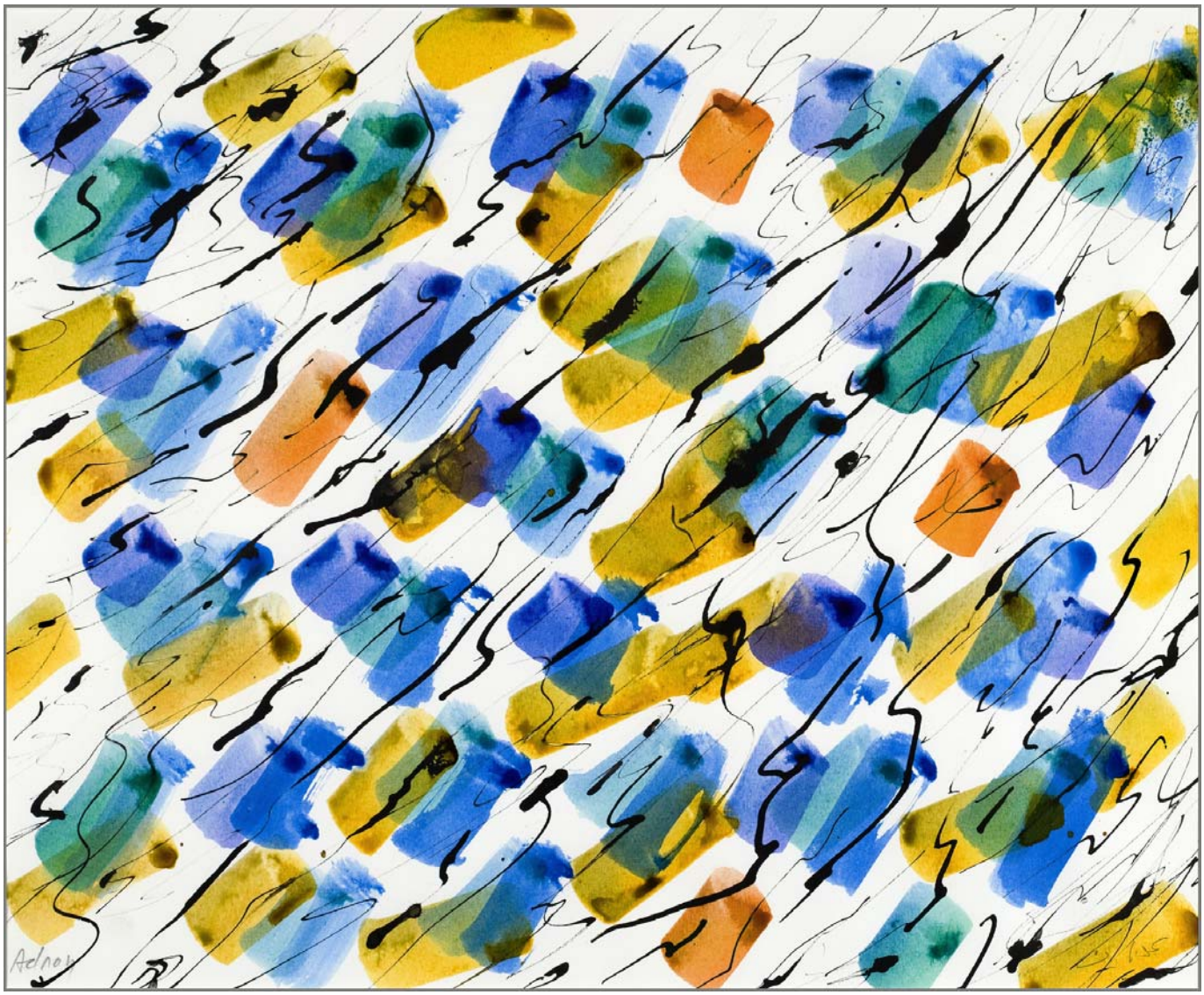
# AL JADID

A Review & Record of Arab Culture and Arts




www.ALJADID.com VOL. 15 No. 61 (2009) $8.95



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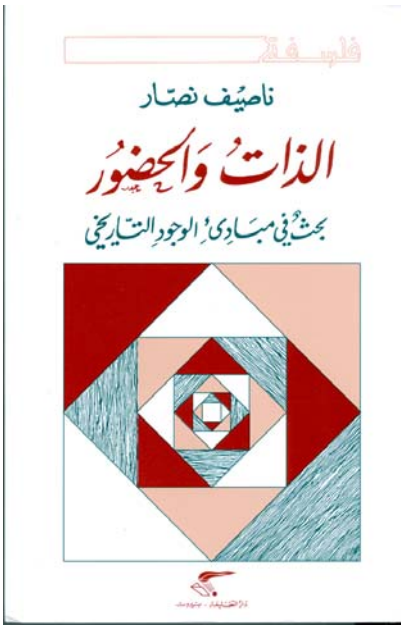
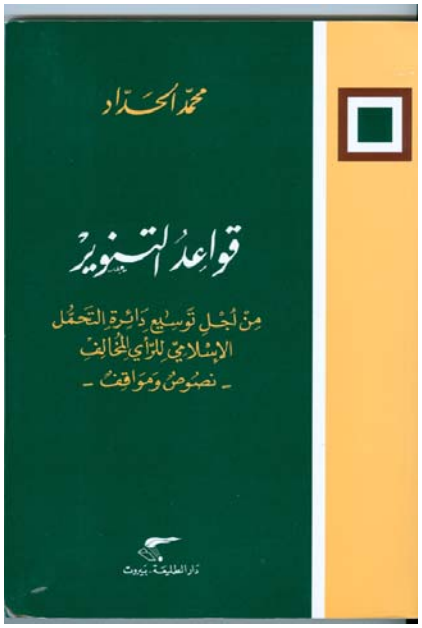
# A New Life for Arab Rationalism?

Nassif Nassar has a long-term research project, and his latest book, *"Al Zaat wa al-Hudur, Bahth fi Mabade' al-Woujoud al-Tarikhi"* (The Self and Existence: A Study in the Principles of Historical Existence), published in Beirut by Dar al-Talia (2008), is the next step in this endeavor. In it, he characterizes Man as the free and sovereign maker of his own social and political life, a depiction that has been routinely impugned by all types of deterministic ideologies.




Nassar's project goes back to the 1960s – to *"Nahou Mujtamah Jadid"* (Towards a New Society) – and as he mentions in the book's introduction, it is a continuation of a philosophical inquiry developed in two other previous books, *"Mantiq al-Sulta"* (The Logic of Power) and *"Bab al-Huriyya"* (Freedom's Door).

To be sure, the crisis of rational and liberal ideologies is both political and intellectual, and more evident since the 1967 War and the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Nassar's most recent work is a philosophical inquiry (and a difficult read for the non-specialist) that sets attention on Arab liberal and rational thought. This type of thinking has been marginalized, besieged, excluded, and threatened, according to Karam al-Helou's review of Nassar's book in Al Hayat newspaper. Thus Nassar, also in al-Helou's opinion, has stood steadfast in the face of an onslaught of ideological challenges to his commitment to secular and rational thought.

Nassar insists that individual and human consciousness forms the basis of our existence, determining past, present, and future values. Since ideas like these fall clearly under the umbrella of secular idealism and rational-liberal traditions, Nassar's goal is to re-introduce these traditions into contemporary Arab thought.

His timing may be perfect: Arab liberals need all the help they can get nowadays. They have been on the defensive for quite some time – more so since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. They suffer from "guilt by association." Since the dominant ideology of the West has been liberalism, and since Western powers have been at war with the Arab and Muslim world (both directly and indirectly), liberal ideas have tended to be viewed as apologia for Western interests, and, on the extreme side, as indications of support for American policies in the Middle East.

Nassar is not defending Arab liberals but is instead advancing principles that might nourish their thinking in the Arab world. His project

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## Cover Artist

### ETEL ADNAN

Etel Adnan (whose work "Resonance" appears on the front cover) is a well-known Arab-American novelist, essayist, poet, and artist. Her paintings have been exhibited internationally in galleries and museums. Currently, she has a show in Beirut at Sfeir-Semler Gallery. Her most recent participations in group shows were at the British Museum in London; at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg; and at the Martin Gropius Bau Museum in Berlin.




Al Jadid (ISSN 1523 – 746X) is published biannually (twice a year) by International Desktop Publishing, P.O. Box 241342, Los Angeles, CA 90024-1342, Telephone: (310) 470-6984, Fax: (310) 602-6222, E-Mail: aljadid@jovanet.com, Web site: www.aljadid.com. Subscriptions: $28.00 (individual); $40.00 (institutional). Add $10 for postage in Canada and $16 in other foreign countries.

## Booknotes/*Elie Chalala*

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may be even more ambitious if we listen to al-Helou.

Although there is some disconnect between the ideas of the Nahda intellectuals of mid-19th to early 20th centuries and those writing today, Nassar's contribution is considered as important as those of his precursors. When scholars search for traces of rationality in Arab discourse, they immediately turn to the age of Nahda, a legacy to which Nassar is linked. Nassar's book, according to al-Helou, is a contribution to the open battle for Arab rationality since the age of Nahda. Al-Helou goes even further by saying that Nassar insists on challenging the position that denies the existence of authentic Arab philosophical thought, concluding that the Arab reader could now undertake "The Self and Existence: A Study in the Principles of Historical Existence" alongside Sartre's "Being and Nothingness" without any sense of one being inferior or subordinate to the other.

In his own introduction, Nassar writes that the book's seven parts and 28 chapters all focus on one question: What does it mean that Man makes himself? According to him, this key quandary invites a host of others that pertain to Man's consciousness.

Man in control of his destiny and history is a constant theme that is highlighted by Nassar's publisher. The book cover states: "This book raises a radical question that tries to examine it in a method that is just as radical: What does it mean that Man makes himself and history?" Given the popularity of religious books in the Arab world, the evidence of which is found at one book fair after the other, this book could not have been more timely.

## The Issue of 'Dialogue' in Islamic Culture

"If you are a traditional Muslim, you might be disturbed by parts of this book. But if you are an enlightened Muslim, you will realize that dialogue is a characteristic of the modern age. There is no dialogue without difference and without the ability to tolerate different opinions. There is no use in merely courteous dialogue, or a dialogue with those who hold similar views to yours," wrote Mohammad al-Haddad in the foreword to his book, *"Qawad al-Tanweer, Min Ajl Tawseeh Da'irat al-Tahamoul al-Islami lil Rai' al-Mukhalef – Nusous wa Mawakef"* (Principles of Enlightenment: Expanding the Sphere of Islamic Tolerance of the Different Opinion – Texts and Positions), which was published in Beirut by Dar Al Talia in 2009.

Al-Haddad (Haddad henceforth) has been an effective critic of Islamic extremism, declaring his views in both newspaper articles and books. Still, his writings have not endeared him to the group of Arab intellectuals that can be called, for lack of a better term, anti-Orientalist. Although in the introduction of his book he is quite conscious of how


traditional Muslims would react to his book, he is silent and possibly ambivalent in terms of how non-traditionalists might respond. Nevertheless, he categorizes this type of Arab intellectual as being "enlightened," stating that they would engage in dialogue with those with whom they differed. This is correct, but what about those "enlightened" intellectuals who take issue with him? The author is silent regarding this group.

Haddad cautions the reader that dialogue is not simply an intellectual luxury but part of the process that reproduces it, and one of the mechanisms and the conditions essential to its foundation. He offers a chronological history of the development of meaning in Islam. Meaning is a process that developed in three stages. First, human beings were unable to interpret the world around them, and so they began interpreting it in a way that was consistent with their psychological needs. As a result, religious ideas formed, comprising a knowledge revolution that separated facts from myths. Second, it gradually became acceptable to apply multiple interpretations to a given piece of data or information. Lastly, in the modern age, dialogue and meaning became inextricably linked, with dialogue being a prerequisite for meaning.

Since the concept of dialogue is central to Haddad's book, he clearly defines the term in the foreword: "Dialogue is a peaceful confrontation between different possible explanations attempting to influence each other, and when they reach an agreement, that agreement could be total or partial." He also adds that in either case, dialogue legitimizes the plurality of meanings and interpretations and reduces the opportunity for a clash that would enable one meaning or thesis to defeat the other. An additional cautionary note added by Haddad: The reader should not confuse dialogue with

dispute or argumentation, which revolve around one group overcoming another; neither should he confuse it with politeness or civility, which might inhibit the intellectual from taking a position so as to avoid hurting the feelings of the other party.

Having said this, Haddad continues to bemoan the lack of dialogue in Arab and Muslim culture. He laments the heightened importance of mosque preachers, satellites, and religious radio stations, whose influence by far exceeds that of intellectuals. Even the modern centers of culture, universities, and research institutions, have been colonized by the pseudo-educated, whose rigid adherence to custom secretly masks a failure to command foreign language or to be abreast of avant-garde global developments and ideas.

Islamic thought, Haddad contends, faces both internal and external challenges. By internal challenges he means the crisis within Islamic thought itself, which involves greater censorship and an increased role for preachers and satellites, alongside the reduced prominence of intellectuals. The external threats are reflected by the deteriorating image of Arabs and Muslims throughout the world. Some contributing events cited by Haddad include the assassination of the Dutch filmmaker Theodoor van Gogh, whose film "Submission" criticized the treatment of women in Islam; the violent and bloody protests in 2005 against a Danish newspaper that featured cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad with a bomb in his turban; and the 2006 papal speech, known as the Regensburg Lecture, containing unflattering remarks about Islam that incited controversy and condemnation in many parts of the Muslim world.

