mutahawell*" ("*The Static and the Dynamic*"), in which he offered a new interpretation of Arab culture and continued with "*Fatihah al-Qarn*" ("*Turn of the Century*"), finally ending his project with this book. I think this work may have little impact on the dominant mindset of the Arab world, but it is of benefit for those experiencing psychological and epistemological transformations. These individuals are like a grain of yeast in a dormant Arab society, a society that does not read or write. Can such a meager amount of yeast make a difference?

Summarizing the principal ideas in "Black Region," we conclude that Adonis believes the reading and interpretation of the religious text remains an ideological activity *par excellence* so that knowledge of this text leads to authoritarian power allied with the ruling elite. This alliance leads to a decline in *ta'aweel* (interpretation), an increase in violence, and the proliferation of exclusive and fanatic religious schools.

In other words, Adonis, who is a poet of change, observes that religion has entered the "world of the finite" and has succeeded in corrupting it. The Absolute seems fixed, complete, and final, with people and events becoming merely secondary, and

the final goal, rather than being the acquisition of more freedom, is the creation of more enslavement.

On the issue of the veil (*hijab*), Adonis believes there is no religious text that clearly imposes the hijab. He remarks that those calling for the hijab do not respect their compatriots and disrupt their way of life, leading Westerners to perceive the veil as a tool used for the violation of individual rights, even an invasion of those rights.

In Adonis' assessment, Islamic culture under the *Salafi* tradition has rarely been challenged; hence, it has never experienced the ensuing growth that emerges from introspection, skepticism, and rejection and has been left instead with dogma and self-reassurance. Every *murtad* (apostate) was killed, with each of these deaths taking place during the *ridda* (apostasy) wars.

Individualism disintegrates into the community, leaving one's religion to another or even to a lack of religion, constituting a withdrawal from the Islamic nation itself. Adonis asks, "How does Arab psychology analyze an individual who has no individualism or a self that is recognized only as a subject, rather than as a person?"

This question takes on new meaning as Adonis intertwines ideas of individual creativity with the personal psyche immersed in the community. The latter type has its psychological foundations in the roots of the fascist personality, as a number of prominent scientists have demonstrated with in-depth studies on significant historical figures like Luther and Calvin, or in their analyses of the masses who are fed absolutist dogma that divides humanity into the powerful and the weak, the believers and the heretics. In Islam, there is a similar division between those who believe and the infidels. Further, the worship of the text and the leader, which is associated with sadomasochism, strongly applies to the Arab personality, that fades away in this group-nation.

In the case of Iraq, Adonis does not believe that Saddam created Iraq, rather that Iraq created Saddam. Thus, our poet confronts Iraq, a country that has allowed the formation of a monstrous regime like that of Saddam's. The problem then lies in a people that accepts oppression and allows it for whatever reason, a condition attributable to a one-dimensional cognitive structure. No wonder the former regime fought artistic creativity in its many manifestations and firmly established an authoritarian culture and the culture of the state, not to mention the authority of the tribe, the clan, and sectarian and ideological loyalties.

Adonis takes on a more sarcastic tone when referring to the many poets and writers who converged on the regime's *marabid* (Saddam's cultural festivals) where they glorified Saddam's heroics and accomplishments ranging from "the Mother of All Battles," *Kadissiyat Saddam* (wars with Iran), the massacre of the Kurds at Halabja, and various other significant and not-so significant battles. However, the complexity of the regime structures and its possession of advanced weapons have always managed to suppress Iraqi resistance to oppression, resistance that might have succeeded in earlier times, such as during the era of the sword and shield.

As for American dominance, Adonis sees the U.S. as the new Rome, which needs a new Christ to help control its aggressive





instincts. Adonis does not agree with the American discourse, which portrays the world as divided into two camps: Good and Evil. This division deprives humankind of its humanity and takes away their rights as people. There is an urgent need for a new renaissance in which Europe and the Third World can participate and establish a New World based on openness, generosity and creativity.

Then there is the role of Beirut – a role that, in our view, can be distinguished from those of other Arab cities, though Beirut shares many characteristics with them – which has become part of the debate in the wake of the strong attack launched by some Lebanese and Arab intellectuals against the generalizations imparted by Adonis about the city, in a speech he gave two years ago. It is true that Beirut has declined, but the reasons for this decline are beyond its control. It is true that many Lebanese share the responsibility for Beirut's decline, but the city remains relatively the best that the East can offer and continues to be the focus of Adonis' admiration. It is remarkable that Adonis diagnoses Beirut as having many repressed capacities, as a city without civility, full of conflict and exclusion. Indeed, it is no more than a mixture of church, mosque and shop.

Without doubt the crisis coaxes from Adonis, the great poet of rejection, his finest words. He sees the crisis as a sign of burgeoning life that should allow freedom of choice, growth, and renewal. The problem is that most Arabs do not understand the depth of their crisis, and their societies recognize not a crisis but collapse. Their current lifestyles are based on killing and exclusion; and most of their intellectuals are new *fuqaha* (religious experts), offering no conclusive responses to challenges.

Upon completing "Black Region" one is left with the impression that the Arab world is a desert of ashes, with millions of human beings dead in body and soul. This characterization is deep and honest, because it acknowledges that the minds of most Arabs have become frighteningly complacent. Can this be a surprise when the average person in the Arab world spends less than five minutes reading each year?

Perhaps I have not done justice to this book, nor to Adonis, with this journalistic account of "Black Region." This book is a milestone in the history of Arab culture, and one of the most daring and confrontational of the established principles in the Arab world written during a period that has witnessed the collapse of political parties and regimes, and the increase of decadence

of intellectuals and peoples. Of note is the death of the ideas of nationalism, socialism and Arab unity, and we should not forget that ideological "intellectuals" made the literary and political texts an authoritative victory that is pseudo-religious. When we look around, we see that creative thinkers are subject to insult and injury, while trite critics and TV personalities receive praise and appreciation. Everything is ash, a barren desert; yet hope remains, just as when there is too much sin, blessings abound. If, however, we do not recognize and accept the blessings, they may, indeed, become a curse. **AJ**

*Translated from the Arabic by Kamal Dib*

*This review appeared in An Nahar Newspaper. The author has granted Al Jadid the right to translate and publish this review.*

### Not Every Death is Worthy Of Death

BY CHARBEL DAGHER

The dead by retail trading in a wholesale war,  
The dead by wholesale trading in a retail war,  
Death proportional to the number of biographers  
To the number of the living standing in line to pay their respects  
Proportional to the number of wreath buyers  
To the number hunting for a show in open-air theaters  
Death proportional to the quantities of life given to those who direct it;

The satellites' search for a soldier's single shoe after a desert storm,  
While the nameless sunken dead pile up, or part ways as the case may be:  
No concern that they were buried in a mass grave,  
Without their families' presence,  
Without a televised or printed photograph,  
For nationalistic flags do not befit them as coffins  
But befit only others!

It is not enough that you die,  
But where and in whose company you die,  
For the dead is one who is missed,  
Is one whose return is expected,  
Whose seat is kept warm after departure,  
Whose legacy is lit by a burning oil candle:

The dead is an impatient future governed by the past,  
It does not wait for anyone,  
It is not expected by anyone,  
It has sunken marks in antique friezes.

*Translated from the Arabic by Basil Samara*

*From "A'raba Lishakl." Published by Al Muassasa al-Arabiyya lil Dirasaat wa al-Nashr, Beirut, 2004.*

# The City's Keeper

*Dedicated to Jalil al-Qaysi\**

BY MOUAYED AL-RAWI

(1)

**You see**

**What no eyes see:**

(Your eyes are like precious rubies)

You see us ride on calm winds  
that beat at our sails  
We hope for awe but carry  
The coals of what's to come  
And with the same rising flames,  
You wait  
    for a ship  
        that sails  
            from  
                the past

You await its flood  
to overcome a time, whose history you  
    can organize;  
        you place this person here  
        and that person there  
Not because of compassion, but because  
    spirits are like that:  
They quarrel  
and make up.  
After the flood, the ship arrives wrecked  
You begin to stitch it  
as if you were teaching manners to a  
    child that cannot speak  
Then, on clay, you inscribe the names of  
    those who can stay and those who can  
    leave

**because  
you were deluded  
and believed that delusion**

.....  
Here we are,  
next to cages overflowing with illusions  
that we nurture with long sleep  
So that we may delude the illusions.  
We pass our days on the backs of  
butterflies that die  
Here we are masked with content  
Inside locked rooms  
That we sometimes open – during the  
    anesthesia of our illusions – onto the  
    nights,

hoping for someone to surprise us  
with a shovel that digs out what's in our  
    hearts,  
or for someone who reveals our faces  
with eyes from the past

Without a lantern,  
we gamble and throw dice like thieves  
on who or what will come into our  
    dreams.  
A bird, a hunter?  
Or maybe a fortuneteller  
who narrates our tale  
and advises us to follow  
the smugglers  
    to those lands.

Here we stand bankrupt of illusions  
because  
we invested in the same illusions.  
Days shed their skin like snakes  
and every day was like any other day;  
time passed by  
    slowly  
    as we  
    waited for  
another wind to move our sail.

.....  
(2)

**You see**

**What no eyes see:**

(Your eyes are like corals that warn of  
an      apocalypse)  
The sweat on your forehead is an  
    emblem  
of airplane whose fires deepen the  
    graves of the dead  
Some soldiers win the war  
and others lose:  
it's an auction on an ancient mask.

Eyes widen in awe,  
When death is justified—with an easy  
    conscious—

as a joke  
or a gambler's game.  
A cloud rises like saffron.  
Above the village,  
Splitting trees that  
declare people as coal's fuel.

Personifying prophets is more powerful  
    than gods  
The ambition of pretenders is higher t  
    than the sky  
They come like imposturous visionaries  
who bet  
on power and never lose.

**You see**

everyone in their hideaway.  
The constant image of your face makes  
    the Room of Intension turbid.  
The eyes are shut  
to shun away creatures that crawl out of  
    the ceiling's cracks,  
holding knives in their hands  
and inviting you to their feasts

You watch the snakes sneak  
into the cradles of infants  
that you rock  
You watch them scatter the ashes that lie  
    before you.

.....  
(3)

**You see**

**What no eyes see:**

(In your eyes, there are emeralds. Gold  
    covers your eyebrows)

You predict what's to come:  
A fate that carries riddles that only you  
    can solve  
You heal people—dwarfed from fear—  
You bandage them in beds:  
Petrified corpses  
that have dried out long ago  
for the lumberman's use.

Your scalpel weeps inside the heart,  
but your doors have lost the keys.

## Poem

The cities, the streets, the sky  
and the food are rotten.  
The waters that wash the sins  
pour prayers for deliverance,  
prayers that are in the unnfathomable  
words of the devil.

You know that flood follows the fire  
and yields about rotten fruit:  
    You see diseases waiting to  
    strike.  
    You see a shepherd guiding his  
    ship to wolves,  
but there is no escape even in  
prayers;  
Even those who pray at dawn  
fear time's escape.

(4)

### You see

#### What no eyes see:

You see in malice fields that can never  
recover;  
in the seeds of evil, children grow.  
An unknown hand stops them  
when you return from the caves as an  
old man.  
You carry treasures  
over your hunched back.  
You collected them from the heavens—  
When the gods fought, they threw you  
gifts;  
scriptures  
of empty promises  
that advocate sin  
and ask you to find light in the dark.

.....  
Writing on mud occupies you  
You find inspiration when the gates of  
heaven shake and the rivers flood  
Your sky is gray and your river floods  
with corpses.  
As you move through the past, your  
language changes  
You grasp your fingers in fear  
when they turn stiff: the bones are not  
yours.  
You hide in the grass like a fearful bird,  
Someone else's fingerprints are on the  
ax  
that conceals its intentions as it falls  
over a neck  
Language is the trap

and the words that you carve have  
    already been inscribed  
by a hunter who loves birds.  
You chose  
words  
that are mere words.  
You carry them to ancient kingdoms  
and bring them back to earth  
with their useless wisdom;  
Earth, as you can see, is only earth  
Elements are that way too:  
They do not change  
Humans are the same:  
They don't get  
lost in words.

.....  
(5)

### You see

#### What no eyes see:

(A city made out of rock with a river that  
diurnally floods and dries. This river's  
addiction and time are its guards)  
Angels took refuge in your house of  
stone,  
which God forgot about or neglected for  
a reason.  
The fortress of "Kirkuk" was  
abandoned to soldiers,  
who bargained with history and took its  
claws.  
They crossed the city's bridge in order  
to lock the doors of "Shaterlo"  
    Heaven closed the doors  
    and you lost all sense of place.  
You see soldiers dressed in ancient  
armors  
As they build fortresses  
and then destroy their walls.  
Heavy in iron—you spy on them—they  
guard the gardens of "Almaz."  
At dawn, the dead cry over the hill of  
"Damer Bash."  
So you bring them shovels to scare away  
the wolves.  
You stay far away from "Sary Kahyah"  
and wander around "Arafah" that is  
fenced in green:  
You preserve  
the places that are yours  
and make them bridges for our  
memories.  
Like dreams, strangers come;

they cross the Sahara and the  
mountains.  
They mix sand with snow  
and cook over wasted fire.  
You give them the rock and the curves of  
the road.  
Yet the city remains obscure;  
It has a soul that is guarded by gods.  
It conceals its rising; in secrets lies a  
legacy  
that enriches existence  
and protects the city

(6)

### You see

#### What no eyes see:

The plague has always started here.  
Purification was the excuse  
for the use of fire.  
You came to us,  
Running  
in a saint's  
robe,  
unaware that being an orphan among  
orphans  
is like the howls  
of a ferocious dog.

(7)

### You see

#### What no eyes see:

(Seasons without a single flower that  
can flourish inside the memory)  
the dead bring them from the past as  
ashes  
or as faces that disappear like ghosts  
from fever or madness  
that weaves dreams to obstruct famine.

In the morning, we came to you carrying  
our harbors  
(every sea was a garden for waning  
flowers ).  
in the evening, we came to you drowned  
in alcohol.  
We dialogued at noon  
and carried fires to decorate your joy.  
We called you the knight of all times  
and your horses our imagination.

You're the hope for enlightenment  
You reside in our memories,  
nurturing us. As you can see,

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# Two New Poetry Volumes by Arab Americans: Inner Voices in the Shadow of the Twin Towers

## Zaatar Diva

By Suheir Hammad  
Cypher, New York, 2005

## Into It

By Lawrence Joseph  
New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005

## Codes, Precepts, Biases and Taboos

By Lawrence Joseph  
New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux

### BY JUDITH GABRIEL

Their voices muted in the chilling shadows of post-9/11 hysteria, Arab Americans dwell in a realm of uncertainty and daily indignation, the targets of

demonization. While lawyers and civil rights groups may publicly raise their legal outcries against discrimination and prejudice, few mere humans who have been stung, slighted or struck because of their Arabic name or accent dare to speak out. With all the fear, indignation and outrage that they might express amongst themselves, there is no individual narrative to describe the draining, infuriating shadows that permeate and shape their daily life.

To produce such a narrative, one would have to be a poet, for perhaps only that voice slips through the tightly controlled gates of media compliance and neighborhood prejudice to bespeak the complexities, indignities, vulnerabilities and prayers of being human – and Arab

American – in these times.

Two Arab-Americans residents of New York City at the time when the Twin Towers were toppled on 9/11, Suheir Hammad and Lawrence Joseph, have expressed their individual responses to that and other aspects of contemporary urban life in newly published collections of poetry.

There is plenty of such voice given here, some with a discernible “accent,” incorporating their ethnic identity – and much more in a distinctly universal “American” vein. And while the poems do not only focus on images at Ground Zero, or the suspicion with which immigrants and second-generation children of immigrants are treated in America, these experiences and observations are integrated into the

---

we chat about you and secretly join your  
breakfast.

with you, we’ve shared the fear  
that our past will become our present,  
A burdensome present that we  
hold  
and examine.

a cloud of steel  
turns the seasons desolate.

(8)

### You see

#### What no eyes see:

Time moves like an old train  
that God steers for you at a slow pace  
because there is wisdom in death  
or resurrection.

Time pollutes the smoke of days and  
stains them with darkness.

Like the flags of sins,  
it encourages the beating and tearing of  
ribs.

It is a void of darkness;  
You stand in it and turn on the lights for  
the scene:

Masked actors and a storyteller

that hides a vampire beneath  
his garment  
causes people to wander the  
streets  
and dine on blood.

We see  
And you also see:  
In the distorted light, crowds  
gather in pretentious rituals.  
They carry incantations and  
rags  
of the same face that that you  
bless

The happy drummers return  
weary,  
absent;  
their music had led the crowds into the  
ocean  
to drown.

(9)

### You see

#### What no eyes see:

(In your tears lies the bewilderment of  
knowledge)  
Blood delves into the city

and cleanses the dead  
that are enshrouded in white and yet  
ragged garments  
fences divide the nations,  
and turns souls rancid.  
Yet you remain the enchanter at your  
ongoing feasts.  
You’re the city’s keeper;  
You rescue us from those who hold us  
under siege.

You speak to us of sins  
and punishment.

**You stand like an ax  
written on our foreheads  
since the beginning of time.**

**Translated from the Arabic by  
Rim and Razzan Zahra**

*\*Jalil al-Qaysi is a short story author,  
playwright who lives in Kirkuk. He  
stopped writing in the last years of the  
Baathist regime to resume his creative  
activities in 2003.*

other parts of their lives: their memories, their loves, their sidewalk encounters still occur in the space of being Arab in America.

Suheir Hammad was born in a Palestinian refugee camp in Amman, Jordan in 1973. Her family immigrated to the United States when she was five, settling in the New York City area (first Brooklyn and later Staten Island). She is most often referred to as a Palestinian from Brooklyn, and her work carries with it the sense and beat of the city streets where she grew up around the 1980s hip hop culture.

Her first book of poetry, "Born Palestinian, Born Black," was published when she was 22 years old, and she went on to write "Drops of this Story." She was an original writer and cast member of the TONY Award winning Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam on Broadway, and has twice received the Audre Lorde Writing Award from Hunter College

Her recently published "ZaatarDiva" is poetry about love, politics, humanity and art, all emerging, as it were, from Hammad's bag of *za'atar*, the traditional Arab spice mix made of thyme, sumac, and sesame seeds. (And in fact, for people ordering her book online, a free bag of the spice mix is sent out. For everyone who buys the book, it comes with a CD of her reading the collection.)

Hammad weaves the personal into the public, a public transformed in the wake of 9/11 and other calamities. As a Palestinian American, the political status of her identity infuses her compassion for other displaced persons. Everywhere she goes in the movements of her daily life, she cannot escape flashes of the human drama around the globe. Her poetry is infused with rhythm, building into the sense of urgency with which she addresses the alienation she sees around her.

In "first writing since" (all her titles are lowercase), she responds to the events of 9/11 in a seven-part poem. She describes distraught New Yorkers frantically, hopelessly, looking for survivors, and how she prays, "please god, after the second plane, please, don't let it be anyone/who looks like my brothers." And one person "ask me if i knew the hijackers."

She questions the public Arabophobic

reactions: "and when we talk about holy books and hood men and death,/ why do we never mention the kkk?" she asks; and later declares, "if there are any people on earth who understand/ how new york is feeling right now/ they are in the west bank and the gaza strip." She concludes the poem explaining that "i have not cried at all while writing this. i cried when i saw those/ buildings collapse on themselves



Lawrence Joseph

like a broken heart."

Another Arab American whose observations and questions focus on various frontlines of urban and international life is Lawrence Joseph. "Into It" is Joseph's new book of poems woven from events before, during and after Sept. 11, 2001. He lived just a block away from Ground Zero, and he interjects surreal details from the twin attacks in several of his poems. In "Unyielding Present," he imagines himself inside the targeted towers and wonders "what transpires in/ a second. On an intact floor/ A globe of the world/ bursts like a balloon. A ceiling mounted/ exit sign is melting."

Weaving in the experiences and tensions of being an Arab American in the post 9/11 U.S., his poetic questions and meditations are woven into his sharp-eyed meanderings in the city streets. He views the geopolitical terrain with a stung and

savvy scrutiny, and he challenges the times when "The technology to abolish truth is now available/ not everyone can afford it, but it is available/ when the cost comes down, as it will, then what?"

Joseph was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1948. His grandparents were Lebanese and Syrian Catholics, among the first Arab American emigrants to the United States. He attended Catholic schools in Detroit, where his family endured segregation and violence. In 1970, his father was shot when the family's market was robbed at gunpoint, and the Lebanese civil war of the 1980s gave him another powerful subject, suggesting a "God/ who changes tears into bombs."

Since then, he has had five books of poetry published, and one of prose. His settings are the urban landscape, as well as images from his childhood, reflecting the strong influence of his family. He still lives in downtown Manhattan, and is a professor of law at St. John's University School of Law.

A collection of his poems written between 1973 and 1993, titled "Codes, Precepts, Biases, and Taboos," was also released at the same time as "Into It." It includes the previously published poem, "Sand Nigger," which made a shockingly dramatic statement when it was first published in 1988. ("In the house in Detroit/ in a room of shadows/ when Grandma reads her Arabic newspaper/ ...Outside the house my practice/ is not to respond to remarks/ about my nose or the color of my skin. 'Sand nigger,' I'm called...")

His work is an intense meditation about the causes and consequences of these times when "the weight of violence/ is unparalleled in the history / of the species." And elsewhere, he notes: "The immense enlargement/ of our perspectives is confronted/ by a reduction in our powers of action, which reduces/ a voice to an inner voice inclined to speak only/ to those closest to us ..."

Unless, of course, the voice is that of a poet, and those "closest to us" become the readers. **AJ**

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## Persian Gardens & Iranian Prisons

### Translating the Garden

By M. R. Ghanoonparvar

Austin: Universities of Texas Press, 2001.

### The Bathhouse

By Farnoosh Moshiri

Seattle: Black Heron Press, 2001.

### The Persian Bride

By James Buchan

New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000.

### Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran

By Elaine Sciolino

Illustrated. New York: The Free Press, 2000.

### The Dance of the Rose and the Nightingale

By Nesta Ramazani

Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002.

### Missing Persians: Discovering Voices in Iranian Cultural History

By Nasrin Rahimieh

Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001.

### BY JUDITH GABRIEL

An increasing number of literary works, originally penned in any of a myriad of tongues, find their way into the reading diets of American readers – a largely monolingual audience. All too often, the process of translating these works is taken for granted, and the translator's name is quickly passed over. In "Translating the Garden," M. R. Ghanoonparvar, a prolific practitioner of his complex and largely unappreciated trade, captures the process in a fascinating narrative as he sets to work

translating modern Iranian literature.

The work in translation is "Goftogu dar Bagh," (Dialogue in the Garden) by Shahrokh Meskub, and although relatively short, it is a culturally complex work exploring the Persian psyche through perceptions of art, literature, identity and spirituality. To translate it into English – to render its allusions and references meaningful and in alignment with the intent of the author – is a time-consuming mission. In describing the process, the translator also opens doors to Persia's rich literary tradition and contemporary culture, noting: "As any translator would concede, translating, especially literary translation, is not just the act of rendering words, phrases and sentences from one language to another; rather, it involves the translating or transmitting of culture." As an example, Ghanoonparvar points out that the "garden" of the title is a translation of the Persian *bagh* – yet the meaning is more complex than the English term, embracing concepts such as homeland and imagined or remembered worlds.

While staying away from any heavy theorizing, Ghanoonparvar is honest about the struggles to find the right word, the proper tone, and the often imperfect results: "I also hope to show how and why in practice every translation is inevitably a failure, with occasional moments of success." Ghanoonparvar begins the book by presenting several translations of one section of the text by other translators, then moves on to focus on his own process as he worked his way through the text. He explains certain decisions, as well as key aspects of the original text.

For one thing, punctuation was introduced quite late into the Persian language and does not follow English conventions. In addition, Persian word order places the verb at the end of the sentence. Besides the matter of semantics and syntax, there is the larger picture of the text and complex, multilayered metaphors and allusions. Ghanoonparvar recounts how he struggles to find just the right word – based on its sound, its connotation and denotations and the intended meanings, particularly for words

## In the Shadow of Politics, in the Light of Truth

BY ADONIS

Censorship in Arab life is not only a state practice, but it is an organic part of this life and its culture.

The Arab-Muslim today is, strictly speaking, a censor.

But, let's all dream of another type of censorship:

preventing unemployment, poverty, emigration, repression, and oppression with all their forms, and they are many,

preventing hospitals from refusing to admit patients on the pretext that they cannot pay for their admission,

preventing the poor and the needy from turning into thieves or bribees so that they can live and provide livelihood for their children,

preventing the intellectual and creative abilities from leaving their countries seeking freedom and an honorable life,

preventing the isolation of women and their deprivation from complete entry into the worlds of employment, politics and culture,

etc.-etc...