The fanatical reactions to these events are indications of disastrous failure, as Haddad puts it. Consistent with his critical assessment of the religious clerical establishment, he claims that religious leaders have waged a battle they are unqualified to lead, mainly due to their lack of understanding of modern culture and the mechanisms of dialogue. "You cannot confront the modern world by waving the rule of Sharia," he wrote. Instead, "you can defend yourself with sober-minded dialogue."

One purpose of this book is to show how to transition from what Haddad calls "the society of prohibition into the society of thinking." To accomplish this, the author lays out five rules, which become the five parts that make up the book.

Perhaps the most important of the book's contents are the sections that include the lectures (pp. 47-67) of Ernest Renan (1823–1892) and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897), both of which presented significant challenges to Islamic thought. Renan and al-Afghani have become household names in the Orientalist debate and in *turath* studies. The former had a large number of critics, while the latter's motivations have been questioned, especially after he changed positions on the role of religion.

While Haddad highlights in Renan what some Muslim and non-Muslim intellectuals would consider an Orientalist perspective regarding the Muslim and the Arab world, he does not appear to be heading in the direction, i.e., labeling Renan as Orientalist. He does, however, imply that not many intellectuals have read Renan's lectures fully, nor for that matter, al-Afghani's rebuttal as well.

Theodoor van Gogh

Haddad acknowledges that the Renan lecture caused uproar among Muslim elites when it was delivered in 1883, provoking heated responses both at that time and since. At the heart of the controversy caused by the lecture is a thesis that challenges modern Islamic thought: religious extremism did not come from outside the religion but rather from within. Islamic thought has and continues to exonerate Islam from any responsibility for religious extremism, insisting on its innocence. Rather than introspectively examining the basic structure of the religious tradition, Islamic thinkers have instead tended to blame the problem of extremism on external forces.

Most interesting is Haddad's observation that the one Muslim intellectual who challenged Renan at the time actually made statements similar to Renan's. This discourse, however, is widely unknown. That the real text of the exchange between Renan and al-Afghani has been kept out of circulation, Haddad writes, explains the lack of Muslim desire to openly discuss extremism. Haddad draws the reader's attention to a section that has been omitted from al-Afghani's rebuttal wherein it is claimed that extremism has played a role in Islamic history since the religion's inception. According to al-Afghahi, Islamic reform was one attempt to eliminate this phenomenon.

The author laments the failure of Islamic thought to deal with pressure, whether emanating from within or without. Throughout his criticisms of Islamic thought, Haddad insists that the ability and willingness to engage in dialogue is a prerequisite for terming oneself an intellectual. What does it take then to be a real intellectual?

The real intellectual, according to Haddad, is the one who accepts dual membership: critical affiliation with his culture and mental affiliation with a higher cause that transcends

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# The Politics of Getting Published:
## The Continuing Struggle of Arab-American Writers

**BY ANDREA SHALAL-ESA**

More Arab-American writers are getting their work published than ever before, but even those lucky few who land lucrative book contracts with big publishers still face a host of problems ranging from censorship to being pigeonholed as only Arab-American writers.

Clearly, U.S. publishing has a growing appetite for information about the Arab and Muslim worlds, but many mainstream media remain deeply affected by an Orientalist agenda that focuses on the oppression of women and other stereotypes about Arab society. What Steven Salaita calls "stories of escape" sell in numbers, while more nuanced, complex, and self-reflexive pieces don't. For example, a series of books by Jean Sasson about "oppressed" women in Saudi Arabia and Iraq fly off the bookshelves by the millions, while more authentic novels like Mohja Kahf's "The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf," which depicts growing up Muslim in America, sell in far smaller numbers.

Rania Ghamlouch for Al Jadid

Arab-American writers still have difficulty getting big book contracts with large mainstream publishers, and if they do, they find their works often heavily edited, if not outright censored. Moreover, they have little control over the way their books are marketed and sold. Diana Abu-Jaber's second novel, "Memories of Birth," was under contract and rewritten several times, but in the end, W.W. Norton opted not to print it, presumably because it dealt with the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from Palestine in 1948. Gregory Orfalea's historical novel about the Palestinian Resistance in the period preceding the creation of Israel in 1936 also has not been published.

Partly these trends demonstrate that the mega-mergers in the publishing industry and the attendant focus on profits have made it harder for any writer to get published. Pressure from shareholders to increase profit margins has made it harder and harder for publishers to take risks on unpublished authors and subjects that may not sell.

Despite those pressures, the number of books published about the Middle East and Palestine in recent years has increased. For example, one of the big five publishers, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, published "Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood," by Ibtisam Barakat in 2007. Barakat's touching novel describes the Six-Day War from a child's perspective, but her success remains an exception, and most of the books that make it into print are non-fiction. Recent contracts between Arab-American writers and big publishing houses indicate an encouraging trend, but it is probably premature to talk of a broad new receptivity to literary works from Arab-American writers.

Often there is more to the story than meets the eye. Mohja Kahf relates the story of one Muslim author who was offered a million dollars if she would slant her debut novel against Islam. She refused and eventually got the book published by another large publisher, albeit with a much smaller advance.

Arab-American writers can also find themselves relegated to a fairly narrow niche in the publishing world. Alane Mason, Abu-Jaber's editor at W.W. Norton, explains that publishers are often reluctant to let writers venture beyond the narrow niche in which they have succeeded in the past. Mason ultimately signed a contract with Abu-Jaber for a book that has nothing to do with Arabs or the Middle East, but she described it as a "huge gamble" and likened it to Starbucks suddenly deciding to sell pizza. The agent for Khaled Hosseini, the author of the much-acclaimed

novel, "The Kite Runner," told her that she would never have let Hosseini venture so far afield. "Once you establish that niche, people don't want to see you go outside it," Mason said in a February 2007 interview. In fact, Norton signed a two-book agreement with Abu-Jaber that covered the 2007 novel "Origin," a forensic mystery with no central Arab-American theme, but also stipulated that the next book would return to the Arab-American angle.

Mason says she understood that Abu-Jaber also wanted to write something different, test her limits and move into new territories. "She didn't want to be the poster girl of Arab-American literature," she says. For her part, Abu-Jaber yearns for her work to be judged on its own merits, not as representative of something. "I want it to be about the literature," she said.

Mohja Kahf also wonders if her first novel, "The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf," has sold so well because she wrote about Arab-American and Muslim-American communities. Ideally, she would prefer to see the book categorized with other coming-of-age stories, not just Arab or Muslim-American literature. Kahf published a collection of poems in 2001 that dealt with her ethnic/immigrant identity, but so far, she has been unable to interest a publisher in her love poems or a cycle of poems about interfaith spirituality.

Kahf also went through significant trials to get her novel published. Her first editor called her a "pain in the ass." The second insisted Kahf remove many examples of white racism and harassment of Muslims in Indiana, where much of the story takes place. Those experiences, the editor argued, were just too overwhelming for the reader. Including them all would be unaesthetic.

By contrast, harassment of women by their Arab and Muslim husbands, fathers, and society as a whole is not only considered aesthetic when it's repetitive, but it also sells books. Take for instance, the "Princess" trilogy of books written by Jean Sasson, which were marketed as "a powerful indictment of women's lives behind the veil with the royal family of Saudi Arabia." Altogether, the three books have reportedly sold 7 million copies.

These books fit into a formula that Kahf described in Islamica magazine last year: "No matter how much a Muslim woman may have something different to say, by the time it goes through the 'machine' of the publishing industry, it is likely to come out the other end packaged as either a 'Victim Story' or 'Escapee Story.' Then the Muslims yell at her for contributing to stereotypes."

Moroccan-American writer Laila Lalami, whose book, "Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits," has been translated into six languages, has criticized the publishing industry for trying to shape discourse to fit its stereotypes about the Arab world. Speaking on a panel on Arab-American literature at the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee annual convention in 2006, Lalami said, "As an Arab woman, I'm expected to talk about how oppressed I am by evil Arab men."

Rabih Alameddine, the Lebanese-born author of "I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters," agrees that editors try to shape his work in ways that make him uncomfortable. But he says many Indian and African-American writers face the same pressures. Alameddine for his part prefers not to be identified as Arab American. "I am an Arab. I am an American. I don't do hyphens very well." "I, the Divine," also edited by Alane Mason at Norton, was published on Sept. 12, 2001 – one day after the hijacking attacks on New York and Washington. However, the book was eclipsed by nonfiction books as Americans rushed to get more information about the Arab and Muslim world. Mason believes Alameddine might have done better if he had agreed to be interviewed as an "Arab American" immediately after the attacks, but he did not want to speak out publicly as a representative. From his perspective, Alameddine says he would feel uncomfortable being "the voice of anything," much less the Arab-American community, since he identifies more closely as an Arab.

Going to a smaller, independent press can help authors preserve more of their editorial freedom, but they still have many issues to contend with. For one, they risk being virtually shut out of the big chain bookstores, which tend to buy mainly from the mainstream presses. (Independent bookstores account for just 17 percent of sales each year.) And only the biggest publishing houses can afford to send writers on national book tours. These tours help to generate reviews, newspaper articles, television and radio interviews – all of which ultimately help sell books.

And even at smaller independent presses, Arab-American authors are not immune from editorial pressure. Kahf relates how she nearly withdrew her novel after her publisher, Carroll & Graf, an imprint of Avalon Publishing, posted on its website a cover that she had never seen nor approved. It showed her Muslim-American character in a midriff and cut off her eyes – exactly the sort of exoticized Orientalist cover that Kahf had sought to avoid by writing a clause about cover control into her contract. The publishing house hemmed and hawed, but eventually commissioned another cover, albeit one that still focuses on a single woman with a hijab - one that omits the sense of community Kahf had wanted.

Susan Muaddi Darraj also had trouble with her cover when Praeger Publishers, an imprint of Greenwood, published her anthology of Arab and Arab-American women. Titled "Scheherazade's Legacy: Arab and Arab-American Women on Writing," the book's cover features the image of a pair of blue eyes framed by a black veil, although most of the writers included in the anthology are Christian. As in Kahf's case, her publisher did not consult Darraj and then showed "no interest" in her displeasure with the chosen cover.

The news is not all bad, to be sure, and being Arab is not always a drawback given heightened interest in the post-9/11 context. Alameddine, for instance, reportedly got a substantially larger advance – 200 times what Norton paid him for "I, The Divine" – for his new novel. Knopf published "The Hakawati," which has been described as a fantastic re-imagining of the "Arabian Nights," in April 2008. Abu-Jaber was able to get a two-book contract from Norton, and FSG published Bakarat's account of living through the Six-Day War.

But one is left wondering how many more books are not making it into print because of lingering barriers.**AJ**

# Taking on Sexual Harassment in Egypt

**BY MOHAMMED ALI ATASSI**

Sexual harassment of women in Egypt is one of many social problems that politicians and the media have tended to treat as an instance of individual, abnormal behavior. Because they treat it as an isolated aberration from proper social norms – falling outside the path, principles, and traditions of a sanctioned way of life – Egyptian society as a whole does not need to confront it.

It took the courage of a few Egyptian women who exposed their own suffering to reveal the treatment many women routinely experience on the streets of Cairo. Simultaneously, a few civil society organizations, aided by alternative media outlets (blogs foremost among them), launched awareness campaigns aimed at transforming both the understanding and method of dealing with the issue, so that Egyptians would cease to view future incidents as isolated acts of perversion, and instead see them as components of a pressing social problem. As such, perceptions of sexual harassment have changed to now frame it as an important issue – one that demands political, educational, and judicial measures, though many of these have yet to be implemented.

"Untitled" by Shadi Ghadirian, 2001, from "Art of the Middle East" (Merrell, 2010)

The problem of sexual harassment in Egypt comes to sharp focus in the case of the young film director Nouha Rushdi Saleh, who won a legal case against a truck driver who harassed her in a Cairo street. The court handed down a three-year jail sentence to the perpetrator – and the case blew the cover off the issue in Egypt, where official silence has reigned for years.

Most tourist guidebooks on Egypt, particularly those published abroad, warn foreign women regarding sexual harassment in the street, and offer advice on how they should act and react. This could easily suggest that this phenomenon is on the rise. The aggression is hardly confined to foreign women; its victims include Egyptian women from all social and religious classes, veiled and unveiled.

Still, most public authorities and influential social forces ignored the issue until the outbreak of the 2006 riots. During the downtown celebrations of the holiday of Eid al-Fitr, a crowd of hundreds of sexually frenzied young men participated in violent attacks on dozens of women, surrounding them in the streets, groping, and even trying to undress them. As police stood by and watched the scene ambivalently, no one, not mothers nor veiled women, were safe from the mob.

Supported by the state media, mainly newspapers, some political figures tried to minimize the impact of the incident by accusing the opposition of exploiting the social and political dimensions of the riot for their own benefit. But if the state authority was ready for a cover-up, the Egyptian blogosphere was ready for a fight. Bloggers published testimonies and played video clips of the scenes in Talaat Harb Square and the surrounding streets where women were assaulted.

And while Egyptian authorities took action and installed security cameras in the center of the city – the site of the 2006 riot – to alleviate the phenomenon, the effort did nothing to prevent similar attacks from being perpetrated in other parts of the city. Incidents spread and in fact intensified in other areas, including Al Haram Street and Al Mohandesseen district, where many girls were assaulted on Eid al-Fitr last year. This time, however, police successfully arrested many of the attackers.

Unfortunately, many dominant beliefs still place the blame squarely on the shoulders of the victims of sexual harassment. Society makes an implicit assumption that women dress provocatively, or otherwise behave suspiciously to excite men into violently attacking them – or blame women simply because they are unveiled or don't conform to conservative Islamic dress codes.

***Translated from the Arabic by Joseph E. Mouallem***

The Arabic version of this article appeared in An Nahar Cultural Supplement November 2008. This article is translated into English with the author's permission.

If there was one positive result of the 2006 attacks – which claimed many veiled victims – it opened the door for public debate about the phenomenon of sexual harassment in Egypt. Civil society organizations and women's groups touched on the fresh social wound, launching a legion of awareness campaigns while the issue was still on citizens' minds.

These campaigns sought to educate women about their own rights and warn both men and women about the severity of these practices and the pressing need to face the problem as a society. Presenting it as a social issue that affects everyone, the campaigns linked the phenomenon of sexual harassment to youth unemployment and marginalization, as well as to the fact that a growing number of young people are marrying at an older age. They also cited the upsurge in sexual repression amidst an increasingly male chauvinist culture, in addition to the breakdown of the family and moral codes, as factors.

The magazine Kalimatina (Our Word) published the campaign "Respect Yourself," and the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights presented "Safe Streets for Everyone." In cooperation with various media outlets, both print and visual, websites and blogs, these campaigns worked to enlighten Egyptian youth on the danger of such practices and demand the development of laws that deter them. Campaigns also prepared police stations and trained officers for handling sexual harassment incidents.

"Qana" by Helen Karam, 2005

In the wake of this multifaceted campaign, a sociological study named "Clouds in the Sky of Egypt: Sexual Harassment – From Verbal Advances to Rape" examined the situation. The study took a sample of 2,500 Egyptian women and 2,020 other individuals (equally divided between men and women), as well as a survey of 109 foreign women. The results were shocking: 98 percent of the foreign women and 83 percent of the Egyptian women had been subject to sexual harassment – and nearly two-thirds of the men confessed to committing sexual harassment against women.

## Counter-Campaigns

On the other hand, conservative political and religious groups attempted to exploit the worsened incidents of sexual harassment to serve their own special interests. In a manner clearly demeaning to women, these factions attacked women's dignity by pegging the blame for the assaults on the victims. The counter-campaigns even went so far as to collude with those who committed the crimes in an obvious attempt to justify their deeds. Rather than defending the victims or protecting women's rights, these campaigns took the opposite approach.

Two striking examples of this came in the form of posters that the groups hung in some streets and published on many Islamic blogs and websites. The first contains two juxtaposed images. The picture on the right has a green hue and features a woman wearing a veil plastered with mosque-minaret pictures. At the bottom of the picture is a piece of candy carefully wrapped in green, and under it the statement that God will forgive the sins of veiled women. The image on the left, tinted in bright red, depicts an unveiled woman and a man. The bottom shows a red candy in torn paper, with a religious injunction beneath that warns women of moral failure.

The second poster continues the theme of objectifying women, likening her to a piece of candy ready to be eaten, by portraying her as a lollipop that cannot be protected from flies (which means men in the language of these campaigns); same with the wrapper, which translates to the veil. Under the images of two lollipops, one wrapped and the second naked with flies hovering over it, a religious statement professes that an unveiled woman will not be able to protect herself – for God, the creator, knows what is in her best interest, and thus ordered the veil.

These messages reveal a disturbing mentality and ideology that view women as objects of pleasure and entertainment, who must cater to men's physical needs and fantasies for religion's sake. While enjoining women to cover themselves in public to prevent being sexually harassed by strangers, this belief system seems to limit women's choice when it comes to their own sexuality. These messages imply that the spread of sexual harassment is linked to the absence of the veil, and thus the unveiled woman holds the responsibility for the sexual harassment she encounters.

## Interference of Justice

The public discussion over sexual harassment could have been confined to the media, the campaigns, and the counter-campaigns were it not for the courage of the young Egyptian director, Nouha Rushdi Saleh. A driver sexually assaulted her while she returned from the airport, even though she was accompanied by a friend. The assault took place in one of the

streets close to her home in the Al Karba district when the driver began swerving his car towards her, extending his hand from the window and violently pulling her towards him. He touched her breasts until she fell on the ground, then he quickly drove away, looking back mockingly at her through his window.

According to Saleh, this glance back was an important factor in her decision to turn to the court and demand her rights. Yelling and feeling great anger that cannot be expressed in words, she followed the driver and was able, thanks to the heavy traffic, to grab the front of his car, all the while shouting and calling for help. Saleh gave an account of her shock at other pedestrians' reaction: "I couldn't believe that some were willing to help and assist the driver to run away in the car, while others told me, 'We will let him apologize to you.' I asked them why I would want an apology. Had he stepped over my feet? With my refusal, they asked, 'What do you need?' I told them I would report him to the police station. Another bystander said, 'I don't understand why you stand here in the midst of men.' There were people on their balconies looking down and watching me as if I were in a film. One woman was saying to me, 'Enough my daughter, forgive him,' but I refused and maintained my position."

**It took the courage of a few Egyptian women who exposed their own suffering to reveal the treatment many women routinely experience on the streets of Cairo.**

Saleh's legal background empowered her to insist on her rights, and she succeeded in making a police report and taking the defendant to the criminal court. With the support of her father, she was determined to have the court session be public as a means of shaking the Egyptian populace and judicial system into confronting sexual harassment. Northern Cairo's criminal court, presided over by Judge Shawqi al-Shalqani, issued a judgment on October 21, 2008, which sentenced the defendant Sharif Jouma Jebril to three years in jail and a payment of 5,001 Egyptian pounds as a penalty. Saleh faced the news cameras and said that the judgment had restored her self-esteem. The judicial system had done her justice, paving the way for all Egypt's daughters to pursue the legal road to claim their rights and render the first nail into the coffin of sexual harassment.

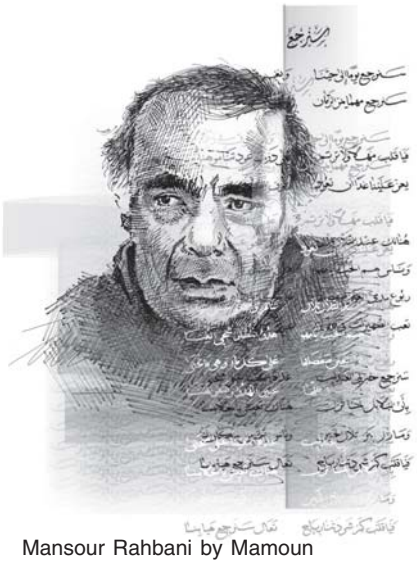
However, the judgment did not prevent Nouha Rushdi Saleh from being the subject of a vicious campaign that impugned her credibility. Her critics accused her of distorting Egypt's reputation and of carrying Israeli citizenship, as her grandfather was among the Palestinian refugees who came to Egypt. But her courage has left a significant mark on Egyptian society because she insisted on seeing her judicial proceeding to the end, as well as ultimately extracting a judgment in her favor from the Egyptian court. She will be remembered for helping to spearhead the long and difficult battle towards creating a civil society that holds the dignity and rights of women as inseparable from its overall goals and aspirations. ***AJ***

# Mansour Rahbani, Legacy of a Family and a Generation

**BY SAMI ASMAR**

Modern Arab music was shaped by a few highly creative individuals throughout the 20th century. Three of them were members of one family: the Rahbanis of Lebanon, comprised of the two brothers, Assi and Mansour, and a singer named Nuhad Haddad who married Assi and took the name Fairuz. Their documented journey has become legendary; for nearly three decades, the Rahbani Brothers wrote and composed songs that Fairuz sang and musicals in which she starred. Their prolific works are considered a treasure by generations of Arabs worldwide. In January 2009, Mansour Rahbani died at the age of 83, ending the second chapter of a great legacy.

Assi died in 1986. After a separation from Fairuz, and until his death, all their work was signed as the Rahbani Brothers. Critics and the curious fans often wondered how they divided their duties between writing the lyrics and composing the music; was Mansour the poet and Assi the composer? The brothers insisted that all their works were joint creative products in all aspects; they were not one poet and one composer but two poets and two composers. They revealed that when writing a musical play they would assign scenes for each to write separately, then exchange them for feedback and revisions. After the death of the more temperamental older brother, Mansour spent years fighting hurtful critics who declared Assi as the musical genius and Mansour the poetic genius, taking away from his musical contribution. It has become generally accepted, through close collaborators and former assistants, that Assi preferred to write poetry in the Lebanese dialect while Mansour wrote in classical Arabic, and that Assi preferred folk tunes and instruments while Mansour preferred large orchestral compositions.



Mansour Rahbani by Mamoun Sakkal for Al Jadid

This is consistent with Mansour's background. Born in the town of Antelias, he studied in mostly Christian schools run by Jesuit priests who likely taught hymns with Western style

harmony and orchestration. He then studied for years under Bertrand Robillard as well as Father Paul al-Ashkar. Mansour also took tremendous interest in classical Arabic literature and history and was fascinated by the works of al-Kindi and al-Farabi, among others. As a young adult, Mansour supported his music studies by working with the local police force prior to becoming a professional musician with his brother on the staff of the national radio station. Mansour and Assi's career took off as they teamed up with Fairuz and started the musical plays of the Baalbek Festival through which they quickly achieved national, then pan-Arab and international, recognition.

Assi and Mansour's younger brother, Elias Rahbani, who was very young when their father died and was essentially raised by his brothers, followed in their footsteps as a composer. The three brothers also have musician sons. Assi and Fairuz's son, Ziad, is a highly talented composer. After her husband's death, Fairuz worked exclusively with her son, whose style was very different from that of his father and uncle. Ziad intentionally challenged the traditional "Rahbani School," and in his own musical plays ridiculed the over-used imagery of the simple and pleasant village life, the peacemaker mayor (*mukhtar*) and the water jug (*jarra*) carried by the young and beautiful that had been interesting images developed by Mansour for the early Baalbek Festivals of the late 1950s. Ziad had modern political and socialist messages with a sharp edge and cynical humor. Mansour Rahbani's children, on the other hand, collaborated with him and followed a style he seemed to favor – grandiose musical productions of universal themes, with large Western-style orchestras, expansive stage sets and, in one play, numerous horses on stage. The *mukhtar* was replaced by al-Mutanabbi, and the *jarra* replaced by fancy choreographed sword fights.

In his later years, Mansour's relationship with his sister-in-law was mixed. He publicly expressed displeasure at Fairuz's solo concert tours in which she performed her classics – his creative work – without sufficient coordination with him. But he also went out of his way to defend her when she performed in Damascus at a time of a strong anti-Syrian sentiment in Lebanon, asserting that nobody was more patriotic than Fairuz, who should be a national treasure to be protected from political squabble.

The man whose work was taught in conservatories worldwide, his writings analyzed by graduate students, was a genius visionary who, with his brother and a select few intellectuals, started the Baalbek Festivals in the 1950s to put Lebanon on the world map. In the process, he created a musical genre recognized around the world as the music of Lebanon and indeed the folklore of Lebanon. Mansour Rahbani who, obsessed with historical figures, wrote plays about Socrates, Jesus, Gibran, and Zenobia, passed away with his last play, "The Return of the Phoenix," still being performed. He was the Phoenix who was to rise after the loss of his brother and the predicted demise of his career. He rose to be the wise older statesman of Arab music, expressing his feelings with poetry to the end, and leaving a legacy to his children and an inspiration to all artists. **AJ**

# Albert Cossery, 1913–2008: Mockery as Resistance

**BY MICHAEL TEAGUE**

The novels of Albert Cossery are refreshingly scathing in their criticism of vanity, political corruption and poverty of thought and imagination. They are also a tribute to the power of humor to free people from the vapid absurdities of modern existence. Judging by the reaction to his passing last year, one may deduce with resignation the scandalous underexposure of Cossery's work. He does not tower over Arab literature like Naguib Mahfouz, or over Arab-francophone literature like Albert Camus, but one should not misread his lesser position as an indication of any artistic shortcomings. Of Cossery, it might be more accurate to say that he towered underneath these literary giants. He wrote, like Jean Genet, of the underground; his stories take place among the prostitutes, drug addicts and criminals at the bottom of society.

Albert Cossery by Mamoun Sakkal for Al Jadid

Born in Cairo in 1913 to bourgeois parents of Syrian origin, Cossery was educated in French schools in Egypt and was introduced to the classics – Balzac, Dostoevsky, Baudelaire, Nietzsche and Stendhal – by his older brothers. In his early 20s, he became involved in an art collective by the name of *Art et Liberte,* which defined itself by its allegiance to the Surrealist movement, as well as by its opposition to the Third Reich's condemnation of Expressionist art. After a good deal of travel, he moved to Paris in 1940 – motivated in part by a desire to see the Second World War in the flesh. He lived first in Montmartre, and then, after the war ended, in Saint-Germain des Pres, where he passed the rest of his life in one room on the 5th floor of the Hotel de Louisiane. Cossery thrived in the intellectual climate of Paris, of which Saint-

Germain was then the epicenter; he knew Sartre, Camus, Durrell, Henry Miller, Giacometti, Tzara, Vian and Genet, amongst others. He was not as productive a writer as his colleagues were, delivering on average only one slim novel for every decade of his life ("only imbeciles write every day," he once said in a French television interview), but each book is carefully crafted in a French that is at once masterful, concise and trenchant in its humor.