*Translated from the Arabic by Basil Samara*

*Included in a long essay that appeared in Al Hayat newspaper*



that have mystical meanings such as those tied to Persian Sufi literature. He shows that translation not only involves searching for the “right” words, but also an interpretation of the text. For the translator, it’s often a thankless task, as Ghanoonparvar says, for “when a translation is successful, usually the original author gets the praise for having written a masterpiece, but if it fails or even reproduces the failures of the original, the translator gets the blame.”

Both the translator and the author of the text merit praise in this instance. Ghanoonparvar examines the dialogue between the two Iranian intellectuals in “The Garden,” setting the groundwork for it by delving into questions of the nature of migration and emigration, and some specifics about Iranian migration itself, particularly as it relates to Meskub’s text, in which “the ‘loss of the garden’ or the loss of Paradise and the nostalgic desire to return home, even if it is to die there, is a metaphor for the loss of roots.” The reward, for English readers, is twofold: besides gaining entrée into a modern Persian literary text, they will, having been allowed to hover over the translator’s shoulder as he wrestled with linguistic and cultural enigmas, find that text to be enriched and clarified.

Winner of the Black Heron Press Award for Social Fiction, “**The Bathhouse**” is **Farnoosh Moshiri**’s second English-language novel. Her first, “At the Wall of the Almighty,” tells the story of a nameless male political prisoner in the El-Deen prison. “The Bathhouse,” a much shorter work, is similar in that the central character – this time a young woman – remains nameless as she tells of her time in an old bathhouse used as a prison. The story, although fictitious, is based on interviews with former Iranian women prisoners. Both works combine literary beauty and the stark horrors of torture and repression.

The nameless girl of “The Bathhouse” is the daughter of a secular professor and the sister of an activist who finds herself imprisoned in the early years of the revolution along with other activists’ relatives, as well as women who are political activists themselves. Their lives are sheer nightmares, which Moshiri captures in a restrained yet chilling way, tautly recreating the

horror of prison life through sounds and cinematic incidents. Captors lead the prisoners around by leashes because the women are considered to be “untouchable devils.” Women who “repent” wear black veils and must supervise the unrepentant; the book deals with how the vulnerable are manipulated into collaborating in their own victimization, as well as the confrontation between the oppressor and the oppressed and the bonds formed by the captives. Trying to help one another, the inmates form a kind of family, often making sacrifices for one another; ironically, the girl is punished for feeding the starving baby of a fellow prisoner, and she loses many friends to terrible deaths. It is the humanity of these women that “The Bathhouse” extracts from the torment they endured.



“Lion And Women On Khaju Bridge,” Isfahan, Iran, 2005, Archival Pigment Print, 11” x 14”

Moshiri grew up in a literary family in Tehran. She worked as a playwright and fiction writer in Iran, before fleeing the country in 1983, after her play was banned and its director and cast arrested. Moshiri went underground, eventually escaping to Afghanistan, then to India. She has lived in Houston since 1987.

“**The Persian Bride**,” an epic novel by **James Buchan** that spans the last quarter century in Iran, was first published in Britain under the title “A Good Place to Die.” It is the story of a young Englishman, John Pitt, who comes to Isfahan in the early 1970s, and with a faked university degree, gets a job teaching

English at a local language school for girls. Almost immediately, he falls in love with one of his pupils, Shirin Faramah. The two elope and escape to a deserted villa on the Persian Gulf coast, but in the turbulence of the fading years of the shah, with the specter of the secret police hovering over them, they are separated. As he searches for his missing wife and child, Pitt is arrested and tortured in the infamous Evin prison.

Pitt’s quest ultimately leads him to Afghanistan and Kashmir and to the front lines of the Iran-Iraq war. Having survived the resurgence of political Islam, Pitt declares: “The effect of the revolution has not been to revive religion in Iran but to make it hateful to all but the portion of the population that has a material interest in it, that gets its bread and water from the mosque.”

A former foreign correspondent for The Financial Times,

Buchan's description of the Iranian scenario reflects a familiarity and nuanced understanding of the country's political and cultural realities, and frequently alludes to Persian poetry and the Quran.

**Elaine Sciolino** has had more experience covering Iran than any other American reporter, reporting on the events of the past two decades for Newsweek and The New York Times. In "**Persian Mirrors**," she paints a portrait of the Iran of today, with an emphasis on changes permeating the society under increasing liberalization of attitudes and the declining sway of the mullahs. But while she finds resistance and modernization, there is no rebellion per se, and she finds that Iranians are still motivated by piety and patriotism. Nonetheless, the changes are there, in restaurants, schools, aerobic classes and private homes, and Sciolino documents the experiments in democracy and Islam she has witnessed.

That most visible symbol, the *chador*, is still the rule of the day, but there's some relaxation of attitudes toward women's dress, and Sciolino quotes an Iranian woman writer who characterizes the garment as an ever-changing symbol: "An emblem now of progress, then of backwardness, a badge now of nationalism, then of domination, a symbol of purity, then of corruption, the veil has accommodated itself to a puzzling diversity of personal and political ideologies." Currently, many women are subtly attempting to subvert the dress code, and are now allowed to wear a headscarf, providing that it covers all the hair, as well as a kind of raincoat outer garment. But even this is likely to change, as Sciolino notes, "The Islamic Republic is a fluid place where the rules are hard to keep straight because they keep changing. What is banned one day might be permitted the next."

Written in a lively, reportorial narrative, yet filled with insight and nuanced observation, Sciolino includes her own experiences as a Western woman, one who, by virtue of her journalistic ingenuity, as well as by gender, has gained rare access to the otherwise veiled lives of her Iranian counterparts.

"The Dance of the Rose and the Nightingale" is the autobiography of a young girl growing up in Iran. The daughter

of an English Christian mother and an Iranian Zoroastrian father, Nesta Ramazani was allowed a distinctly liberal lifestyle for her time and place, one that took her into the world of Persian and Western music, poetry and dance. She violated convention when she became a member of the first Iranian ballet company, which had been established by an American woman, performing a synthesis of Persian and Western forms throughout Iran and other countries.

Dancing was not the only taboo she surmounted, both as a female given certain freedom ("Never before had a young girl from a good family danced in public") and a member of a minority – her grandfather was a leader of the Zoroastrian community and a member of Parliament. In many ways, her life was exceptional for the time and place into which she was born, and her account reads like a novel. Ramazani lays out an Iranian landscape, both culturally and personally, that few have access to. In velvet prose, she brings the reader behind the screen, into family settings and shows the way that the changing political scenario impacted their lives. Ramazani today is Associate Dean of Humanities and Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta.

**Nasrin Rahimieh** learned as a child that linguistic and cultural identities were changeable and negotiable. With family border crossings between Persia and Azerbaijan, she was familiar with many levels of migration and exile, yet ultimately rediscovered a need to submerge herself in Persian culture. She found herself drawn to works by her "missing Persians" throughout history, interested in how they had dealt with cross-cultural transplanting.

In "**Missing Persians**," Rahimieh presents selected narratives written from the 16th century to modern times. Each of the five chapters is devoted to a particular individual who traveled away from Persia either in an actual or a metaphorical journey. Together, they represent ways in which Persian travelers have interacted with other cultures and how these interactions helped them to define themselves. **AJ**

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## Heartbreak, Soapsuds and Patriotism on Egyptian TV

### Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt

By Lila Abu-Lughod  
University of Chicago Press, 2005.

#### BY LYNNE ROGERS

Admirers of “Veiled Sentiments and Writing Women’s Worlds” will not be disappointed with Lila Abu-Lughod’s new work, “Dramas of Nationhood, the Politics of Television in Egypt.” From an ethnographic and social stance, Abu-Lughod looks at the popular Egyptian television serials of the 1990s, particularly those shown during Ramadan, as “the articulation of the transnational, the national, the local and the personal.”

In the first of three sections, “Anthropology and National Media,” Abu-Lughod shares her methodology which examines the dynamics of national television produced by the urban elites for consumption by marginalized rural and women viewers. Watching and analyzing the television serials with rural women during her extensive travels to Upper Egypt and with domestic workers in Cairo, she paints an intimate picture of their lives and the dignity of their viewing responses.

In her discussion of methodology, Abu-Lughod not only introduces her topic of national television as “a significant presence in quotidian life” but also gives an informative overview of the debates in contemporary anthropology. She argues that “national television is imbricated in deeply political efforts to make nations into legitimate units, dominated by particular groups and with specific images of and visions for themselves and for their citizens.” The breadth of her research confirms her enthusiasm that “Television may be one of the richest and most intriguing technologies of nation-building in Egypt, because it works at both the cultural and socio-political levels, and it weaves its magic through pleasures and subliminal framing.”

In Part Two, “National Pedagogy,” Abu-Lughod outlines the Egyptian agenda to promote education, modernity, and nationalism to the uneducated and poor through the television serials. She cautions that these well-intentioned discourses actually silence their intended viewers by creating a negative self-image for those for whom “quality education, like other resources, is not equally available.”

Despite the government’s initiatives and the efforts of foreign aid, she stresses the problem “that unless the basic structures of economic and political life that could sustain such values are put into place more universally in Egypt, the values themselves come only to symbolize a lack on the part of many villagers: their inability to measure up to the ideals.” While the drama and spectacle offer entertainment and open a space for public discussion of relevant social and moral issues, the serials do not “threaten, or question, the basic inequalities or structures

of political power and class.”

In the third part, “The Eroding Hegemony of Developmentalism,” Abu-Lughod asserts that the aesthetics of developmental realism of Egyptian television foster the individuality and inner life of ordinary people. Despite the negative self-image one may carry away from the lifestyles and commodities portrayed in the television series, the emotional quandaries and romantic resolutions can “enforce a sense of the importance of the individual subject.” As an emotional individual, the disenfranchised viewer moves into “a better position to be a modern citizen, subject to the state rather than family or community, something nationalistic and middle-class television producers want from their melodramas.” To fight the disillusionment of post-Nasser Egypt and to combat the lure of extremism, television serials strive to reinforce the individual civic responsibility to the nation.

In her conclusion, “Star Magic and the Forms of National Affinity,” Abu-Lughod examines the national intimacy and moral ambivalence in the marginal viewer’s relationship with the popular stars of these series. Despite Abu-Lughod’s innate sensitivity to and erudite understanding of contemporary Egypt, with her professional modesty, she never claims to be an “insider,” only an astute observer. Her subtle sense of humor and irony balance her academic vigor throughout this engaging text. “Dramas of Nationhood” contains a helpful bibliography for academics interested in women and media studies, anthropology, or the Middle East. While Abu-Lughod concludes that these serials “entertain these communities and seek to draw them into the nation, but [they] do not suggest how they might transform their nation state to make it a more equitable or just place,” her own work serves as an example of humanitarian research. Once again, Lila Abu-Lughod reconfirms the vitality and potential of Middle Eastern scholarship.

## Treaties Trace Emergence of Region

### Sources in the History of the Modern Middle East

By Akram Fouad Khater  
Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004.

#### BY MALEK ABISAAB

In “Sources in the History of the Modern Middle East,” Akram Khater presents a varied and significant array of primary sources that tackles distinct events and ideas that shaped the last 200 years of Middle Eastern history. For those interested in studying or teaching the history of the Middle East, Khater’s contribution lies in the multifaceted nature of the documents and works included in “Sources.” Khater’s approach to the works included in his book was shaped not only by his scholarship, but

also, he notes, by his experience teaching Middle Eastern history in North America. "Sources" includes no fewer than 70 treaties translated from their original Middle Eastern languages into English. This painstaking process of collection and translation promises to meet the growing demand Khater predicted among Western students for first-hand Middle Eastern documents that are not reduced to partial perspectives or limited narratives.

The book is divided into four parts that are thematically arranged. The first part furnishes a number of documents covering socio-political, economic, educational and religious reforms and the reactions to them in different Middle Eastern societies. In this part, Khater exposes the reader to the ideas of Nazira Zayn al-Din, an obscure Lebanese feminist thinker, who published an important book in 1929 that called for the unveiling of women and that demanded certain rights for Muslim women from patriarchal and social restrictions. Zayn al-Din's feminist position, which she bases on Quranic statements, provoked a storm of condemnation, and she was even accused of collaborating with French mandatory authorities.