All of Cossery's novels are in some way vehicles for this philosophy, a philosophy that is portrayed as being ontologically at odds with authority...

Of all of his friends, it was perhaps Henry Miller who was most taken with Cossery's novels. Miller endeavored to introduce his work to an American audience, writing the introduction to the English translation of Cossery's 1940 "Men God Forgot." In the book of essays "Stand Still Like the Humming Bird," in which the introduction is reproduced, Miller writes: "No living writer that I know of describes more poignantly and implacably the lives of the vast submerged multitude of mankind … ("Men God Forgot") is the sort of book that precedes revolutions, and begets revolution, if the tongue of man possesses any power whatever." This rather high-flown praise, typical of Miller when he speaks of his favorite authors, captures something essential about Cossery's writing.

Each of Cossery's eight novels depicts the neglected rabble of Egyptian cities and the corrupt state power structure that painfully complicates their already difficult lives. Cossery's protagonists invariably challenge the symbols of authority by means that are often hilarious, using the labyrinthine underbelly of society as a cover for their operations. In the first scene of 1964's "Violence and Derision," a police officer patrolling an affluent neighborhood seeks to rid a street corner of an arrogant beggar, only realizing that the beggar is actually a mannequin when he accidentally pulls its head off while trying to rough it up. The figure of authority becomes the butt of a situationist-style joke, the beneficiary of which is a crowd of spectators who have gathered to watch the scene unfold. The author of this prank is a young, hedonistic interloper named Karim, who with a group of associates wages a campaign of mockery against the corrupt governor of the city.

All Cossery's protagonists share several characteristics, one being their refinement of derision as a weapon against the powerful and the hypocritical. The formula is reminiscent of Nietzsche's tireless struggle against the corrosive illness that is *ressentiment*, since for these characters it is never a question of disguising the pathos of helplessness in the costume of superiority. Relentlessly as the venality of power and the mindlessness of the populace are denounced, these clever young men are never consumed by resentment or despair. Another shared characteristic, humor, puts them on an even footing with power and allows them to engage it with disruptive action rather than impotent outrage. Humor is also the means by which a sense of compassion for the suffering multitude is expressed. And however much Cossery's characters oppose vulgar materialism, they have no part of political causes. In his novels there is often at least one unfortunate soul naïve and misguided enough to take part in such activism, but the Cosserian hero is far too appreciative of life's simple pleasures to be distracted by ideological posturing.

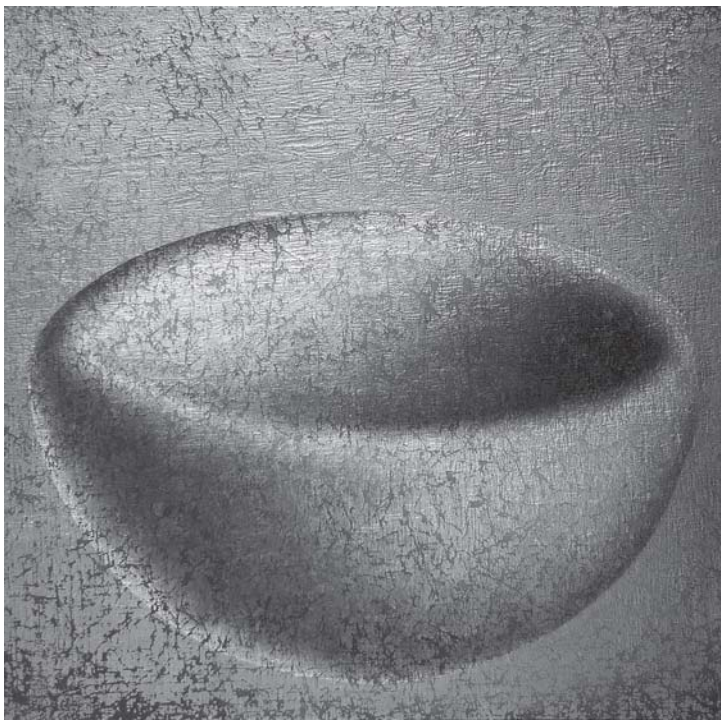
From the little we know of his personal life, Cossery seems not to have differed significantly from his protagonists in outlook and lifestyle. In the few substantial interviews with the author that exist, he speaks of his disgust with consumer society, the common denominator of *la foule* and mentions on more than one occasion the paucity of his personal belongings, which apparently consisted of nothing more than his wardrobe, his books and some artworks given to him by his friends (those of Alberto Giacometti in particular, which were often sold when money was needed). The comparison to Nietzsche is not accidental – for Cossery, living itself is the highest form of art, and true aristocracy is "that which is detached from this world of consumption, violence and vanity." All of his heroes faithfully espouse this point of view, eschewing ambition for a more fundamental experience of life, one in which contemplation and enjoyment are the central themes.

All of Cossery's novels are in some way vehicles for this philosophy, a philosophy that is portrayed as being ontologically at odds with authority, whether it is the authority of the state or the supposed authority of the ego and its hallucinatory self-regard. He often referred to this as an Oriental way of thinking, in stark opposition to the Occident, and it is here that we confront one of the most original aspects of his work. The Cosserian protagonist is not involved in conventional organized resistance, which is peculiar considering the author's nationality and the era during which he wrote many of his novels. For two decades, the Egypt of Nasser was the political context in which several of Cossery's books appeared, but unlike his better known contemporaries Mahfouz, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and Abd al-Rahman Munif, he never refers to the political realities that dominated the era, such as Arab nationalism and Arab-Israeli wars. All the same, his stories are thoroughly preoccupied with a form of resistance in which the relationship between life being lived to the fullest and endeavoring to oppose power is one of necessity. It is an altogether different view of the artist's responsibility from the one put forth by his friend Jean-Paul Sartre. In the fictional work of the latter, the theme of resistance is always drenched in seriousness and tragedy, whereas for Cossery resistance is itself something to be relished.

...the Cosserian hero is far too appreciative of life's simple pleasures to be distracted by ideological posturing.

One might say that Cossery's heroes express resistance through their complete detachment, their utter refusal to participate in the shabby constructions in which the powers that

be have ensnared the masses. Cossery therefore occupies a rather rare position in Arab literature, since the writings of many of his contemporaries draw on their experiences of direct involvement in politics (here one thinks in particular of the Palestinians – Mahmoud Darwish, Ghassan Kanafani, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra – but even the more mild-mannered Egyptian Mahfouz engaged issues in a far more specific manner). Cossery's political imagination seems to express itself mostly through rather generalized themes, and the formula is generally some variation of the idea that the political class of the city is corrupt and the police force is their muscle. Perhaps the only exception to this is 1984's "An Ambition in the Desert," a somewhat Munif-esque affair about a small Gulf oil-monarchy, which is the only novel set outside Egypt. Still, this is not inconsistent with statements made by Cossery in interviews, as he often mentions that his appeal, especially to younger readers, is based on his treatment of universal themes intelligible to people anywhere. Though Cossery lived the majority of his life and wrote the majority of his novels in Paris, he always maintained that he never lost his Egyptian identity (though there was one 35-year period during which he did not visit Egypt), that he still thought in Arabic, and that the characters in his stories were always based on vivid memories of people with whom he had associated during his youth in Cairo. By his own admission he never even bothered to apply for a French passport. This appears to be borne out in his work, for even a cursory look at the language used to render dialogue will reveal French that is clearly subservient to Arabic colloquialisms and idioms, though the narration itself is in a very classical register. All the same, there is a nagging sense that the dandyism evinced by his principal characters is too French to plausibly exist in an "Oriental" context. Similarly, the fact that their contrivances against power seem to miraculously work out in the end, and that they usually emerge relatively unscathed, indicates a sort of romanticism on the part of the author that either ignores or simply has no experience of the brutality of most Middle Eastern autocracies.



"Silver bowl on gold" by Farhad Moshiri, 2006, from "Art of the Middle East" (Merrell, 2010)

Surely it would be unrealistic to suggest that Cossery was somehow unaware of the general nature of Arab regimes or any totalitarian regime vis-à-vis criticism, and interviews indicate that the romantic aspect of his work was hardly unwitting. However, considering the Marxist rhetoric of class struggle and armed resistance that were common features of many Arab nationalist movements and the writers that championed them until the 1980s, one can see that, had he been better known, Cossery might have faced accusations of elitism or cynicism from his more revolutionary contemporaries. Such suspicions would have been bolstered by the fact that in a few of his stories the aspiring revolutionary is portrayed as a somewhat clumsy and misguided fellow, more in need of emotional assistance than radical societal transformation. Indeed, the lack of overtly political writing may have contributed to his relatively minor position in the Arab literary world.

There is no doubt that Cossery was adept at portraying with humor, sensitivity and compassion the deplorable living conditions imposed by the strong upon the weak. If we are to take him at his word, he was quite familiar with the indignities suffered by society's unfortunates, and it stayed with him even during the 35-year absence from Egypt. But, the Arab world being in a constant state of political upheaval, Cossery's relative lack of resonance among his own people is not so mysterious. Tawfiq al-Hakim and Naguib Mahfouz, to take two of the more celebrated Egyptian examples, wrote of the relationship between the personal, the social and the political, exploring events in a manner in which readers could recognize themselves and perhaps make sense of their own joys and tragedies, as well as the historical contexts that brought them about.

For all his self-professed Orientalism and his distance from the Western world, it was in that same world that Cossery practiced his art. He wrote in its language, albeit in a version that he enriched with the nuances of his native tongue. Perhaps Paris insulated him from the violence, tragedy and censorship that he would have experienced had he remained in Egypt. But we would be wrong to assume that he owes his unique perspective to the Occident – nothing could be further from the truth. Albert Cossery lived at the margins of East and West alike, and would have surely occupied a marginal space wherever he went. The importance of mockery and laughter in his work is paramount; it breathes new life into the idea of resistance, and practically ensures that his stature will increase in both the Arab and French literary worlds as he is discovered by new generations of violence-weary readers.***AJ***

# Helen Karam On Childhood Inspirations, Artistic Quest to Preserve Beirut and Will to Survive on Own Terms

**BY REBECCA JOUBIN**

Helen Karam is a prominent Lebanese artist known for her magical canvases of colors defying all categorization, and for her bold human and social statements. Having become more and more prominent in the Lebanese art scene in recent years, her works have also become recognized internationally in London, Paris, Kuwait, and most recently Davidson College in the U.S., (February 2010), where her artwork and presence were an integral part of a festival celebrating the experience of women in the Middle East. The following is an interview with Helen Karam conducted for Al Jadid during the fall of 2009.


Helen Karam

**You currently teach fine arts at the American University in Beirut and through your traveling exhibitions have become a distinct presence among Lebanese artists. Please speak about your earliest inspirations.**

From the moment I was born in Beirut, the eldest of five children, art was the basic fabric of my family life. My father designed women's hats, and I grew up observing as the designs dancing in his imagination metamorphosed onto paper and then onto the mold; I watched in enchantment as the colorful fabrics took the shape of the mold. It was the process of transformation that captivated me most.

At the time, my family owned a building in Beirut, a 1950s construction on Bechara al-Khoury Street, which was later demolished when it did not fit with the new city plan. During my childhood we lived in this building, which housed a cinema, Gaumont Palace. As a child I used to devour the movies shown in Gaumont Palace, entranced by the images, colors and music.

Even though I was still just a child when I told my father my dream to become an artist, he immediately took me to the atelier of an artist who was renting a room on the first floor of our building. The moment I entered his studio and smelled the paint, I felt I needed to touch the colors and experience the transformations they could make miraculously between my fingers.

My parents openly embraced my artistic endeavors. I married very young, though, and right away gave birth to both my sons. During those first years of married life, I turned away from my art. However, in 1985, when my children were still young, I returned to school and studied in the Beaux Arts Department at the Lebanese University in Beirut. I now realized that getting my degree and becoming an artist were essential to the very fabric of my being, without which I was virtually dead. Without any support, I studied with intensity and in 1989, graduated with my D.E.S in fine arts.

**The majority of your paintings belong to larger series centered on varying themes, each with their own story and *mise-en-scène* similar to a theatrical production. Largely autobiographical, you are comfortable expressing your emotions and body in art. I am thinking in particular about your series: "Loneliness in Red" (2004) and "Vanishing" (2008). Please elaborate on these series.**

I begin with a certain theme or experience and then ask questions, portraying emotions that relate to human feelings, hopes, fears, and expectations. In my "Loneliness in Red" series, loneliness is symbolized by a woman who mourns the absence of her companion. His absence is also his presence. The color red is often used to depict love, fire, and happiness, but I have chosen bright red to adorn these canvases with sorrow. Using colors in new ways is characteristic of my work, since I adhere to the notion of a color language; in other words, that colors, just like letters in an alphabet, change meanings according to where you have placed them.

In "Loneliness in Red," as well as in all of my artwork, the woman is not posing for us, but rather we are capturing her in the intimate details and surroundings without her knowing we are there. Our view of her is not aggressive, but sensitive.

In my series "Vanishing" exhibited at the Babel Theater in Beirut, I depict the body vanishing through the slow process of

sickness and death. Delving into this series was the only way I could emotionally deal with the death of my beloved younger brother. In this series, the body has distortions; it is melting, telling its own story. Inspired by Oriental and Byzantine icons, I transposed these symbols into distorted portraits of myself and my brother, manifesting human suffering, rather than divine or superhuman power.

**Your art explores the feminine condition. Do you identify yourself as a woman artist, and do you consider yourself a feminist?**

I am an Arab artist, who happens to be a woman, in a society where thoughts about the female body have been stifled through the centuries. Exposure of the female body is largely taboo in our culture and in my humanistic portrayals of the body, I have sought to lighten animosity, prejudice, and oppression through dialogue.

In response to your question on whether I see myself as a woman artist, I have to say very firmly that no, I do not believe in woman's art and man's art. In every man there is a woman, and in every woman a man. I don't see myself as a woman artist, since male artists can accurately depict women and women can portray men. The present inability to do this is due largely to education and upbringing, rather than to anything inherent in the female and male entity. Indeed, sometimes you can even find a woman artist using the same voyeuristic technique on the female body as her male counterpart.

"Vanishing IX" by Helen Karam, 2007

Yet, while I am against all dichotomies and separations, I have to say that as an artist living, working, and falling in love in this society, I have particular experiences, which give me a wealth of information to draw upon. This is not to say that I shy away from portrayals of men, as can be seen in my series "Vanishing" and "Majnoun Laila" (The Lovers), for example.

I am not a feminist. I am an advocate of the human being. The Arab woman is oppressed, and so is the Arab man. In our society, he is forbidden to cry and express his emotions, which is seen as weak. In my art I hope to advocate an end to human suffering whether male or female.

As a Lebanese artist who has lived, loved, and worked during and between the wars in Lebanon, the political and personal are intricately related.

**While your art is autobiographical, you have also been a political activist. I am thinking in particular of your series "Qana" (2000), which portrayed the war massacre at Qana in 1996.**

As a Lebanese artist who has lived, loved, and worked during and between the wars in Lebanon, the political and personal are intricately related. After Qana 1996, I went into a four-year incubation period, shocked by the tragedy and searching for a way to express my sorrows and my rebellion against all kinds of violence and injustice through art. In 2000, my ideas took shape and I worked with intensity on my exhibition in London, which was a statement against war and focused on the impact this bloodbath had in particular on women, the real victims of man-made war.

In this series, my mixed-media narrative paintings were on recycled paper attached to a raw canvas. They were hung on the walls by small safety pins with a transparent, flimsy nylon string. I purposely used the safety pin because it is a very useful item associated with hardworking women in the agricultural community of southern Lebanon who depend on safety pins to fasten clothes, baby diapers, face covers and veils, among other things. I chose recycled paper as a symbol of how women are expected to just get up again after the war and start over, somehow recycling their lives. It is, in fact, women who pay the highest price for the war. She loses her home – symbol of safety and family – her security. After the ravages of war made from power struggles that men have started, she is the one who rises to rebuild the home again from the rubble. The fragility of these paintings is indicative of the individual – male and female – at the time of war, in all his or her vulnerability, hung in the air, clasping for the last breath, expecting that at any moment death will arrive.

**Your recent installation "Places' Memories," exhibited May 2009 at the Zico House in Beirut, depicted ravages on Beirut's identity by modern construction builders. Please tell us more about your latest installation.**

Everyone talks of the destruction of Beirut during the wars. But, what I see is that the real desolation came after the war, during the very rebuilding of Beirut. Indeed the ravages of war were much less than the ravages Beirut was exposed to after reconstruction when businessmen with pockets full of money came to town in search of construction sites, which entailed demolishing Beirut's landmark historical buildings and transforming them into buildings that could be located any place in the world. In doing so, they have been destroying Beirut's identity, which will weaken the attachment of people to the city, since it will soon resemble any other city in the world.

The subject of this installation is an Ottoman-era building on Makhoul Street in Hamra, in which I lived for 14 years before it was bought by a developer in 2002 and demolished. At the time, I was heartbroken and like a woman grieving a lost lover. I snuck to my former home every single day, taking pictures and video clips documenting its slow, tragic death.

"Places' Memories" at the Zico House, presented on three floors, documented the complete destruction of my home. It is comprised of a selection of 2,000 photographs I took throughout the decimation, numerous video clips I took of the site, and 41 mixed-media paintings drawn from memory. At the time, I bought as much of the structure as possible, like the blue window of my son, the door to our entrance – they are survivors testifying to the destruction. The installation was a *mise-en-scène*, or *mise-en-abyme* as it was referred to in the press. I staged it in the showcase of the Zico House in a way that the visitor of the exhibition passes through the installation to get to the showroom, as if they are witnessing first-hand the destruction.

The concrete photos and video clips, bits and pieces of the house, are set alongside paintings drawn by memory, which become more and more vague, illustrating the disappearance of our identity, which will live only in the memory and imagination. Subject to the ravages of time, memory fades and then nothing will be left of our beloved city.

**You have been very active as an artist, exhibiting both in Lebanon and abroad. Please describe the current art scene in Beirut. How does it differ from the art scene that existed in the '60s? What has been the effect of the civil war?**

During the '60s, Beirut witnessed a renaissance in the arts heralded by the opening of extraordinary galleries throughout the city center. These galleries were cultural entities, rather than commercial enterprises. There was Platform Gallery, owned by the late artist-writer Samia Tutunji, which recruited rising artists fresh out of college. Samia Tutunji, herself an artist, could spot creativity and was willing to take a risk to promote new artists. She struggled to continue working during the war, but died tragically at the end of the war in a bomb blast. "Gallery One" was another famous gallery, owned by a group of artists. It was active in recruiting new talent in the pre-war days, but was not able to survive the war. "*L'Epreuve d'Artiste*," an important gallery owned by Amal Trablousy, one of the best curators in Lebanon, tried to keep going during the war despite financial problems and security issues. However, she was forced to close at the end of the war.

Unfortunately only a few of the original and authentic art galleries survived the war, and this includes Agial Gallery owned by Saleh Barakat, Alwan owned by the Lebanese artist Odile Mazloum and the gallery of Janine Rbeiz, known as one of the best curators in Lebanon since the 1970s. About two years ago, the Beirut Art Center, the Zico House and a few other galleries were opened and work to promote true art. This is not to mention several cultural centers of some European Embassies, such as Cervantes, C.C.F. and Goethe.

> I do not believe in woman's art and man's art. In every man there is a woman, and in every woman a man. I don't see myself as a woman artist, since male artists can accurately depict women and women can portray men.

Despite the few galleries with genuine art curators that have survived, the war and its aftermath have given birth to a whole new breed of art curators, who have emerged especially since the 1990s. They do not have the genius to discover new talent, thus at the very best they merely advocate older generation artists who have already established a name, or they support those with connections just dabbling in art. These *nouveau riche* art curators know that money is power and thus they buy artists.

**What type of support did you have during your exhibition at the Zico House last May 2009?**

The director of Zico House has transformed his entire home into a cultural center to promote the arts. Open to all forms of art, the director hosts exhibitions, conferences, movies, concerts, book signings and theater. However, he is forced to work under very difficult conditions. Thus when I exhibited my installation there last May, I found myself in a rather odd, but familiar, situation. I had a wonderful place to exhibit my work, but there was no art curator. I was not only in charge of setting up, but also responsible for printing invitations and making press contacts. This is quite a challenge for any artist.

One thing I want to make clear is that the art movement in Lebanon is very strong. It was before, during and after the war. It

*Continued on page 44*

# Syrian Artist Walid Agha Searches for the Spirit of the Letters

**BY REBECCA JOUBIN**

Syrian artist Walid Agha is well-known for his paintings, which draw upon the rich cultural traditions of his country. In October 2008, Rebecca Joubin interviewed him in his art studio in Sahnayah, Damascus. Here he talks about the sources of his inspiration as well as future plans.

Walid Agha

**How did your childhood stimulate your art?**

My father worked as a customs official, and thus my family moved often from one part of the country to the next. In just a few years we had lived in Aleppo, Homs and then up north in Hassake and Qamishle. As a child I noticed how the decorations and architecture of the homes in each region were varied. In the north, the Assyrian reliefs inside and outside the homes fascinated me. The tree of life symbol was often present, as well as Assyrian stamps and tablets. Usually the owners of the homes did not know much about the history or meaning of these symbols, which were there merely for decorative purposes. From early on, these interesting decorative items instilled a deep love of art in my being. Even when I was a child, if anyone asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I said I would become an artist.

I was fortunate because my parents not only supported my interest in art, but they enthusiastically encouraged me. When I was in elementary school my parents enrolled me in private art lessons in the studio of Arto, an Armenian artist in Aleppo. These private lessons were invaluable, and from the time I entered high school I focused on getting accepted in the Fine Arts Department at Damascus University, which I did.

**Your art is known to draw upon the rich tradition and history of your country, and calligraphy – Arabic, Assyrian, Sumerian – prevails. Tell us about your first experiences as an artist in Syria.**

At the university I was lucky to receive the guidance of important art professors such as Abdel Ghader al-Naut, Mahmud Hamad and then later, Faten Mudaress. These teachers taught me how to treat calligraphy as a symbol, as poetry, in my paintings. As a student of art I felt fortunate to have a rich history to draw upon. I regularly visited museums, and the deep-rooted traditions and mythology of my country inspired me. As a child, when I had seen reliefs in different homes across the country, I had not understood the real historical significance. Now, much older, I grasped their meaning. I combined calligraphy against a background of symbolism from Syria's history. I was searching for the spirit of the letters, and the colors I used were usually earthy, related to history. In 1984 I had my first exhibition of Arabic calligraphy on silkscreen graphics at the Spanish Cultural Center in Damascus. I saw the interest people showed in calligraphy, and then rather than just depending on Arabic letters, I explored Sumerian and Assyrian letters.

**During your early period, your paintings are busier. But I notice that in your later periods there is less calligraphy and symbolism, and more emptiness on the canvas. What has happened here?**

In my early period I was so excited to use the symbols of my country. Often my canvases were full. I tended to leave very little empty space. But perhaps in my later period I have gone back to my childhood memories, back to the village of my childhood, to the homes, decorations and symbols. My work is more relaxed, less hectic. I have more confidence in myself and the power of just one symbol and what it can express. And this also applies to the art deco I now create. For example, sometimes a chair is just one letter of the alphabet. Though you can sit on this kind of chair, it is certainly not a traditional piece of furniture.

**What are your most common techniques?**

While I rely wholly on Syrian history, culture and tradition in my work, and never leave my roots, I am always experimenting with technique. For example, I combine graphics, painting, stamp reliefs in one painting, so the textures are often rich and varied. I often mix the different calligraphies. Most of my paintings have a small circle somewhere on the canvas. This is from Sufism, which says that all humans circle around one point, that the whole universe rotates around one point. I draw from Sufism not from a religious perspective, but a scientific perspective. I also combine contradictions – young, old, hot, cold, sad, happy. So you see me use very warm colors next to very cold ones on one canvas.

**You have exhibited all over the world, from Syria, France, Germany to the United States and Japan. What exhibitions do you have planned now?**

*Continued on page 47*

## Booknotes/*Elie Chalala*

*Continued from page 5*

nations, religions, nationalisms and cultures – a membership that leads him to form a universal language among peoples and coin solutions that respond to the highest aspirations of humanity.

Then Haddad proceeds to draw a distinction between the parochial and the universal and how the two may be reconciled in the conduct of the true intellectual. Thinking parochially alone amounts to redundancy without creativity and repetition without criticism. However, the attempt to reach the universal by sidestepping the parochial is an illusory and self-indulgent flight from the responsibility of disseminating ideas in a language understood by the majority.

Protesting the Danish Cartoons

Haddad adheres to the school of critical modernism that accepts this dual membership, which is represented in contemplating the parochial to reach the universal and contemplating the universal to realize the parochial. Only this would contribute to a society in which people interact with each other through reason rather than violence.

At the end of his foreword, Haddad seems to advance a solution for both the Muslim and the world communities. The Muslim intellectual must work toward expanding the sphere of dialogue within Arab and Muslim societies as a prerequisite for opening up to the universal; the same can be said about the world community, which should expand the universal dialogue to accept all human experiences as a step toward establishing a genuine dialogue that does not depend on domination and dictation.

The author also addresses those who see an irreconcilable dichotomy between tradition and modernity by offering his own take on the relationship between the two: true Muslim intellectuals should rid themselves of tradition only insomuch as is needed to ensure a better future, simultaneously remaining fortified by tradition to the extent that it provides strength in confronting the difficulties of the future. Liberation here does not equal repudiation. Instead it demands placing the self in a larger context, where the local opens up to the universal, culture to humanity, the past to the future, and the opinion of one to the ideas of many. ***AJ***


Yasmin Levy

# Yasmin Levy at the Skirball Center

**BY DANIEL HUGH-JONES**

I had the rare good fortune recently to experience a fine singer working at the top of her form. Rarer yet, I was privileged to enjoy the performance in a small and intimate setting. Perched high above Los Angeles at the Skirball Center, the singer was Yasmin Levy, taking part in the Skirball Center's current series, "Elles, Voices of Women," celebrating ideals of "tolerance, friendship and shared humanity."

Yasmin Levy is part of the trend of "world music" that has so greatly enriched the music scene over the past two decades. While she is not yet as well-known as such great divas of world music as Cesaria Evora or the Portuguese Fado singer, Mariza, with a handful of well-reviewed albums over the last seven years, she appears well on her way to joining them. Born in Jerusalem, the daughter of a well-known ethnomusicologist father, Levy has fashioned an oeuvre that is a mélange of different styles. She mixes music from Sephardic and Middle Eastern traditions with the Ladino songs that her father sought to preserve. For those unfamiliar with Ladino, it was the language spoken by Jews in the Iberian Peninsula until their expulsion at the end of the 15th century. It is a mixture of medieval Spanish with Hebrew, Aramaic, Turkish and various other languages.