The second part is a collection of archival materials that pertains to the rise of nationalism and nation states in the Middle East. Khater introduces readers to historical colonial documents and to the controversial correspondences between the British and Sharif Husayn, the prince of Mecca and Medina who led the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire in 1916. Khater also provides a piece written by Michel Aflaq, one of the leading founders and ideologues of the Baath Party, on the relationship between Arabism and Islam. Delving into a less-researched part of Middle Eastern history, Khater includes the views of Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, on the Islamic basis of Egyptian nationalism. Indeed, much more has been previously translated and researched on Sayyid Qutb, another member of the Brotherhood, than on al-Banna, making Khater's translation of al-Banna an important one.

Khater dedicates the third part of his book to the emergence of the post-independence states after 1950. The final section deals with contemporary Islamic movements, subaltern groups, globalization and democracy in the Middle East. I enjoyed reading, among other translated pieces, the few pages Khater selected from Lilian Liang's reflections on homosexuality in Egypt, especially since the topic lacks adequate scholarship.

The amount of scholarship Khater used to complete this comprehensive collection of several original, diverse sources and analytical works to light is commendable. In sum, "Sources on the Modern History of the Middle East" is a thoughtful and rich resource for students, scholars and responsible readers of Middle Eastern history.

## Books in Brief // Lynne Rogers

### A Small Feast

Iraqi satire explores lost homeland

#### Scattered Crumbs

By Muhsin al-Ramli

Trans. Yasmeen S. Hanoosh

The University of Arkansas Press, 2002.

The Iraqi novelist Muhsin al-Ramli's novel, "Scattered Crumbs," translated by Yasmeen S. Hanoosh and winner of the Arabic Translation Award, is a literary gem that shines with the humanity of Iraq. This brief novel begins as a satire of life in an Iraqi village under an anonymous yet easily-recognized dictator and offers a poignant self-examination of impotency and exile. Unlike many novels that deal with the despair of exile, "Scattered Crumbs" never loses sight of the horrific conditions in a lost homeland.

The narrative opens in Spain with the narrator's attempt to retrace the exodus of his nondescript cousin, Mahmoud. The narrator's efforts usher him back to memories of his village on the Tigris River, and the reader is introduced to a recognizable panoply of local characters. With echoes of the magico-realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and the political humor of Emile Habibi, the narrator's extended family of several generations reflects the rise of the Iraqi military, the ramifications of war and the subsequent moral and aesthetic dilemmas for the villagers.

The narrator observes that "sad stories become monotonous in Iraq because of their abundance" and proceeds with a hilarious family history. With affection, he describes the intellectual climate of the village: "What is not known today we will know tomorrow, and what cannot be known does not interest us." He recounts village lore of when a hedgehog's needle gets caught in his uncle's throat and he can only "bah" like a sheep. "All whose eyes saw the thin thread of blood spurting and receding with the rise and fall of his Adam's apple did not forget his bahbahs, not to this very day when they sit around the coffee pots and discuss newspaper stories about the European Common Market and the declarations of the American president and cowboy movies and the gory assassinations." The juxtaposition of the content and context of the conversation implies a social criticism of Iraq with which many Americans can easily empathize.

The same uncle becomes known as "Nationan Ijayel," when, to the mullah's chagrin, he mistakenly blurts out, "I worship my homeland! I worship my homeland!" Through this uncle, al-Ramli begins his multi-layered mockery of the uncritical nationalism of the previous well-meaning but naive generation.

With the exception of his great-grandfather, who reputedly stabbed a British officer, "that son of abitch" and his nationalistic uncle, the family males unilaterally desert the battlefield. The

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fates of the narrator's cousins paint a claustrophobic portrait of a military regime built on empty rhetoric, greed, and fear. Qasim, the artist figure who invents "Qasimicalligraphy," explains the generational and ideological conflict to his beautiful sister: "Father thinks that the land is more important than the people, and I think the reverse, and the Leader takes advantage of this difference by pitting us against each other without giving a damn about the land or the people." Warda, with her feminine sensibility, doesn't understand, for "he doesn't know either of you. Leave him on his throne and make up with Father." As the war progresses, the army unsuccessfully resorts to recruiting his cousin, the village idiot, through torture, and executes Qasim for desertion.

Finally, after the deaths and exile of almost an entire generation of males, Qasim's painting, and not his "prescription glasses," inspires his uncle's epiphany. Honest artistic expression functions as a catalyst to understanding. For American readers, this engaging novel with the bite of Arabic humor reminds us that even when "the price of bullets was paid," hatred lingers as a menacing inheritance. The lonely narrator in exile, one of Iraq's scattered crumbs, concludes with the painful consolation of a poem by Mahir al-Asfar. "Scattered Crumbs" captures the flavor of village life and the vacuousness of exile in a melody of memory and poetry. Both humorous and tragic, "Scattered Crumbs" confirms the vibrancy of contemporary Arabic culture and testifies to the comprehensive need for more Arabic translations.

## Poetic Prose from Contemporary Egypt

### Children of the Waters

By Ibtihal Salem

University of Texas, Austin, 2002.

In the introduction to her translation of Ibtihal Salem's "Children of the Waters," Marilyn Booth describes Salem's "meteoric stories" as hovering "somewhere between the narrative demands of story-telling, the immediacy and visuality of vignettes or film takes, and the compressed depths of prose poetry."

Salem's evanescent narratives read like poignant prose poems giving the reader a pensive look into the diverse tapestry of Egyptian humanity. Salem, who was born in Cairo in 1949 and began writing in the 70s, has witnessed the changes from the hopeful Nasser era to the constraining and simmering politics of contemporary Egypt. Consistently focused on the human ramifications, Salem's literary experiments reflect the varied Egyptian landscape, from the poverty and the nouveau riche of Port Said, to the isolated loneliness in the overcrowded streets of Cairo.

In addition to her informative introduction, Booth also provides a brief and helpful preface to each of these 35 vignettes, contextualizing them historically and culturally for English readers. The stories paint a humanistic mural of joy as well as



"Accordianist" (1993) by Monkith Saaid

sorrow, degradation, and dignity of both the collective community and the forlorn individual.

In her first story, "Arabi," a young man in Port Said climbs the lighthouse, disrobes, and threatens to jump to his death while the Egyptian crowd immediately gathers below him. The authorities bring in his wife who pleads with him, "Come on, man, use your brain, come down, now you're leaving me all on my own." Discouraged by their dire economic circumstances and the memory of the hungry little ones at home, she retreats to the oppressive conditions of a home easily imagined by the reader. Highlighting the social despair of Egyptian poverty, Arabi only climbs down when the authorities promise to find the family an apartment. Nevertheless, the cynical authorities meet his descent with handcuffs and a brutal arrest. The Arab crowd, so quick to gather at any aberration variant from normal

### Arab-American Artists: A Biographical Dictionary

Dr. Faye Oweis is preparing a scholarly reference book about Arab-American artists for original publication by Greenwood Press. This is a much-needed and important project that will feature and highlight the lives and works of about 100 Arab-American visual artists. The author is seeking help in identifying artists, publications, references and web sites about Arab-American artists.

**For more information, please contact  
Faye Oweis at [foweis@aol.com](mailto:foweis@aol.com)  
or visit  
[www.oweis.com](http://www.oweis.com)**



life, quickly responds with throwing stones in a violent display of sympathetic alliance with Arabi.

In a later story, "The Work Gang," a mother travels to catch a glimpse of her young son, still a child, chained to the prison work gangs and herded onto the work trains. While one soldier attempts to beat her away, an officer kindly intervenes and "the youngster squinted in her direction. The teardrops floating on those eyes spoke words held back. Rebukes, shyness, shame." An anonymous passenger calls to the mother while another helps to lift her on to the train. This simple vignette draws attention to the heartbreaking problem of child prisoners in the Middle East.

While "Arabi" juxtaposes the crowd's sympathy with the disdain of the authorities, "The Work Gang" brings to light the individual gestures of benevolence that can be found throughout both the Egyptian army and civilian populace.

The collection also contains stories exposing the plight and pride of the Palestinian refugees and the small victories and relentless wretchedness of Egyptian women. While each piece can be aesthetically appreciated by itself, together the pieces give an emotional and socially conscious panorama of Egyptian life, reminiscent of both Nagib Mahfouz's later writing and the colorful tales of "A Thousand and One Nights."

The title of the collection is derived from the short piece "Palm Trees and the Sea," a memorial to a young poet-sheikh. Before his death, the poet humbly reflects: "Children of the water, you always go too far. But the witness is God's. Fresh perch with rice is the sweetest thing there is." His warning attests to the shared Egyptian attachment to the sea, the ever-present mingling of sadness and the perseverance to enjoy the everyday pleasures of life. Once again, Western readers are indebted to Marilyn Booth for her agile translation and her introduction of Ibtihal Salem's lyrical "Children of the Waters."

## Alexandria: Between and After the Wars

### Farewell to Alexandria

By Harry E. Tzalas

Trans. Susan E. Mantouvalou

The American University Press of Cairo, 2000.

Harry E. Tzalas' "Farewell to Alexandria" consists of 11 short stories set in Alexandria, Egypt during the deceptively peaceful interval between World War I and II and during World War II's immediate aftermath. This collection chronicles the diverse ethnic communities of the once cosmopolitan city of the narrator's childhood. Unlike the present-day city where "only Egyptians remain," in Tzalas' Alexandria, Greeks, French, Germans, Armenians and Egyptians all live and work together harmoniously, enjoying the sights and sounds of their vivacious city. Tzalas' stories record the moment when the ominous cloud

of world politics and racism disperses all foreigners, leaving behind only the Egyptians to lament the loss of Alexandria's liberal internationalism.

In each story, a character bids his/ her Alexandria farewell. In "The Maestro," an aging music teacher passes away as Greek families move on, while a young girl seems to time her death so that her grieving parents can leave on a giant Russian boat that arrives to take the Armenians back "home" in "The Little Armenian Girl." Frau Grete, the German mother, enjoys a privileged life in Alexandria until the outbreak of World War II. When the British bury her husband and the German defeat is imminent, she feels "cut off from her homeland, trapped, helpless in an enemy country." After surviving both bombings and social ostracization, Grete faces a debilitating depression before finally departing for Brazil.

In the final story, the elderly bachelor Alekos refuses to leave the city with his love, Mary, the attractive prostitute, and finds himself waiting for death accompanied only by his painful memories of cowardly social conformity. Affectionately illustrated by Anna Boghiguan, Tzalas' "Farewell to Alexandria" serves as a fond adieu to the city of his childhood.

## The Novel as Parable of Post Post-Colonialism

### Fugitive Light

By Mohamed Berrada

Trans. Issa J. Boullata

Syracuse University Press, 2002.

"Fugitive Light" by Moroccan critic and novelist Mohamed Berrada floats through the lives of an older male artist combating "painter's block" and the mother and daughter pair who love him and who serve as his respective muses. Their love affairs take them briefly to Paris and Spain and also carry them through the modern historical landscape of Morocco, juxtaposing the colonial glitz of Tangiers with the struggle for independence. The political changes that followed Morocco's independence intensify both the consequences of the love shared by these three characters and their struggle to discover a sense of self and of belonging. Domestic illusions of marriage dwindle due to pragmatic finances and stifling boredom in both Europe and Morocco, while the issue of adoption highlights the creative generosity of the non-nuclear family. The polyphonic narrative of dreams, letters, conversations and memories centers on Ayshuni, a middle-aged painter who lives in Tangiers in a home inherited from his adopted Spanish father, who was also a painter. Ayshuni's imagination continues to flourish, yet it fails to translate his ideas to his canvas, causing him to wonder whose voice he echoes. While feminist readers may be tempted to snigger at the ageless male artist whose robust sexual vitality enraptures the beautiful mother and daughter Ghaylana and Fatima, these two muse figures actually evolve into



# Arabic & Islamic

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Arabic calligraphy for cover of Light in the Palace, Cune Press, Seattle, WA

complicated characters, navigating between traditional village life and the more liberal lifestyle of urban Morocco and Europe. As both women ultimately settle for the comfort of financial security, they turn to the artist, wanting him to “create a new heroism for [them], other illusions, other dreams....” The triangular love affair uses sexuality to express the dilemma of the contemporary artist who must negotiate a living space that does not regress to the misguided romance of orientalism and that moves beyond the political anger of post-colonialism. The “fugitive light that constantly escapes” illuminates for Ayshuni the value of light and color and reduces everything else to “prattle and sermonizing blowing in the wind.” Although Ayshuni’s canvas remains white, “Fugitive Light” challenges the reader and artist to take inspiration from memories and dreams and to create on canvas an imagination that extends further than post-colonialism.

## Metaphorical Scavengers and Fishermen

### Clamor of the Lake

By Mohamed El-Bisatie

Trans. Hala Halim

The American University in Cairo Press, 2004.