As you might expect, this is passionate music, and it requires a voice capable of fully expressing its deep feeling, and Levy's voice is entirely up to the task. It is rich, sensuous and powerful, with a broad range of emotional expression that allows her to move easily from traditional Bedouin tunes such as the eponymous "Mano Suave" from her most recent CD to the achingly beautiful flamenco-influenced "La Alegria." I particularly enjoyed "Irme Kero," a sultry mix of Levy's sinuous tones over a fast-paced guitar and flute that somehow managed to conjure up desert landscapes even in the air-conditioned, urban comfort of the Skirball. On stage, Levy is confident and relaxed, at ease with both band and audience, introducing songs

while explaining to us how she learned them from her mother's singing in the kitchen or asking the audience to guess which band member was her husband. And this was one of the benefits of seeing her in a small venue: the chance to really pay attention to the fine musicianship of her band. A four-piece made up of percussion, upright bass, guitar and an extremely fine flautist, who also plays clarinet and the traditional duduk and zurna, they clearly know each other inside out and relish each other's playing.

If you get the chance to see Yasmin Levy and her band, take it. You will be the loser if you don't. **AJ**

# Issa Boulos Brings Al-Hallaj Back to Life

**BY SAMI ASMAR**

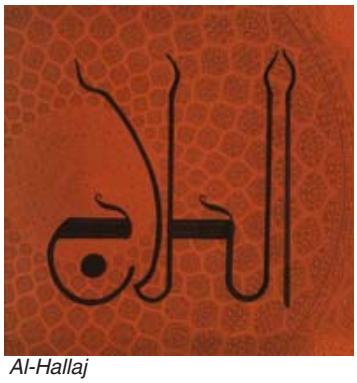
Composing the text of classical Arabic poetry is a tremendous challenge typically avoided by musicians seeking the rewards of mass appeal. Regional dialects are favored due to the supposed ease on listeners, especially adolescent consumers of CDs and music DVDs. So when a composer dusts off the poetry of the little-known Abu al-Mughith al-Hussayn Ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, who was brutally executed in Baghdad in 922 for his pacifist Sufi writings, it is an indication of a rare musical confidence.

**Al-Hallaj**
By Issa Boulos
Issa Boulos, 2008, 49 minutes

In his new CD, "*Al-Hallaj*," Issa Boulos composes eight poems by its namesake in a remarkable landmark in Arab-musicological and Sufi history. Boulos is an award-winning Chicago-based composer and oud player as well as a lecturer at the University of Chicago, where he directs the Middle East Music Ensemble. Among his numerous accomplishments is a commission by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and writing the music for the documentaries "The New Americans" and "Nice Bombs." His other works include "*Kawkab Akhar*," "Shortly After Life," "Lysistrata," "Catharsis," "*Sama*," "Being Peace," "A Palestinian Memoir," and "*Rif*."

In the instrumental CD "*Rif*" (Countryside), the Turkish *kemence* master Nermin Kaygusuz performs a dozen of Boulos' compositions that were inspired by interacting with objects and concepts taken for granted in the Eastern Mediterranean: the fig tree, the color of the soil, the dew and the insects. The *kemence* (common Turkish name for two very different instruments, one used in north Anatolian folk music, and the other in Turkish classical music) expressed what Boulos felt was the appropriate tone for both the simplicity and sophistication needed to paint the intended images, such as, in one example track titled "*Raqsat al-Khityar*," of an old man dancing in a village wedding one day after his wife passed away. Boulos' work is clearly that of a reflective thinker.

In researching Sufi texts, Issa Boulos was moved by what was preserved from the millennium-old work of al-Hallaj and invested admirable effort in bringing it to life. In this difficult process, he needed to sort the classical musical tradition, developed as the court music, from the Sufi musical practices in *zawaya* found in less courtly parts of towns, sometimes in secret and mixed with local musical elements. He sought to maintain fidelity to the Sufi text and the imagined poet's environment while utilizing the better-documented tools of the *maqam* system, the formal modal structure essential to composing in the classical Arab style. His creative approach produced composed texts harmonious (only figuratively since the structure does not lend itself to harmony) with both the *maqam* tradition and the poem's philosophical spirit, while paying careful attention to all technical and interpretive details.


Al-Hallaj

The CD was recorded in Ramallah with the *qanun* beautifully standing out as the primary instrument in the hands of the talented Ibrahim Atari. Educated at the Edward Said Conservatory (formerly National Conservatory of Music), Atari is no stranger to Sufi music as he co-established an ensemble dedicated to singing Sufi poems. A former student of Boulos, a graduate of the conservatory, and an instrument maker, Samer Totah brilliantly plays the *oud*. Yousef Zayed capably performs the percussion instruments, and Issa Boulos supported the recording on the oud and voice. The primary vocal responsibility to express al-Hallaj's lyrics is trusted to the passion-filled voice of Basel Zayed. The Jerusalem-born singer, another former Boulos student, is also an oud player, composer and ensemble leader.

In discovering *Al-Hallaj*, one actually discovers Issa Boulos, an Arab-American intellectual powerhouse whose work is highly significant in maintaining musical artistry little appreciated by Arab societies. Very few production companies support projects of this class, and grants are rare. It is clear from his choices and career path that he is dedicated to the preservation of quality art and, more interestingly, creating such art in ancient and modern contexts. **AJ**

In discovering *Al-Hallaj*, one actually discovers Issa Boulos, an Arab-American intellectual powerhouse whose work is highly significant in maintaining musical artistry little appreciated by Arab societies.

# Documentaries Reveal Complicated Interactions Between Israelis and Palestinians

BY LYNNE ROGERS

The multiple award-winning documentaries, "Strawberry Fields" and "Men on the Edge," portray two little-known and unglamorous joint-business ventures between Israelis and Gazans as both groups attempt to live off the land.

**Strawberry Fields**
Directed by Ayelet Heller
The Cinema Guild, 2007, 60 minutes

In Beit Lahiya, located on the border between Israel and Gaza, approximately 1,000 Palestinian families grow strawberries, referred to as "red gold," for exportation to Europe by the Israeli company, Agrexco.

First, the Palestinians must get all their supplies through Israel. Once harvested, the strawberries travel through Karni Crossing into Israel. After a suicide bombing at the crossing in 2005, this solitary commercial checkpoint was closed. The film documents the following year showing both the disappointed Israeli executives and the persevering Palestinian farmers communicating via telephone. In a simultaneous political development, after turning their homes into a pile of cement rubble, the Israeli settlers have vacated the nearby Dugit Settlement, to the rejoicing and slightly incredulous Palestinians.

Nevertheless, their tanks still patrol the border with sporadic gunfire. The farmers listen to the radio for reports of missiles, Apache helicopters and F16 airplanes as they try to coordinate their farming efforts with Mother Nature and Israeli military maneuvers. While they can successfully produce 20,000 boxes a day, the Israeli executives complain about the quality and shape of the strawberries for "Europeans will only buy heart-shaped strawberries." They constantly remind the farmers of the threat of competition from Morocco and Egypt and are seen training East Asian foreign workers to properly pick the berries in the Occupied Territories. Later the Israeli military will drop 1,800 bombs in one day followed by pamphlets ordering the farmers to leave their land. The film ends with the closure and a farmers' demonstration, a mild Boston Tea Party affair with strawberry crates emptied on the ground, and, five months later, the depressed farmers begin the cycle again of planting to the radio reports and gunfire.


From "Strawberry Fields"


From "Men on the Edge"

The film alludes to the complex ethical problems, such as the Israeli marketing of the strawberries as Palestinian, yet, in the spirit of cooperation, allows the viewer to witness this agricultural process once from fields to the European markets and then an aborted season from the fields to the closed checkpoint.

In "Men on the Edge," politics have dealt different positions for the fishermen on the border of Gaza and Ashkelon. Here the Palestinian Gazans own the boats, and, as the indigenous population, they know the sea and how to fish.

**Men on the Edge**
Directed by Macabit Abrahmzon and Avner Faingulernt
The Cinema Guild, 2007, 90 minutes

Nevertheless they need the Israeli fishermen, the minority, as their legal escorts to be allowed on the seas.

The film opens in the dark before dawn accompanied by a repeated hoarse and haunting "Aye" coaxing the viewer into expecting a horror film and instead viewing the real and

desultory checkpoint. This documentary approaches stunning artistic cinematography with its Jungian shots of the fishermen heading into the night sea, the glittering fish lit by the moonlight, while the narrative juxtaposes bits of poetry against the raw perceptions of the fishermen. On a small strip of beach graced with the magnificent ocean and littered with rundown shacks and school buses as trailers, a primitive camaraderie of fishermen, sitting around the fire and joking about their manhood, solidifies them before they face the abundance of Mother Nature and the wrath of politics.

Both of these documentaries ... focus on an unfamiliar segment of society that reveals the heartbreaking complications and valiant individual efforts as a potential model for change.

In an atypical grouping, the Sa'adella family of fishermen has adopted the two Israeli settlers, Ellie and Motti, and has taught them the trade of fishing. Issa Sa'adella found Motti when he was homeless after leaving his wife and children. Initially Motti claims that they are all like one family and that he has gratefully learned "work morality" from the Arabs. Ellie, who also heralds from the Israeli streets, hopes now that he has learned the trade that all the Arabs disappear. As in "Strawberry Fields," on the boat, the fishermen listen to the radio to connect them to a land which separates them; both the Israeli and the Palestinian stations play popular love songs intermittent with reports of fighting. When the fighting spreads to the sea, the struggle for survival opens an unrefined and unstable set of alliances. The frustrated Palestinians, fearful of Israelis on the seas, stay landed while Motti and Ellie make a feeble attempt to fish without them. At one point, the Israelis arrest Motti for smuggling stolen cars to Gaza, yet he returns to fish. Filmed from 1999 to 2003, the film covers this macabre dance of cooperation and antagonism till the final disintegration. The Sa'adella family stays at home, Motti turns against them and Ellie, an unlikable aberration of Robinson Crusoe, ends up alone on the beach. Yet, like a tragic hero, he redeems himself in his sorrowful regret that they have all "destroyed their livelihood with their own hands." The audience's empathy can only increase when they read the film's dedication to Ellie's wife, who was shot "by a terrorist" while jogging on the beach.

Both of these documentaries, a collaborative effort in itself, focus on an unfamiliar segment of society that reveals the heartbreaking complications and valiant individual efforts as a potential model for change. As documentaries, they witness man's squandered possibilities of a naturally bountiful geographic area. In a classroom that looks at global marketing, microeconomics, human rights and or politics, these honest films will inform viewers as well as stimulate vital questions and discussion.***AJ***

# Growing Accustomed to Beirut's Scars

**BY REBECCA JOUBIN**

The film commences with the serene image of a small boat floating on rippling water, surrounded by green trees, lofty mountains and the enchanting music of songbirds. Slowly, the camera moves further and further away from the pureness of nature, and suddenly there is the shrill sound of an explosion.

**Falling from Earth**
Directed by Chadi Zeneddine
Promenade Films & Wizz Production, 2008, 70 minutes

"That sound," says the narrator, is a sound he was never able to forget, for it spared no one and nothing. It was a sound that his children and grandchildren, who were born between the wars, grew accustomed to. When the narrator opened his mouth to scream in protest, he found himself voiceless.

Zeneddine divides his film into short chapters indicating important moments in the history of Beirut, such as "Beirut Chapter 1990: Being," "Beirut Chapter 1975," and "Beirut Chapter 1985." With the lack of chronology, the entering and exiting of new characters, and continual shifting of language registers from English, Italian, Arabic and French, Zeneddine unsettles us and gives us a deeper understanding of a scarred city and disruption of normal relations. It is as if the narrator is Beirut when he laments that everyone walks over him, leaving him mutilated; and he hopes that they can leave just one small breath of life in him. ***AJ***

From "Falling from Earth"

# Guns and Ghosts in the House

BY LYNNE ROGERS

In a recent postcolonial trend, fiction humanizes the villain, the torturer, the collaborator and the occupier. Now, the documentary that won multiple, well-deserved awards, "To See if I'm Smiling," elicits a painful sympathy for the Israeli female soldiers who, like so many other soldiers before them, participate in sustained acts of cruelty while a tiny voice of their former self momentarily dreams of protest. Six young women who have fulfilled their compulsory two-year military service speak to the camera without dramatics as they recount the demons of serving in the Occupied Territories. In an emotional contrast of content and form, the film juxtaposes quiet ordinary feminine charm with their complicity in beastly abuse. The range of their military posts, from education officer to operation sergeant, testifies to the widespread military tactics that their individual shame wrestles with back in civilian life and away from the military camaraderie.

**To See If I'm Smiling**
Directed by Tamar Yarom
Women Make Movies, 2007, 60 minutes

From "To See If I'm Smiling"

Meytal, with her shorn head and soft voice, leads this female chorus of lament. After joining the service to train as a medic, in a benevolent wish to help and to learn a useful profession, she "jumps for joy" when she finds herself stationed in Hebron, a political hot spot. Instead of playing Clara Barton to the troops, Meytal finds herself collecting and hosing down corpses before they are handed over to the Palestinian National Authority. Slowly, she reviews the chilling details: her first fatality, an infant girl, and the subsequent congratulations; the corpse whose eyes kept opening; the smell of a man who slowly bleeds to death and finally the corpse with an erection. These experiences transform her into an unrecognizable ogre. Rotem, a military observer with the code name "Snow White," with her long straight hair and white teeth, looks like she wandered off the set of a 1960s Flower Power commercial instead of the sinister surveiller of young Palestinian rock-throwers, oblivious to the technology stacked against them in her periscope. In an unsure giggle that betrays her self-estrangement, she remembers the "power" of her position and how her surveillance leads to the torture and death of a young boy. Like a contemporary Lady Macbeth, she cannot wash the blood off her hands.

Inbar, an operations sergeant; Tal, a welfare officer who ends at the checkpoints; Dana, an education officer; and Libi, a combat soldier, all unflinchingly reflect on their service in a manner that triggers respect, empathy and repulsion in the viewer. Their visible deterioration and quietly expressed torment will set off a muffled emotional explosion for anyone concerned about the cost of Israeli occupation to Israel, or more generally the cost of occupation to our own soldiers.

In "My Home: Your War," Australian filmmaker Kylie Grey effectively compiles e-mails, news clips and personal interviews to give an intimate look at the changes in one Iraqi woman's family over three years of war and occupation. Her protagonist, Layla, a woman of "many masks" (wife, mother, daughter and teacher) will appeal to most Westerners, especially those wearing the same masks here. The documentary opens by introducing her middle class family, including her 15-year-old son, Amro, who approves of Britney Spears' pretty face but disapproves of her body shots. Before the coalition attack on Baghdad, the family remembers the first Gulf War while fearfully waiting for the second to begin. At work, Layla translates for a "staged" peace conference hosted by Dr. Huda Amash, the infamous Queen of Hearts, and at home, Layla collects water bottles and dry food to prepare for the "Shock and Awe" campaign. This blatant display of 21st century military might provides counterpoint to Layla's mundane desires for her son's future, her wish to travel and to live in peace.

**My Home: Your War**
Directed by Kylie Grey
Women Make Movies, 2006, 52 minutes

From "My Home: Your War"

With the arrival of American soldiers and the subsequent looting, Layla expresses disillusionment that the "government has disappeared" and worries that none of the Iraqis "know the meaning of democracy." Amro innocently complains that he can no longer play soccer on the streets when the electricity goes out because of the American soldiers. Still, both Layla's Sunni family and her best friend's Shiite family relish the first taste of freedom of speech and Layla lovingly caresses the previously banned books in Iraq's famous book market. With the capture and hanging of Saddam Hussein, his public humiliation spurs depression, anger and nostalgia. While Layla feels pain at seeing "everything has gone with him," for her son and younger sister, Saddam becomes a symbol of Iraqi strength, a leader who made mistakes but kept the electricity on and the streets opened.

As the security vanishes and the car bombings, kidnappings and assassinations escalate, Layla and her sister think about romantic love. Layla dreams of exile to protect Amro "from his ideas." Yet Amro also has plans for the future; "as soon as exams end," he plans to start a movement with his friends and their hidden weapons. The film ends two years after the fall of Baghdad. Layla's sister, a 24-year-old woman who talks like an intellectually challenged 13-year-old, adopts the "scarf," and Amro, who has joined the street militia, also seizes the freedom to talk back to his mother. In a disquieting domestic moment, Amro struts for his mother with his machine gun, and the war-weary, peace-loving Layla flatters him with "it suits you." Perhaps "My Home: Your War" moralizes about the Iraq War to a now-deaf audience, yet the changes wrought in this educated, well-meaning, Westernized, middle class family do not bode well for the future. **AJ**

# To the Heart of Islam: A Convert's Journey

**BY REBECCA JOUBIN**

"A Road to Mecca: The Journey of Muhammad Asad" documents the story of Leopold Weiss, a Viennese Jew, who converted to Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Asad in the 1920s, and went on to become one of the most important Muslim scholars of the 20th century, authoring numerous books and serving as co-founder of Pakistan.

**A Road to Mecca: The Journey of Muhammad Asad**
Directed by Georg Misch
Icarus Films, 2008, 92 minutes

Through archival footage, contemporary interviews with writers, scholars and his friends, Asad's legacy comes alive, and varying viewpoints on the man and his scholarship are vividly portrayed.

This documentary explores how one of Asad's challenges as a modernist was to offer a more liberal-minded interpretation of the role of women in Islam. In his translation and interpretation of the Koran, he stressed the role of men as caretakers and providers of women rather than as masters. Some of Asad's Pakistani friends interviewed in the film talk of how he dreamed of a true Muslim state, where Muslim ideas of equity would be shown to the world, and how his dream of a Muslim state came true in the founding of Pakistan. They said that if Asad could see Pakistan today he would be disappointed. As one Pakistani friend said: "God sent a few to make a Muslim state, but we Muslims can't even make it work."

Courtesy of Icarus Films

"A Road to Mecca" reveals Asad's disappointment near the end of his life with the state of Muslim affairs. As one of his contemporaries said: Asad fell in love with Islam but did not feel Muslims deserved to call themselves Muslims. In showing the difference between the humane Islam he embraced, and the fundamentalist beliefs nurturing terrorism, this film successfully challenges Western prejudices and failures to understand the core of the Islamic message. **AJ**

## *Documentaries About Egypt and Syria*

# From Condemning Voter Fraud to Chronicling Regime's Predicament

**BY LYNNE ROGERS**

In the spring of 2005, when the Egyptian government announced a change to the Constitution for multi-candidate presidential elections, the population took to the streets of Cairo decrying the gesture a "fraud." Simultaneously, three courageous women began to worry about the present state of Egypt. Bosayna, an attractive newscaster for Egyptian National Television, votes at an empty polling station and then later reports full civilian participation to her television audience. Disarmed by the blatant hypocrisy, Bosayna joins forces with Engi, a chain-smoking marketing consultant, and Ghada, a university professor and mother of four.

**Egypt: We Are Watching You**
Directed by Leila Menjou and Sherief Elkatsha
The Cinema Guild, 2007, 52 minutes

From "Egypt: We Are Watching You"

Armed with cell phones, video cameras, a laptop and a palpable sense of justice, these three musketeers of Egyptian Democracy form www.shafyeen.com, a watch group to monitor elections. When they find polling stations closed and judges changing votes, the women resolutely turn to the Judges Club for an investigation and to people on the streets to rally support.

Only two judges have the stamina to stand behind the women. Ultimately 3,500 protestors are arrested and spend more than a year in jail. Just when the women consider their failure, the World Movement for Democracy invites Engi to speak to 25 presidents at the United Nations. She expects to be insulted by President Bush, who surprises her with a wink and reassuring words, encouraging her to "hang in there." Leila Menjou and Sherief Elkatsha's inspiring documentary "Egypt: We Are Watching You" records the valiant efforts of three admirable women who successfully take their country to task for apathy and their government for corruption.



As Clinton and Obama open talks with Syria, viewers can catch a comprehensive introduction to Syrian politics in the documentary "Syria: Chess Match at the Borders." Filmmaker Amal Hamelin des Essarts artfully compiles archival films, graphic cartography and interviews with a local taxi driver and elite political insiders.

**Syria: Chess Match at the Borders**
Directed by Amal Hamelin des Essarts
Icarus Films, 2008, 52 minutes

From "Syria: Chess Match at the Borders," courtesy of Icarus Films

Circling the borders as a structure of understanding Syria, the film recounts the repeated defeats by Israel and the occupation of the Golan Heights with 20,000 Syrians still living under Israeli occupation. Moving north to Turkey and the Turkish annexation of Iskenderun, the film looks at the Syrian expulsion of Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan after 20 years of support. Turkey's building of dams to control the flow of the Tigris and the Euphrates establishes water deprivation as vulnerability for Syria, a country without oil.

In its efforts to detangle Syria's most complicated relationship with Lebanon, the film includes interviews with Walid Jumblatt and Amine Gemayel. After the Syrian former vice president squarely lays the blame for Hariri's assassination on the Syrian president, the film traces this menacing web to France and Iran. These military tensions and Syria's economic crisis are further exasperated by the American occupation of Iraq and the flood of Iraqi refugees fleeing to Syria.

The film closes with a cursory glimpse of the mundane hopes of Syrian youth. While some may find this documentary light on the Israeli threat and a little heavy on Syria's milking of "billions" in Lebanese taxes (not that one could accuse the Lebanese government of graft or corruption), overall the film makes a valiant effort at presenting Syria's position as a "victim and a threat" in the Arab arena. **AJ**

# Creating the Nationally Imagined Community

**BY SARAH A. ROGERS**

"Popular Culture and Political Identity in the Arab Gulf States" is a collection of 10 essays, the result of two conferences on the Gulf organized by the London Middle East Institute. The first, held in February 2005, focused on family and kinship. The outcome of the first conference was the publication of "The Gulf Family." Discussions over the need to document the Gulf's "distinctive culture" – in contrast to images of the region as either "backward" or "super modern" – prompted a second conference. "Popular Culture and Political Identity in the Arab Gulf States" is the published outcome of that.

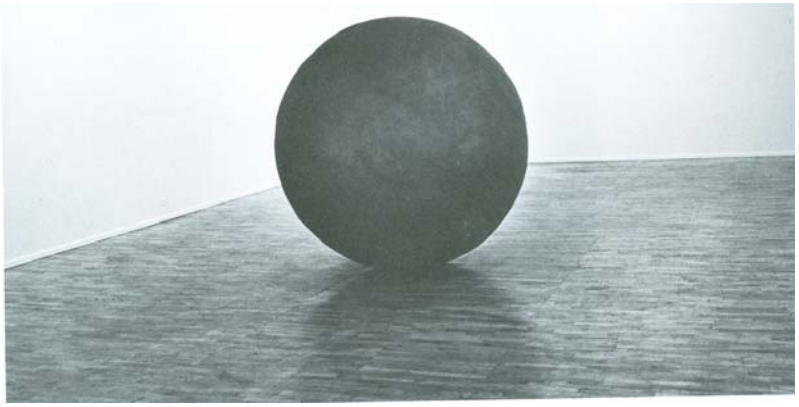
**Popular Culture and Political Identity in the Arab Gulf States**
Alamoud Alsharekh and Robert Springborg, eds.
SAQI Books in association with London Middle East Institute, SOAS, 2008, 206 pp.

For the most part, the authors represent individuals intimately knowledgeable with the region: professors of sociology, Middle East politics, anthropology and political science at local universities as well as directors of heritage and education centers, and board members of various academic and professional organizations associated with the Gulf and the larger Middle Eastern region – and a poet based in Saudi Arabia. One might expect therefore a more nuanced reading of the various cultural, national, religious, political, class and dynastic identities at work in the Gulf. Instead, the reader is confronted by a series of essays that depict a region distinctly defined by the discovery of oil. Previous to the 1970s, life is generally classified as traditional while subsequent life is characterized as consumer-driven in a global economy that has eroded past values.

The first four essays examine the use of heritage in the official creation of a national identity. In "Heritage and Cultural Nationalism in the United Arab Emirates," Fred H. Lawson and Hasan M. al-Naboodah discuss the Oral History Project, initiated by the Zayed Centre for Heritage and History in al-Ain under the patronage of Sheikh Sultan bin Zayed al-Nahayan, the UAE's deputy prime minister and president of the Emirates Heritage Club. Drawing on approximately 400 oral histories of elders in the community, the authors explore the ways in which the Centre collects and nationalizes memory, thereby codifying a particular notion of heritage.

In "Place and Space in the Memory of United Arab Emirates Elders," Nadia Rahman also draws on a series of interviews conducted with elderly citizens in the UAE in order to underscore a generational tension: "pride in development and wealth versus nostalgia for the past and simple life." Sulayman Khalaf documents Kuwait's "invention of tradition" through the inauguration of the annual pearl-diving festival and the Kuwaiti Seaman's Day. As does Rahman, Khalaf highlights a generational divide in terms of lifestyles and values that chronologically rests on the 1970s discovery of oil. With less emphasis on critical analysis and more on straightforward documentation, Mohammed A. Alkhozai presents several historic sites in Bahrain that are undergoing restoration in his essay, "An Aspect of Cultural Development in Bahrain: Archaeology and the Restoration of Historical Sites."

The remaining essays are more diverse in their choice of subject, although all are united by an interest in the creation of a nationally-imagined community and its accompanying identity. Nimah Ismail Nawwab discusses her interests in poetry in "The Social and Political Elements that Drive the Poetic Journey." Abdullah Baahood analyzes the role of sports in Gulf culture with a focus on Dubai's use of hosting sporting events as a means "to engage with the rest of the world, to showcase their modern culture, express their national identity and project their self-image."



"Black Sphere" by Antony Gormley, 1976, from "An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture," curated by Kynaston McShine for the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

In "Media as Social Matrix in the United Arab Emirates," Nada Mourtada-Sabbah, Mohammed al-Mutawa, John W. Fox and Tim Walters examine the ways in which the contemporary media promote a set of values that produce a consumer-based society in direct contrast to the extended kinship network of previous generations. Through a comparative approach, Christopher Davidson examines the possible futures of Dubai and Abu Dhabi based on their economic development plans. In "Debates on Political Reform in the Gulf: The Dynamics of Liberalizing Public Spaces," Amr Hamzawy argues that since the 1990s the Gulf has witnessed a "relative expansion of freedom and a growing degree of pluralism," as a result of post-9/11 pressure to democratize by the West and the forces of globalization. In the final selection, "Gulf Societies: Coexistence of Tradition and Modernity," Lubna Ahmed al-Kazi considers the effects of changes in education, healthcare, work and politics following the establishment of welfare states. These last three essays represent the most interesting of the bunch given their

in-depth analysis and a refusal to reinforce the tradition-modernity binary that seems to haunt the collection otherwise.