The Egyptian writer, Mohamed El-Bisatie, sets his haunting novel, “Clamor of the Lake,” at the point where a lake meets the sea. The confluence of water binds together the novel’s three enigmatic narratives of the mysterious lake people and the villagers living nearby. In the first narrative, an old fisherman invites a mother of twins to live in his house, where he has accumulated bits and pieces of Western civilization tossed up by the sea. In their time together, the mother recounts the tale of her departure from her village with her first nomadic and abusive lover and his signature chest. The second narrative marks the passage of time and the encroaching urbanization of the lake with the tale of the villager Gomma and his wife. They survive by scavenging the turbulent waters of the lake, and Gomma creates a personal ghost museum with bits of refuse and particularly broken weapons, which set his imagination ablaze as he invents histories for their previous

### ON THE WEB/ [www.aljadid.com](http://www.aljadid.com)

When Algerian Writers are Becoming a Vanishing Species,

by *Elie Chalala*

Dismantling the Veils of Western Literature,

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owners. The rhythm of the couple's life becomes disrupted with the discovery of an incomprehensible foreign "talking box." The third narrative follows the tale of two friends, a café owner and a grocer, and their decision to abandon their village lives to roam with the lake people. A vivid and poetic narrative, "Clamor of the Lake," which won the 1995 Cairo International Book Fair Award for Best Novel of the Year, closes with the village widows and the lake people fishing for the bones of their deceased, a disturbing primitive image, set between the unremitting tide and bulldozers.

## Dwarfed Quests and Bleak Heroics in Algiers

### The Lovers of Algeria

By Anouar Benmalek  
Trans. from the French by Joanna Kilmartin  
Graywolf Press, 2004.

### The Star of Algiers

By Aziz Chouaki  
Trans. from the French by Ros Schwartz and Lulu Norman  
Graywolf Press, 2005.

The two novels "The Lovers of Algeria" (2001) by Anouar Benmalek and "The Star of Algiers" (2005) by Aziz Chouaki chronicle the cultural crosscurrents of the aspirations and emotions of poverty-stricken slums in contemporary Algeria and show the poor's unilateral victimization by the police, military and fundamentalists. In both novels, the authors show the repercussions of foreign military policy and the glamour of the entertainment world to place Algeria's political horrors within a global landscape while recounting individual efforts and failures to love and to maintain humanity.

Anouar Benmalek's epic novel, "The Lovers of Algeria," awarded the Prix Rahid, captures the modern history of Algiers as it changed from a French colony to a country enmeshed in a brutal civil war. The narrative follows the agonizing story of two unlikely lovers: Anna, a Swiss-born trapeze artist and equestrian, and Nassreddine, an Algerian villager whose benevolent intentions are consistently undermined by the continual bloodshed. Despite their different cultures and nationalities, the protagonists, an engaging and original Romeo and Juliet, both begin their adult lives as runaways fleeing from domestic parental injustice.

The novel juxtaposes the virtues and rewards of adoption with the gratuitous cruelty committed under the banners of religion and nationalism in Europe and North Africa. Algeria's beautiful landscape contrasts with the torture, fear and killings carried out within the country. Anna's circus becomes a metaphor for the

"This book adds the title "Page-Turning Storyteller" to Dr. Saadah's well-earned reputation as a poet. His account of the events surrounding the Oklahoma City bombing brought tears to my eyes. He captured our collective sense of loss, disbelief and irreversible tragedy as we dealt with the chaos of that horrific day."

**Kirk Humphreys**

**Mayor of Oklahoma City (1998 - 2003)**

### About the Novel

This poetic love story with historic and medical undertones, is the tale of two families, from the opposite banks of life, startled by the Oklahoma City bombing. The bipolarity of deeply held cultural beliefs, the emotional dissonances between the shores of an unlikely couple, the tacit, spiritual tensions among love, kindness, and freedom, all interplay to provide a well-deserved respite to an action-weary, and spirit-starved audience in a world living with violence.

### About the Author

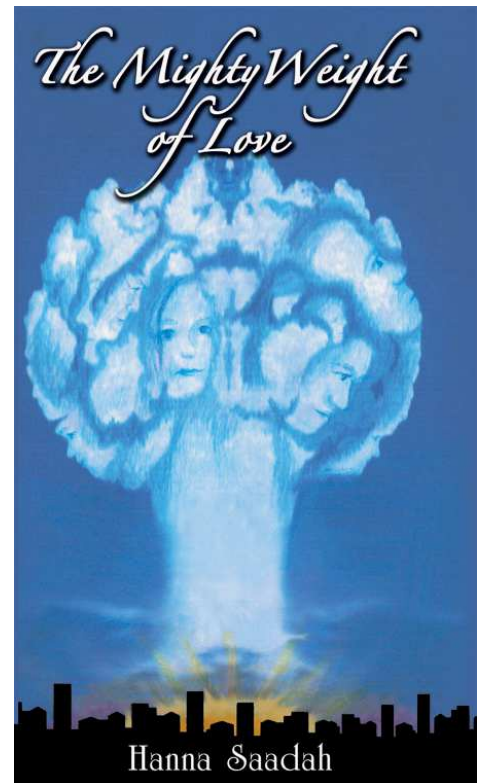
Born in Lebanon in 1946, Hanna Saadah studied medicine at the American University of Beirut. He came to Oklahoma in 1971 for post-graduate training with strong intentions of returning to his homeland, but when the civil war prevented his return, he made Oklahoma his home.



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Cover designed by Oklahoma artist and mother Angel Peck.

European disease of politics, as one frightful and brutal army follows another with the rapid succession of circus acts. Even Anna ultimately commits murder to avenge the deaths of children and rapes of women and to protect other innocent people from suffering the same fate.

Other unforgettable characters include: a young street urchin; the elderly, bitter and broken-hearted boss of rag pickers; the Polish Jewess who dies in an Algerian prison; and the Bedouin widower who returns to the doomed openness of the Southern Algerian desert where the contagious fear and thirst for revenge eventually spreads. Benmalek presents this panorama of European and Algerian characters that parallels the failures of World War II and the rise of the hypocritical Islamic fundamentalists while recounting a page-turning, paternal and romantic love story.

The family of Méziane Boudjiri, the young protagonist of Aziz Chouaki's "The Star of Algiers," also pays a high price for Algeria's history. While one son is killed fighting for independence, another becomes autistic, mute and housebound after being arrested and brutally tortured by the police for distributing leaflets advocating Berber rights.

The two surviving sons drift into the Islamic Brotherhood. Street-savvy and yet still idealistic at the age of 36, Méziane dreams of success as a musician and marriage to the girl of his dreams. His love of American rock-and-roll, from Elvis to Michael Jackson, relieves his pain of living with 14 family members in a small three-room apartment and gives him a taste of success as his *mandola* transports him to the cheap glamour of discos and bronzed glamour girls.

Surrounded by the drugs, camaraderie and sharks of the music world, Méziane changes his name to Moussa Massy, the name of a Berber king and one that reflects Méziane's naïve understanding of his Berber heritage. With his brief success, he shortens his name to just Massy in order to sound more American.

While concentrating on his musical career, Moussa remains vaguely aware of the political currents of Algeria, and he both fights against the dictates of the Islamic Brotherhood and understands its appeal to those fatigued by the injustice, poverty and hopelessness that overwhelm the country.

When the toe-picking record producer cheats him, his music world deteriorates and his liberal friends make a mass exodus from Algiers, Moussa staggers between outbursts of energy aimed at acquiring an exit visa and sporadic expressions of rage accentuated by his heavy alcoholism.

After being imprisoned for the murder of an Islamist, the charismatic Moussa changes his name one last time as he rises through the hierarchy of fundamentalism. In his metamorphosis from a young stargazer of the American dream who cuddles with his sister, dabbles in recreational drug abuse and fears his friend's Kalashnikov, to a drug-crazed man who pimps himself for a visa, Moussa resurrects himself once again, this time as a Kalashnikov knife-wielding, infamous Emir.

"The Star of Algiers" is a particularly engaging and enlightening read for young American students who easily relate to the world of rock-and-roll, as they can use this connection to discover an understanding and develop a knowledge of Islamic fundamentalists. **AJ**

## Books in Brief

# Ghada Samman's Social Critique Goes Abroad

## The Night of the First Billion

By Ghada Samman

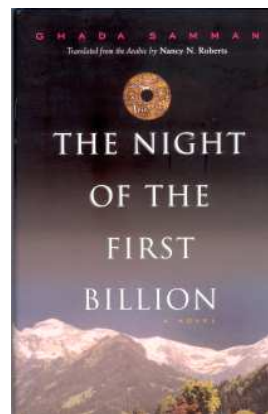
Trans. Nancy N. Roberts

Syracuse University Press, 2005.

BY PAULINE HOMSI VINSON

The third installment of Ghada Samman's novelistic reflections on the Lebanese civil war is now available in English. Published by Syracuse University Press and translated by Nancy Roberts, "The Night of the First Billion" follows "Beirut '75" and "Beirut Nightmares" in its exploration of the conditions

that fueled the Lebanese civil war. Like its predecessors, "The Night of the First Billion" offers a scathing critique of Lebanese society. This time, however, the action is set largely outside of Lebanon, among Lebanese expatriates in Geneva.



The novel opens with a series of magical incantations, which set the tone for the hallucinatory and disorienting atmosphere that characterizes the life of the main character, Khalil. We encounter Khalil in the first chapter and

watch him flee from the nightmarish world of Beirut at the height of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, only to fall victim to the exploitative manipulations of unscrupulous Lebanese abroad. Khalil's return to Beirut in the final chapter provides a structural frame for the novel and suggests that there might still be hope for the Lebanese even among the wreckage of war.

As in her other works, Samman skillfully weaves together several different literary styles into one text. Elements of satire give way to magic realism, which gives way to a murder mystery in a literary *mélange* that addresses basic questions of social justice and human dignity.

"The Night of the First Billion" is an important contribution by an accomplished Arab literary figure. Roberts' translation offers a fluid reading of Samman's Arabic original. This book makes a fine addition to the growing body of Arabic literature now available in translation. **AJ**



# Timely Hybridity: Writers Tackle Islamic Subjects in English

## Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English

By Amin Malak

State University of New York Press, 2005.

BY PAULINE HOMSI VINSON

In “Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English,” Amin Malak explores the ways in which Islam influences the literary productions of writers who come from Muslim backgrounds and write in English. Throughout his book, Malak cogently argues for the consideration of religion as an important component of identity. In so doing, he opens new avenues for the study of literature produced by writers who share the same

religious background, but who are not necessarily aligned along the lines of class, race, gender, or even nationality.

The range of texts that Malak explores is impressive. He begins with a discussion of the Indian writer Ahmed Ali and the emergence of what he calls “Muslim Fiction in English,” and then moves on to cover such wide-ranging topics as “Pioneering Muslim Women Writers,” “Exilic Contexts,” and Salman Rushdie’s problematic text, “The Satanic Verses.” Covering writers from Southeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East, North America

and Europe, Malak ends his book with an insightful chapter on “Arab-Muslim Feminism and the Narrative of Hybridity” in the works of Ahdaf Soueif.

In justifying his inclusion of Salman Rushdie’s “Satanic Verses” among “Muslim Narratives,” Malak explains that he is using the term “Muslim in the widest sense” so that it can refer not only to practitioners of Islam, but also to Arab-Christians like Edward Said who display a “non-Muslim affiliation with Islam,” as well as to those like Rushdie, who may have an ambivalent or irreverent attitude toward Islam.

While Malak’s attempt at including those who have been influenced by Muslim society within his discussion is both apt and laudable, his choice of term remains problematic, as the term “Muslim” in Arabic refers primarily to someone who is an adherent of Islam. However, regardless of the term that eventually gains currency – whether “Muslim” comes to encompass a wider range of meanings than is now the case, or whether a new term

evolves that can refer to Muslims as well as Muslim-affiliated individuals who may or may not be of Arab origin – Malak’s project paves the way for an important though still nascent approach to the study of literature, as it recognizes the influence of Islam upon texts written in English.

Throughout his book, Malak treats both the literary texts he discusses and the religion of Islam with a great deal of sensitivity. In fact, his book appears to have a secondary purpose to the stated aim of exploring Muslim narratives in English, and that is to serve as a type of corrective both to reactionary forces within Islam and to Western misunderstandings and prejudice against Islam. This double effort is understandable, given that Malak’s potential audience may consist of both Muslim practitioners and non-Muslim Western readers.

“Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English” is an important contribution to the fields of literary criticism and postcolonial/hybridity studies. It is among the first to address the growing number of books written in English yet influenced by an Islamic heritage. This work will surely invite further inquiry into the complex dynamics of East-West interactions that come into play with literature produced in English by writers who hail from a Muslim (or Muslim-influenced) background. **AJ**

## contributors

*Continued from page 25*

Critic as the Authentic Modernist,” p. 50) is a Lebanese critic and author of scores of books. He is also the former editor of the Lebanese magazine *At Tariq*.

**Judith Gabriel** (“Seducing America: Selling the Middle Eastern Mystique’:Orientalist Ephemera Collection at UCLA on its Way to Online Database, Book,” p. 18; “Josef Fares Returns to Beirut for Swedish Film ‘Zozo,’” p. 23; “Traditional Arab Sounds via Urban Electronica,” p.24, “Two New Poetry Volumes by Arab Americans: Inner Voices in the Shadow of the Twin Towers,” p. 30; “Persian Gardens & Iranian Prisons,” p. 32) is a contributing editor of *Al Jadid*.

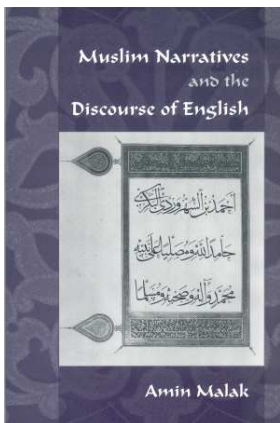
**Rebecca Joubin** (“Jawad al-Assadi: Director Returns to Iraq to Find Nothing the ‘Same’, p. 10) is a Damascus-based writer who contributes articles regularly in magazines such as *al-Warda* and *al-Mada*. She has recently written a book entitled: “Two Grandmothers From Baghdad,” and is currently writing a Syria memoir.

**Nancy Linthicum** (“Alfred Basbous (1924-2006): Legacy of Three Brothers Turns Lebanese Village of Rachana into Global Sculpture Center,” p.44) is an assistant editor of *Al Jadid*.

**Issam Mahfouz** (“Sad Music,” and “The Cold Eyes,” p. 50) is a Lebanese playwright, critic and poet who recently passed away. (See Dakroub’s article on Mahfouz on p. 50.)

**Iskandar Mansour** (“George Hawi (1938-2005): A Man for All

*Continued on page 46*



## Alfred Basbous (1924-2006) Legacy of Three Brothers Turns Lebanese Village into Sculpture Center

BY NANCY LINTHICUM

The name Rachana originally resonated only with this coastal Lebanese village's population of less than 1,000 inhabitants; now, however, for people around the world, Rachana immediately calls to mind the Basbous brothers – Michel, Youssef, and Alfred – who were amongst Lebanon's finest sculptors and the source of Rachana's fame. As Alfred Basbous once said to writer Yaqzan al-Taqi, who, like so many others, had come to witness the renowned sculptures on display in Rachana, "Much sculpting is taking place here and it is being felt at an international level. Rachana will be remembered in 200 years, 300 years, even 1,000 years."

Alfred died at the age of 82 on January 1, 2006, after a long battle with cancer. His brothers, Michel and Youssef, had died in 1981 and 2001, respectively. No clear successor to their talent has emerged in Lebanon, and Alfred's vision of Rachana's status as an international center of culture for years to come will most likely be realized.

It was in 1994 that Rachana, and not just the artists who hailed from this small village in northern Lebanon, first captivated an international audience. That year, Alfred and Youssef, carrying on their brother Michel's vision and spirit, hosted the first Rachana International Sculpture Forum, inviting artists from around the globe to display their works in an open-air exhibition. This forum became an annual tradition that continued through last year with the same passion with which it began. In 1997, UNESCO declared Rachana a global village of sculpture housed in the open air, and just last year, this annual forum attracted dozens of world artists, allowing Alfred to glimpse the future success he had predicted for his village.

Alfred Basbous, the middle brother, was born in 1924 and grew up using his hands and working with stone. He first became interested in sculpture through his older brother Michel, whose abstract style was a source of inspiration for Alfred. Alfred Basbous' abstract style "is not a stylistic journey and

a meaningless thing in a vacuum, but rather is creation in a vacuum," writes art critic Lor Ghareeb in *An Nahar* newspaper on January 2, 2006. In *Al Mustaqbal* (January 3, 2006), Yaqzan al-Taqi also recognizes the strong influence of the Basbous family on Alfred and claims that Alfred's "exceptional" family had instilled in him a love of and curiosity about the challenging Lebanese stone from an early age. Indeed, al-Taqi finds "the spirit of the village, the people and the world" in all of the Basbous brothers' works. According to al-Taqi, Alfred in particular was "a man of madness in his love for sculpture and stone."

Alfred began creating his own sculptures in 1958 and took part in his first private exhibition in 1959 at Alecco Saab's Gallery in Beirut. He earned international recognition just a few years later, in 1961, when his works were featured in the International

Exhibition of Sculpture at the Rodin Museum, Paris. This exhibition took place one year after Alfred received a scholarship from the French government to attend L'Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts.

According to art critic Muha Sultan, writing in *Al Hayat*, January 2006, Alfred was also influenced by modernist European sculptors, including Auguste Rodin, Henry Moore, and Hans (or Jean) Arp, as well as by his fellow countryman, the acclaimed sculptor Youssef Hoyeck. Hailing Alfred as "the sheikh of Lebanese sculpture," Sultan describes Alfred's artistic journey and how, early on, woman



Alfred Basbous by Mamoun Sakkal for *Al Jadid*

emerged as a central theme and figure in his works.

Mahmoud Charaf also comments on Alfred's obsession with woman in *An Nahar* newspaper in January 2006. Charaf recalls Alfred's comments on his first experience of carving the figure of a woman into stone: "One day, I saw a picture of a naked woman in a magazine. I molded her figure into stone with liberty. I placed a snake aside her and an apple in her hands." This, the first of many sculptures in which Alfred intimately portrays the body and spirit of woman, supports many art critics' claims that Alfred's father, who served as the village priest, greatly influenced his son's view of woman. Continuing his discussion of Alfred and woman, Charaf clearly states that Alfred was not haunted by just one woman. Rather, Charaf argues, Alfred saw woman as a "symbol of creation; it is her body that carries within it the seed of new life," another Biblical allusion to Eve.

Shifting to a discussion on style rather than content, Charaf notes that in his portrayal of woman, Alfred skillfully gives the

*Continued on page 50*



## George Hawi (1938-2005): A Man for All Seasons

BY ISKANDAR MANSOUR

No one can write the history of the last four decades of Lebanon without devoting an in-depth chapter to the political and intellectual contributions of George Hawi. He was at the forefront of every struggle. The chapter begins in 1938, in the village of Btighrine, where George Anis Hawi was born, and ends in 2005, when he was buried in the village of his birth.

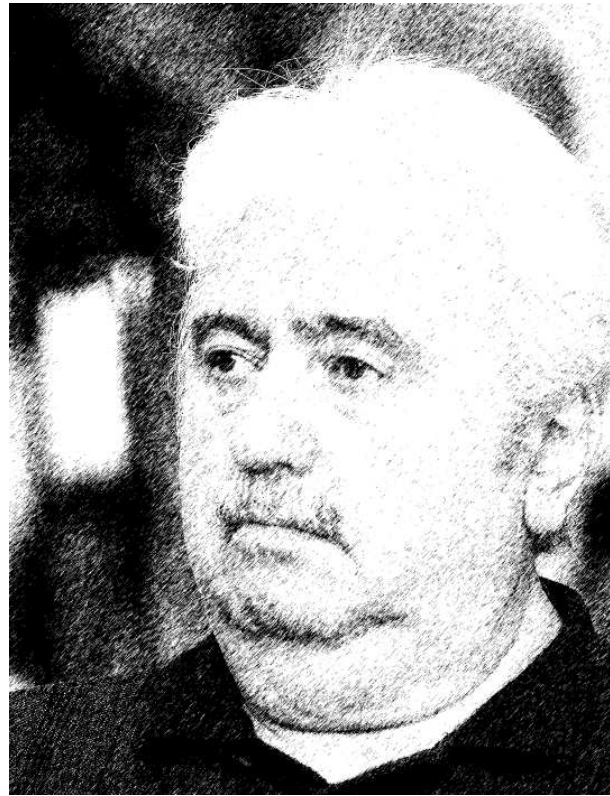
In 1955, at the age of 16, Hawi joined the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP). In a very short period of time Hawi's organizational and political skills earned him the respect of his comrades. As a result, by 1958 he was playing a leading role in that year's uprising against the presidency of Camille Chamoun and the policy of Lebanon joining the "Baghdad pact" against Egyptian president Gamal Abd al-Nasser. From that time to the end of his life, Hawi devoted his energy, enthusiasm, optimism, and hope to the dream of a "free country and a happy people." However, the dream was to remain only a dream, and Hawi was assassinated on June 22 in the city of Beirut.

In the 1960s, when the younger generation within the LCP decided to rebel against the "old guard" in the name of rethinking the national question and restoring democratic rule, Hawi led the call both for changes in style and changes in policy. The new policy was understood not only as an attempt to bridge the gap between both the national and class dimensions of the struggle, but also as an attempt to Arabize Marxism, a notion that was neither fully articulated by Hawi nor by his colleagues.

When, in 1969, the historic demonstration Demonstration of April 23 took place in Beirut in solidarity with the newly emerging Palestinian movement, Hawi was there on the front lines. When the Lebanese confessional system collapsed in 1975, Hawi was there, too, to witness firsthand the birth of the Lebanese National Movement and its reformist program based on a secular democratic principle under the leadership of the late Kamal Jumblatt, the founder and the head of the Progressive Socialist Party.

In 1982, when Israel invaded Lebanon and occupied Beirut, Hawi called for all Lebanese, regardless of their political or religious affiliation, to join the Lebanese National Resistance Front against the Israeli occupation. Once the civil war ended, Hawi crossed the artificial lines which had divided the Lebanese during 15 years of war as he sought reconciliation and dialogue with his "old enemy" Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces. Hawi knew that a new era in Lebanon was on the horizon: Lebanon was entering the Syrian era. This new era would require new politics, a new approach, and a new political forum.

Upon his resignation as secretary general of the LCP in 1993, Hawi addressed his comrades in a new language, a language not found in the dictionary of communists. He stated that truth is relative, as is Marxism. For Hawi, reality came first, and therefore



Georg Hawi

(Illustration credit: Mulhak An Nahar)

the text must be amended to reflect changes in society. He wanted to change the old style, structure, even the name of the LCP, and make it relevant and a more inclusive political forum. Hawi desired that those who believed in the sovereignty of Lebanon, secularism, and social justice should be welcome not only to express their opinions, but also to have access to a tool which could rid Lebanon of all forms of hegemony, including Syrian.

For Hawi, the age of ideology had gone; now political activities are based on people's daily experiences. He departed from the "either-or" logic in favor of a more relational approach to history and politics. For him, it was possible to be both an ardent believer in the sovereignty of Lebanon and a friend to Syria and the Palestinians; a socialist while still encouraging the free enterprise needed to build and strengthen the Lebanese economy. This new position with regard to the relationship between patriotism and nationalism reflects a less than fully-articulated self-criticism and re-evaluation of his thought regarding Arab Nationalism and Arabism. For Hawi, Arabism needs to depart from its Nasserite and Baathist authoritarian tradition for one more tolerant to both individual and minority rights. Unless Arabism is associated with freedom and democracy, it becomes a form of oppression.

Despite the signing of the Taif Agreement, which ended the civil war in Lebanon on a new power sharing formula between Christians and Muslims, Hawi believed that peace among the Lebanese was still fragile and that more serious dialogue was needed among all the Lebanese factions. His initiatives to hold a conference to encourage such dialogue had been ignored by Syria, the main hegemonic power in Lebanon, for years. As the Lebanese presidency of Emil Lahoud neared its end, Hawi was among the

## Contributors

first to raise his voice against any attempt to renew Lahoud's term. Extending the president's term was seen as an attempt to hijack and demean the will of the Lebanese people and to extend the life of the "Syrian-Lebanese intelligence system," which had been in place since the end of the civil war.

The assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri unleashed the largest popular reaction in the history of Lebanon, calling for both the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and the truth regarding the identity of those responsible for this heinous crime. The withdrawal took place, but the assassins remained free to continue their work. Samir Kassir, a noted writer and journalist in *An Nahar* newspaper and an uncompromising critic of authoritarianism in the Arab world, particularly in Syria, was assassinated a few short months after Hariri. Just few months later, Hawi was assassinated. Hawi, whose voice had spoken for freedom, democracy, and dialogue from his earliest days of political involvement, was a source of inspiration for many young Lebanese who took part in the popular rally on March 14, 2005. Though the achievement of the March 14 coalition was of enormous significance in paving the way for immediate Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, Hawi voiced his concerns regarding the direction of this new popular movement. In fact, he believed that unless the leaders of the March 14 rally called for real reform based on a new electoral system as a first step toward the establishment of a modern state, the achievements of the March 14 movement would be in danger.

The chapter of the civil war cannot be closed with the intention of leaving the past behind us. The past shall always haunt us unless we deal with it openly and courageously. Hawi was the first – and thus far the only – active leader in the civil war to reflect openly on the war by emphasizing his personal share of responsibility. We still have not heard from many of those who were active players during the civil war. By saying, "we were right," the parties involved in the war fool no one, nor do they help further the process of dialogue and reconciliation that is sorely needed today. **AJ**

## contributors

*Continued from page 43*

Seasons," p. 45) is an academic and critic.

**Pamela Nice** ("Images of Shiite Martyrdom," p. 22) is a contributing editor of *Al Jadid*.

**Fayeq Oweis** ("The Multicultural Roots of Andrea Ali's Art," p. 20; "Adnan Charara's Art Inspired by Styles, Symbols of Identity," p. 21)

**Mouayed al-Rawi** ("The Place of Origin," p. 14; "The City's Keeper," p. 28) was born in the city of Kirkuk in Iraq. He was forced to leave for Lebanon after the Baath's seizure of power in 1979; subsequently he left for Germany, where he currently resides, in Berlin. He is a poet, critic and author who played a key role in the modernism of contemporary Iraqi poetry.

**Lynne Rogers** ("Assia Djebar Elected to French Academy: Immortalized Sycophant or Courageous Humanist?," p. 6; "Heartbreak, Soap Suds and Patriotism on Egyptian TV," p. 35; *Books in Brief*, p. 36) is a professor and author of many articles on the Palestine question in professional journals and books.

**Ghada Samman** ("A Rebellious Owl," p. 8; "An Owl Whose Heart is in Beirut," p. 8; "A Revived Owl," p. 8) is a prominent Arab poet and novelist.

**John Naoum Tanous** ("Questioning Basics and Principles at Times of Decline," p. 26) is a Lebanese psychologist, critic, and author of several books.

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Wrote," p. 9) is a former researcher for the New York Times Paris bureau and writes occasionally for publications on the Middle East.

**Kamal Dib** (Translated John Naoum Tanous' "Questioning Basics at a Time of Decline," p. 26) is a Canadian economist, author and essayist.

**Basil Samara** (Translated: Mouayed al-Rawi's "The Place of Origin," p. 14; Adonis' "In the Shadow of Politics, in the Light of Truth," p. 32; Charbel Dagher's "Not Every Death is Worthy of Death," p. 27) is a critic and translator and currently resides in North Carolina.

**Rim Zahra and Razzan Zahra** (Translated Mouayed al-Rawi's "The City's Keeper," p. 28) hold masters in English literature and are working toward doctorate degrees in education at the University of California, Davis.

## cover artist

"Stairs," by Monkith Saaid, 1990. Monkith Saaid received his higher studies in sculpture at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam in 1995. He went on to exhibit his sculptures and installations throughout the Middle East, Europe, the United States, and Canada. He has designed several large monuments. His monuments in Lebanon include: "Waiting for the Absent One" (Aley Mountains), "The Chair" (Ehden), and "Before the Last Supper (Downtown Beirut). He has designed culture prizes in Holland, Spain, Syria, and Iraq. He recently executed a culture prize for 'Kitab fi Jarida' in their Paris UNESCO office. He currently lives and works between Holland, Syria, and Lebanon.

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## **Egyptian Playwright Alfred Farag: Prison, Exile and Triumph Through Theater**

**BY DINA AMIN**

On December 4, 2005 Egypt and the Arab world lost one of their greatest cultural figures: Alfred Farag. He died at the age of 76 in London after being hospitalized for a short period of time.

Farag is remembered first and foremost for his talent as a playwright. His many special qualities as a dramatist stem from his ability to write plays of profound philosophical contemplation that at the same time abound in well conceived-dramatic action; they work as both intelligent, dramatic literature and engaging stage performances. Farag frequently blended reality with illusion, prose with poetry, present with past and the conscious with the unconscious. Thematically, he generally concerned himself with the human condition when subjected to severe oppression. He seemed always to be writing about the struggles of insignificant, non-heroic people faced with political, social or economic abuse. He was particularly fascinated with the relationship between oppressor and oppressed, master and servant.

Born on June 14, 1929 to a middle-class Coptic family in the Egyptian provincial city of Zaqaziq, Farag was the second of seven children, four boys and three girls. At the age of three his family moved to Alexandria, where they all stayed in his paternal grandmother's house. Shortly thereafter, his parents moved to an independent residence in Muharram Bek, a quiet middle-class neighborhood. At home, Farag was introduced to music, as his father and uncle both played the oud, and to a wide range of literature, thanks to his father's

vast library of both Arab and Western classics. Farag's father often took him to see touring Egyptian and foreign theater companies who were performing in Alexandria. At a fairly early age, Farag witnessed performances by great Egyptian actors such as Yusuf Wahbi, Zaki Tulaymat and Najib al-Rihani.

In 1945, Farag attended Alexandria University (then called University of



Alfred Farag by Zareh for Al Jadid

Faruq al-Awwal) and enrolled in the English literature department. By so doing, he went against the wishes of his father who wanted him to study law, which was considered the most prestigious career at that time. Farag read the major world classics prolifically: Greek mythology, Shakespeare, Moliere, Arabic poetry, as well as the works of Taha Husayn and Tawfiq al-Hakim. The latter influenced him greatly.

He was drawn to poetry more than any other subject and studied a broad array of styles, but he was especially drawn to the Romantic poetry of the Arab-American al-Mahjar school. His favorite Romantic poets included Gibran Kahlil Gibran and Mikhail Nuaymeh. In English poetry he was particularly fascinated with T.S.Eliot. After graduation in 1949,

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Farag took his first job as a school teacher in Alexandria. He soon became bored and moved to Cairo to work as a part-time journalist. Thus, his professional life as a writer started in the 1950s, an important decade in the recent history of Egypt.

Contrary to common belief, Farag's career in journalism rather than theater made his dramatic works objectionable to censorship authorities. Because he had chosen to express his opinions, sometimes openly, sometimes discreetly, in newspapers and magazines, his plays were often banned or even closed down. Furthermore, he was imprisoned in detention camps from 1959 until 1963 for political activism and later left the country in a lengthy self-imposed exile. During Farag's exile (1973-1986), his plays were neither produced in state theaters nor published as dramatic literature.

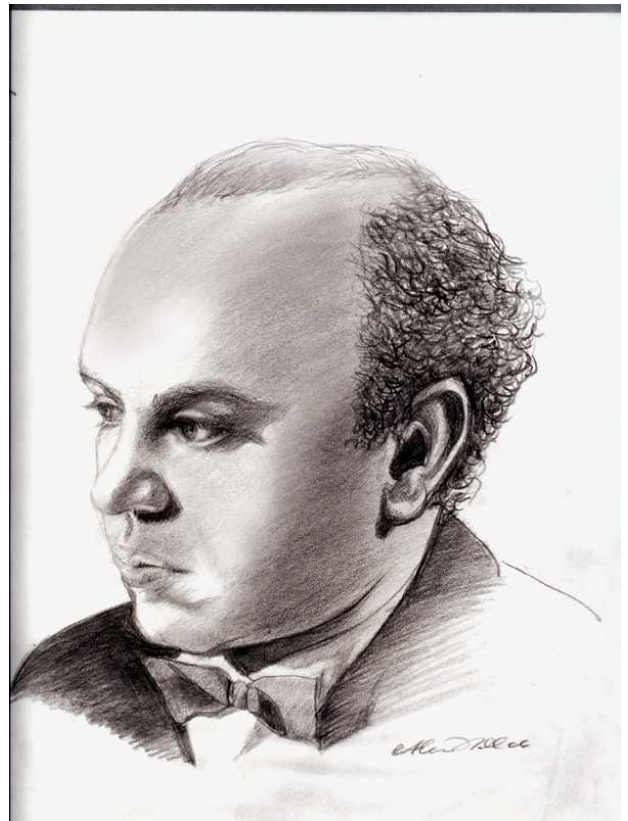
Theater in Egypt – as in many other parts of the world – is a difficult field to break into or to make a living in. For those who surmount its hurdles and continue to produce, it is invariably a labor of love rather than a quest for money or fame. Farag endured many difficulties and produced an exceptional body of work in the process. He was one of Egypt's leading contemporary playwrights who paid a high price for his commitment to theater. He struggled diligently not only to see his plays published and performed, but also to see Egyptian and Arab drama read, performed, and studied internationally – and recognized as a significant contribution to world drama. Until his death, he worked toward that dream, encouraging and inspiring a younger generation of theater devotees to follow in his footsteps. In the 1960s, Farag contributed to the emergence of an impressive theater movement in Egypt, not only by writing masterpieces for the stage, but also by participating in the spread of cultural awareness to the masses of Egypt in remote and rural areas as well as in cities.

As a part of the great theater movement in the 1960s, Alfred Farag has always been closely associated with that golden era of drama in Egypt and is often referred to as a playwright of the 1960s. His 30 years of post-1960s theatrical contribution is often overlooked. He produced masterpieces such as *"Sulayman al-Halabi,"* *"Ali Janah al-Tabrizi wa-Tabi'uhu Quffa,"* *"Al-Zir Salim"* and *"Al-Nar wa-Zaytun"* in the 1970s and 1980s, and he experimented with dramatic form in varying and creative ways. In 1977, Farag wrote an absurdist drama, *"Al-Ayn a-Sihriyyah,"* and in 1989 he produced two plays in the post-modern style.

Furthermore, during the last three decades of his life, Farag became increasingly concerned with the predicament and plight of the female protagonist in modern society, starting with *"Al-Ziyarah"* in 1972 and continuing until his two last plays, *"Al-Mishwar al-Akhir"* in 1998 and *"Al-Amira wa-al-Su'luq"* in 2004. The last is currently playing at the National Theater in Cairo, directed by and starring one of Egypt's leading actors, Nur al-Sharif.

Farag was buried in Alexandria, Egypt. He is survived by his wife Suraya, who was his most dedicated admirer and supporter through thick and thin. **AJ**

## Tawfiq al-Basha (1924-2005) Passion for Modernizing and Popularizing Instrumental Arab Music



Tawfiq al-Basha by Alicia Hall for Al Jadid

### BY SAMI ASMAR

In 1862, five Russian musicians in St. Petersburg (Borodin, Cui, Balakirev, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov) formed the "Gang of Five," a group whose aim was to create authentically Russian music as opposed to the prevalent Western style championed by Tchaikovsky. A century later, five Lebanese musicians modeled themselves after the Russian group and formed their own "Gang of Five" with the mission of creating authentically Lebanese music. These five men, 'Asi Rahbani, Mansur Rahbani, Zaki Nasif, Tawfiq al-Basha, and Tawfiq Sukkar, along with Wadi al-Safi, Fairuz, Sabah, and others, succeeded in creating "city music" based on the folk arts of the countryside. Of the Gang of Five, Mansur Rahbani is the only survivor after 81-year-old Tawfiq al-Basha died in December 2005, after a long struggle with cancer.



Tawfiq al-Basha was born in Beirut in 1924. He started his music career as a cello player, which was a rarity at the time, earning him many bookings and bringing him financial success; however, he eventually abandoned the cello in favor of pursuing his dream of composing. He enrolled in the American University in Beirut and apprenticed with a Russian instructor, then later studied with the same French music teacher, Bertrand Roupier, who had taught the Rahbani brothers and Zaki Nasif.

Basha began his prolific yet under-appreciated career during the 1943 independence of Lebanon, when a unique Lebanese cultural identity was being sought. In pursuit of this identity, the Baalbak International Festivals were established in 1957. The Gang of Five became the musical genius behind the festivals. Shortly after founding Baalbak, Basha co-founded Al-Anwar Ensemble with Said Fraiha. The ensemble toured Europe and earned Basha recognition as a talented orchestra leader and composer, often performing Basha's own arrangements of popular and folk tunes such as "Ammi Ya Bayya' al-Ward," (My Uncle, the Rose Vendor), "Zuruni" (Visit Me), and "Ya Mayila" (One Who Sways).

After a short stint at the Jerusalem radio station in 1950, then another at the Near East radio station, al-Basha spent most of his career as head of the music department at the Lebanese radio station. He was credited with using that position to pressure the government bureaucracy to purchase new musical instruments and to contract with musicians who could read musical notation to play those instruments.

The emerging ensemble was considered for a long time to be the best in Lebanon and the players were invited to perform at many festivals. He increased the size of the ensemble, adding chorus members, producers, and technicians. He also attracted many accomplished Lebanese musicians to the station, such as Halim al-Rumi (father of singer Majida al-Rumi, who discovered Fairuz), and later Elias Rahbani (Asi and Mansur's younger brother), Ihsan Mundher (a keyboard player who currently has a popular TV show), and Salim Sahab (conductor of a large Egyptian orchestra).

As the department head, Basha composed numerous songs for the radio station as well as many festivals, and he also composed songs for several famous singers, including Fairuz, Sabah, Wadi al-Safi, Suad Muhammad, Nour al-Huda, and his first wife Widad. Although he has nearly 3,000 tunes to his credit, Basha's first love was not short songs, but rather large instrumental and orchestral compositions.

However, he recognized that Arabs, in general, preferred lyrical songs over instrumental compositions. Furthermore, the complex compositions required assembling large orchestras with highly-skilled instrumentalists, and even more challenging, it required an accepting audience, preferably one that was musically educated. Yet these challenges did not impede him from pursuing his goal of popularizing music without lyrics.

Basha's best known compositions are "Beirut 82," which marked the year of the Israeli invasion of the capital city; "Peace Symphony," which marked the end of the civil war and was performed by an orchestra in Belgium; and the "Prophet's Recital"

or "*Inshaddiyya*" from the poetry of Ahmad Showqi, which was performed at the Cairo Opera House. His spiritual compositions beautifully combined musical depth with ethereal softness.

In 1969, he won a prize for a symphony oddly titled "Non-Maqam Ultraviolet." Basha's other works include "*Layali al-Asfahani Fi Kitab al-Aghani*," "*Majales al-Tarab 'Ind al-Arab*," and "*Juha*." In 1952, he composed the entire program of the Near East Ballet Ensemble. His work "Fantasie Oriental" was based on the *muwashah* (a musical term meaning *terza rima*) "*Asqi al-Itash*" (Give Drink to the Thirsty) with violinist Abboud Abd al-Al playing in lieu of a singer. He also wrote "Andalus Suites." His Work "*Le Tapis Magique*" (The Magic Carpet) was inspired by "The Arabian Nights."

With all his success – books, albums, awards and medals – and his significant role in the Arab League's Arab Academy of Music, Tawfiq al-Basha will be remembered for two significant accomplishments: his scholarly and encyclopedic knowledge of the *muwashahat* genre, and his orchestral compositions. Basha learned Andalusian music from his uncle Khalil Makniyya long before studying classical music. He pursued Andalusian music and became a recognized authority, writing several books on the topic. Basha also wrote on the history and theory of Arab music – which he preferred to call Eastern music.

Basha believed in the Arab musical heritage and encouraged its presentation in the best possible light. He strongly debated about the purity of Arab music and sided with those who called for musical renewal, including exposure to and learning from Western and world music, albeit never from a position of inferiority. He introduced polyphony to Arab music, which is based on modal melodies.

This composer was determined to demonstrate that the Arabs can stand on their historical accomplishments without blocking modernity. He admired the great Egyptian composers, referring to Sayyid Darwish as the only contemporary Arab musician and to Muhammad al-Qasabji as the greatest source of change and renewal. He often expressed his respect for Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, and in the 1950s, Basha successfully combined several of the tunes of popular Wahhab songs into one suite. He composed transitional phrases to ease the listeners into connecting the songs, especially where *maqam* modulation took place.

In a long interview with critic Nizar Mrouweh in the late 80s, Basha discussed his strengths, as well as the the gaps in his musical education. He described developing Eastern music and his attempts to bring it international acclaim while maintaining its Arab spirit of swimming against the current. At the age of 70 he reportedly said that he was just beginning to compose, since he had many ideas left to realize, including a project with the poet Said Aql.

Tawfiq al-Basha, however, passed the baton to his son, the world-renowned pianist Abd al-Rahman al-Basha, who was honored in Belgium the same day his father died. One of Tawfiq's songs was titled "*Idinnya Haik*" or "This Is Life." As for this sad loss, one can only say *Idinnya Haik!* **AJ**

## Alfred Basbous

*continued from page 44*

illusion of softness and malleability despite the hard stone. It is as if the chisel did not have to break away unyielding pieces of stone to make such forms appear, Charaf asserts. He continues, saying that this illusion “is a symbolic gesture to the feminine nature, which is distinguished above all else by its softness and tenderness – this softness and tenderness that draws us in and that never left Alfred ambivalent in the face of beauty.”

Alfred created his own “austere, aesthetic world” of art “with the simplicity of peasants and the skill of builders,” comments Maroun Hakim on Alfred’s abstract and feminine style in *An Nahar*, January 2006. In an article in *Al Mustaqbal*, January 2006, editor and poet Paul Shaoul focuses neither on the specific forms in Alfred’s works nor on his use of woman, but rather on the transience in his work. “Alfred is a sculptor of passage; he goes from obsession to obsession, from illusion to illusion, from adventure to adventure, from beautiful madness to beautiful madness, from birth to birth,” Shaoul asserts. Though many, like Sultan, see clear influences on Alfred and his works, Shaoul believes that Alfred was a free spirit who did not follow any pre-existing theories or ideologies.

Alfred’s modernist style and his pure passion of molding stone into art earned him much recognition in Lebanon and abroad. In addition to the fame he earned himself through the annual *Rachana International Sculpture Forum*, Alfred also received an award from *L’Orient* newspaper in Lebanon in 1963, the *Alexandria Biennial* in 1974, and, upon his death, Nassif Qalosh, the governor of northern Lebanon, awarded Alfred Lebanon’s Order of Merit.

Alfred Basbous’ works continue to be displayed in exhibitions around the world and, of course, stand as a lasting tribute in *Rachana*. **AJ**

## Issam Mahfouz (1939-2006)

### Recalling Poet, Playwright, Critic as the Authentic Modernist

BY MOHAMMAD DAKROUB

Even in his early writings, which were mainly poems, Issam Mahfouz used to “create a sublime and penetrating theater of dialogue,” says Lebanese poet Shawqi abi-Shaqra about his friend. It is a disservice to Mahfouz to sum up his contributions in generalities. This creative artist made his unique and visionary contributions in different fields: first, in modern poetry; then in theater, where his basic and most notable contributions lie, as well as in literary studies, criticism, and research. He excelled at developing innovative methods for presenting knowledge and introducing creative and cultural works to the Arab reader in a deliberate and entertaining form. We cannot overlook the rich and distinguished literary page which he edited each Saturday in the Beirut-based *An Nahar* newspaper, providing the reader a font of cultural knowledge from an authentic modernist and progressive perspective; and for reasons we have yet to understand, that newspaper has abandoned this shining weekly literary page, a loss for both the newspaper and the reader.

Mahfouz wrote 45 books throughout his life, containing diverse artistic and cultural wealth within those works. Mahfouz’s writings displayed certain characteristic features which distinguish this comprehensive intellectual, observer, and visionary who expressed in his books an intellectual, modernist, and progressive position – sometimes firm, sometimes flexible

In the modern Lebanese-Arab theater movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Mahfouz pioneered the transformation of theatrical writings in Lebanon from formal “literary” mode into

## Two Poems by Issam Mahfouz

### Sad Music

The Slender Boy  
Toys with the shirt’s wounds  
With a slender finger

The rain streaming in the Window’s corner  
Weeps over a red lily  
Planted in a box  
There,  
In the hearth of lights

### The Cold Eyes

Enough, child  
Shut the window gently.

In the eyes of the beloved  
And in the whispers of the strange evening  
The winds blow over,  
The years move on,  
The wailing, the grief,  
Move on!

**Translated from the Arabic by Noel Abdulahad.**  
These are excerpts of longer poems of the same titles.



## In Memoriam

a language of dialogue, the language of theater. This change in language helped to shift the theatrical movement from behind the walls of tradition and expose it to the light of modernism both in art as well as in social and political visions. He achieved this mainly through five plays: *Al-Zanzalakht* (The Chinaberry, 1964), *Al-Qatl* (The Killing, 1968), *Al Diktator* (The Dictator, 1969), *Limaza* (Why?, 1971), 11 *Kadiyya Dod al-Huriyya* (11 Cases Against Freedom, 1975), and *Tabaa Khasat* (Special Edition, 1968). But for some reason, Mahfouz stopped writing for the theater, although he never left the stage.

Next, he entered the arena of literature and critical studies. Mahfouz brought new and renewed formulas, bringing to criticism a dialogue tradition emanating from both a theater experiment and a critical attitude toward it.

Issam Mahfouz has given us a series of “dialogues,” which in fact are major research projects that examine aspects of our cultural and intellectual history through imaginary dialogue. In these “dialogues,” Mahfouz talks with intellectuals and philosophers, mainly those of the rational and progressive schools who believe in change, and who are committed to resisting oppression, repression, and pseudo-oppressors.

He wrote, for example, “A Dialogue with the Pioneers of Arab Renaissance in the 19th Century,” “A Dialogue with the Rebellious in Heritage,” “Dialogue with the Atheists in Heritage,” “Dialogue with Ibn Arabi” (mystic, philosopher and poet, 1165-1240) and other dialogue attempts which are closer to the artistic formation of literary works, including “Gibran: a Personal Portrait,” and “The Scenario of Arab Theater in 100 Years.”

His major concern in this innovative type of critical work was to be progressive, entertaining, and non-complex, all characteristics that perfectly describe his presentation of and his position toward these distinguished figures. Despite the entertaining format, this critical project presents to the reader cultural and factual materials that the author diligently researched, compiled, and produced, while critically examining them through contemporary modern lenses.

Also, he approached these intellectual pioneers appreciatively, recognizing the quality and value of their works. He did not resort to “killing the father” but, on the contrary, valued what these pioneering “fathers” had offered in rational and progressive contributions, showing how they

enrich our modern culture with a wealth of knowledge and creative experiments.

In his “dialogues,” Mahfouz taught cultural journalism a poignant lesson and provided educational incentive: How is dialogue conducted with, or serves as a part of, the cultural and creative community?

In his many personal dialogues with distinguished Arab and world intellectuals, Mahfouz always adhered to an “educational working system” which included respect for the author with whom he spoke, first by familiarizing himself in advance with the author’s works and activities. Next, he showed respect for his readers by introducing them to the basic intellectual aspects of a given thinker or creative person. Even more important, he respected himself when he dialogued with the author not only out of his knowledge of the author’s works, but also from basing his dialogue on his personal intellectual and critical position, so that the dialogue became an actual debate rather than mere questions and answers.

Issam Mahfouz quoted the prominent Egyptian intellectual Farah Anton: “Some of those who tread upon carved-up and paved roads forget the efforts of those who made these roads.”

It is clear that Mahfouz, one of the most important intellectuals who carved up new roads of the contemporary theater in Lebanon, never forgot those pioneers who paved the way, thus presenting them to us in books that are convincing and entertaining as well as substantive.

Issam Mahfouz continued his dialogues and his struggle even with death itself: a stroke left him battling death for several months.

The man of dialogues has now left this world, but this world will preserve Mahfouz’s rich and cultural achievements, striking down death itself, while battling it at every step. **AJ**

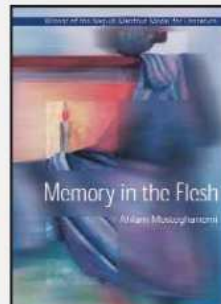
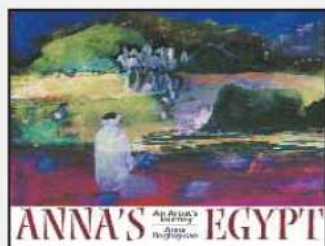
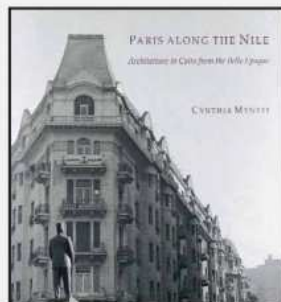
### Translated from the Arabic by Elie Chalala

*This essay is adapted from two articles that appeared in As Safir and Al Balad newspapers, both Beirut-based. The author has granted Al Jadid the exclusive right to translate, adapt and publish.*



Issam Mahfouz by Alicia Hall for Al Jadid

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