"Popular Culture and Political Identity in the Arab Gulf States" provides an introductory resource to readers interested in the Gulf. One only wishes that this truly fascinating region – with all the current educational and cultural projects that have caught both the world's attention and investments – wasn't presented as so one-sided. **AJ**

# Maronite Family Life in Early 20th Century Lebanon, and Journey into America

**BY MICHAEL TEAGUE**

"Kisses from a Distance" is an intimate chronicle of Raff Ellis's attempt to reconstruct his family history using as the letters left behind by his mother after her death in 1994. The author's parents were Lebanese Maronites who made the journey to the United States in the early 20th century, against a backdrop of historical events of enormous significance both within Lebanon and on the global stage.

**Kisses from a Distance: An Immigrant Family Experience**
By Raff Ellis
Cune Press, 2007, 312 pp.

The dynamic of this book is due in large part to the fact that the author had at his disposal only the letters his mother received from her family and friends, and not the ones she wrote to them. This not only leaves room for imagination but also makes Ellis's trips back to Lebanon to conduct research as central a theme as his parents' initial journey to America, giving the work an enjoyably personal feel.

From a historical standpoint, the most interesting aspect of "Kisses from a Distance" is the author's re-creation of Maronite life in the mountain villages of Lebanon around the turn of the century. Ellis's mother came from a family of notables while his father was of peasant origin, making for a fairly thorough portrait of day-to-day existence. This is the part of the book where the author resorts to re-creation most often, and he describes the situations and conversations between members of his family as he imagines they must have occurred with great sensitivity.

Equally poignant is the role played by the impending collapse of the Ottoman Empire which, in its death throes, implemented increasingly repressive measures to extract resources from and control local populations. The author also details the ravages of the locust plague of 1915 that brought famine and disease to an already suffering population. The resulting economic deprivations and sociopolitical turmoil were largely responsible for the departure of Ellis's parents, and so many like them, to foreign lands in search of a better life.

As is the case with so many who emigrate, however, adjusting to a new and completely different life is often just as difficult and even traumatic as the adverse conditions from which one was fleeing. The depiction of the many setbacks and hardships endured by the Kmeid family in their new life in upstate New York constitutes one of the book's strongest aspects. For all of the author's painstaking research into the minutest details of his family's past, the universality of the story is every bit as important. Indeed, this book could be read by anyone whose ancestors made the trek to America at the time of the chaotic birth of the 20th century.

The first three Ellis children (from left to right: Theresa, Raffee, Delor). From "Kisses from a Distance: An Immigrant Family Experience."

The movement back and forth between personal and universal also underscores another of the book's strong points, in that through Ellis's family history we have a unique window onto the social and political situation of the Maronites after the turn of the century. While sociological and political analysis is mostly beyond the scope of the work, we nonetheless catch a glimpse of conflicts that would eventually play a central role in the civil war years later. The author's uncle served in the army under the Ottomans and in his letters makes several references to his role in quelling the Druze rebellions during the French Mandate. The tumultuous history of the Druze-Maronite relationship in Lebanon is perhaps well-known and is really not at all a focal point for Ellis, but it adds a layer of complexity to the account. Particularly, since the Maronites were having their own problems with the Ottomans, also represented by Ellis's uncle, who was an exemplary soldier on the battlefield but who often clashed with his superiors.

Reading this book, one cannot help but wonder helplessly about the other boxes of letters out there collecting dust in the attics and basements of the world, and what these letters would reveal not only about the folks who wrote them but also about the historical events of the times in which they were written. **AJ**

# Photo of a Nation

**BY SIMONE FATTAL**

For an American reader, the experience of reading this book and exploring the photographs of Lebanon, which range from the earliest daguerreotypes to those taken in the middle of the 20th century, is likely to be an unalloyed pleasure.

**A History of Photography in Lebanon 1840–1944**
By Michel Fani
Editions de L'Escalier, 2005, 424 pp.

For the Lebanese reader, however, the pleasure might be infused with sadness. It seems to relate the conquest of Lebanon by the French through their Jesuit auxiliary. We are not told specifically where all these photos come from, but one guesses that they were all part of the Jesuit archives in Beirut and stored there until recently. We read that they are now to be found at the Institute of Photography in Lebanon.

(*Left*) Portrait of a Druze princess by Tancrede Dumas. (*Right*) Portrait of Donat Vernier by Felice Beato.

The first pictures, made by such visitors as Frederic-Goupil Fesquest (1840), and J-P Giraud de Prangey (1843), are beautiful. They capture a country where towns and villages are scarce, built entirely of stone (an indication of the wealth of the inhabitants) and far away from each other. The earliest pictures taken by visitors and residents alike are of landscapes and the archeological site of Baalbek. These early visitors came from all over Europe and even from the United States, but the majority were French. The French visitors were often sent on missions, first given to lay people like Gustave Flaubert and Maxime du Camp, who visited Egypt and Lebanon on the same trip.

As they continue, the spirit of the pictures seems to change, probably a reflection of the French decision to settle in Lebanon. We see Jesuits opening a school in Ghazir, and then one in Beirut; included are pictures of both schools and their seminarians.

Nowhere do we see the occupations of the inhabitants depicted. We have a picture of Beit Chabab, but not of the industry of the bronze bells that were made there. One picture gives an idea of the richness of the region: the warehouses in the port of Tripoli, but there are no images of either the mulberry trees or the silk industry.

Interest in the Levant has been a constant in European politics, literature and art for ages, but in antiquity the conquest of the Levant was the beginning of lasting cultural and political symbiosis. An era of Hellenistic civilization was prompted by the conquests of Alexander the Great, and an even more integrated civilization was born during Roman times. In contrast, the long conquest of the Levant during the 19th century by the European powers led to disaster and chronic war.

The collection features the work of some famous photographers, many of whom made Lebanon their home. There are also local photographers who learned from their predecessors and opened their own workshops or continued previous ones, sometimes by marriage or inheritance. The American photographers seem to have been interested mainly in the construction of the American University.

Very seldom are unknown civilians photographed, but there are many pictures of students. Education to Lebanese students was given on the condition of them becoming protestant, in the case of the American missionary, as for the French, as the Lebanese were already catholic, the problem did not arise.

The construction of the American Mission, triggered a campaing of fundraising in America, by a French Jesuit, in the hope of constructing a similarly important Jesuit school, in order to offset the influence of the newcomer.

Town of Broumana by Theophilus Waldmeier.

The earlier pictures, such as those taken during a visit from Maxine du Camp and Flaubert, depict the country itself. However, the building of the Jesuit school seems to have ushered in a shift in focus. The photographers were asked to work for the school and for the newly established press, called L'Imprimerie Catholique, which is still active and still of excellent quality. The photographs produced were to be used as illustrations for books, or for propaganda. Many photographs reflect the political events of the day, they are in fact the first press photographs: the Kaiser arriving in the port of Beirut, the arrival of General Weygand, the declaration of the Grand Liban (the new head of state) and so on. These, of course, are all important historical documents in addition to being works of art.

We see the High Commissioner, the generals Weygand and Gouraud, and then the first Lebanese presidents, Emie Edde, Bechara Khoury, along with various Lebanese journalists and personalities, such as George Naccache and Charles Helou.

Personally, I prefer the early images taken by the European immigrants: Ernest Benecke's portrait of a beautiful cedar tree, the Dutchman T. Leew's portraits of young women and the German W. von Herford's panorama of Baalbek (the only recurring subject throughout the book). The next generation encountered archeologists such as Louis De Clerq, as well as artists like Rogier and Sauvaire settling in the Orient.

In those early years, the silk industry attracted French industrialists. One of them, Charlier, was to abandon his initial occupation in order to pursue photography. He created beautiful landscapes, including a remarkable detail of Baalbeck. The landscapes of Bedford (the son of the famous architect who accompanied the Prince of Wales on his Grand Tour) are massive, maybe because of his training as an architect.

The next generation is represented by Jesuits exclusively. Given permission to start a school in Ghazir, they prepared generations of students to continue their enterprise. The landscape of Louis Ronzevalle and Gérard de Martinprey depicts a land of peasants living their lives amidst exceptional beauty. One photographer has captured the port of Tripoli, with its impressively large warehouses. The countryside appears very well-tended and mountain slopes are cultivated on often high terraces. We are confronted with rugged landscapes and stone cities, such as Beirut, Tripoli, Ghazir, Bickfaya, and Beit Chabab. There are no pictures of Sidon or Tyre, except as included in a panoramic view of the seaside. There are even aerial views of the approach to Beirut in 1936 as World War II approached.

Portrait of two former Lebanese presidents, Emile Edde (left) and Bechara el Khoury (left), by Mohieddine Saade.

The centrality of the Jesuit school, where so many Lebanese have been educated, to the collection is understandable: the book's author, Michel Fani, is a product of that same school. He has great familiarity with the subject, having also worked at the Bibliothèque Orientale as curator during the Civil War. Fani is a privileged and knowledgeable witness, and the biographical notices of all the authors are extremely detailed. Yet, we would have preferred that they had been written in a more straightforward language, as the information presented is sometimes difficult to grasp.***AJ***

# Young, Female - And Arab American

**BY PAULINE HOMSI VINSON**

"Swimming Toward the Light," a novel by Angela Tahaan Leone, is a heart-wrenching story of a sensitive and talented young girl named Irene, whose musical gifts and sense of self are suffocated by the intransigence and misunderstanding of her Lebanese immigrant parents and American peers.

**Swimming Toward the Light**
By Angela Tahaan Leone
Syracuse University Press, 2007, 188 pp.

Leone's book is the latest in a series of recent publications that address the experiences of first-generation Arab Americans as they grow up in immigrant households. In fact, this genre seems rather overrepresented among Arab-American women writers, especially in first book-length publications by women. One thinks, for example, of Frances Khiralla Noble's "The Situe Stories," Evelyn Shaker's "Remember Me to Lebanon," Susan Muaddi Darraj's "The Inheritance of Exile: Stories from South Philly," Mhoja Kahf's "The Girl with the Tangerine Scarf," and Diana Abu-Jaber's first novel, "Arabian Jazz," as well as her more recent memoirs, "The Language of Baklava."

Angela Tahaan Leone

Photo credit: Raymon W. Leone

While these works give varying perspectives on the experiences of daughters of Arab families growing up in America, they all address the ways in which questions of gender, culture, assimilation and independence intersect in the lives of their characters. Together, they form a multifaceted portrayal of the issues and concerns faced by daughters of Arab immigrants to America, even if they do so through the somewhat overused genre of "coming of age" narratives.

Like most stories in this vein, Leone's work, though labeled "a novel," has the feel of a memoir or first-hand account. Also, like many recent Arab-American publications, "Swimming Toward the Light" vividly recreates the foods, customs and tribulations of an immigrant Arab family in America. More so than some of the other publications, however, Leone bravely confronts such taboo subjects as mental illness and self-harming behaviors, depicting them as the terrible consequences of the inability, or perhaps unwillingness, of the immigrant generation to accommodate the individual needs and cultural adaptations of their American born and raised children. In some sense, Leone's novel may be seen as an anti-coming of age novel, as the young Irene becomes incapable of blossoming and increasingly stifled by her environment.

The story is told from the point of view of the protagonist's loving older sister, Lottie. On occasion, however, the narrative voice shifts to an omniscient narrator who reports dialogue and situations to which Lottie could not have been privy. Though the abrupt shifting between the narrative modes seems awkward at times, it nonetheless conveys the intersection of intergenerational and cross-cultural misunderstandings that the novel tries to emphasize.

An outcast at school, Irene must contend with her overbearing mother's resistance to any form of assimilation into American culture. Finding little support from her parents for her musical talents, and devastated at discovering that her love for an older American neighborhood boy is not only unreciprocated, but unnoticed, Irene increasingly internalizes the tensions surrounding her to the point where they completely overwhelm her.

Angela Tehaan Leone is to be commended for addressing the sometimes devastating psychological impact that cultural clashes have on immigrant parents and their American-born children. Similarly, Syracuse University Press, the book's publisher, is to be commended for being one of only a handful of houses that consistently support and promote Arab and Arab-American writing.

Leone's narrative, so sensitive in its lyrical treatment of the young Irene's predicament, risks rendering this particular depiction of the Arab immigrant experience representative of the whole. The book's flirtation with this danger is unfortunate because negative stereotypes of Arabs are so pervasive in American culture. The commentary on the inside flap of the book's hardback cover in fact encourages readers to see the work as widely representative, stating that the novel "gives readers entrée into a male-dominated, independence-stifling culture where female roles were rigidly prescribed."

The challenge faced by Arab-American writers and their publishers remains one of negotiating a space for the open and sometimes necessarily harsh critique of particular aspects of Arab culture without falling into the trap of undue generalizations

that reinforce existing, damaging misconceptions of Arab culture as a whole. Perhaps this is the ultimate challenge for the readers of Arab-American literature — to free each book from the onus of having to represent Arab culture as a whole, while also holding it responsible for the stereotypes it may unwittingly play into.

Leone's novel, offering perspective on the tragic links between mental illness and the immigrant experience, makes an important contribution to the growing body of Arab-American literature. Its psychological and sociological commentary put us one step closer to understanding the specific experience of growing up in a first-generation Arab-American household. Yet, at the same time, it is an intimate portrayal of one young woman's search for identity as she dodges the bullets of adolescence. Thus, the discerning reader will balance the general with the specific, realizing that the novel makes certain observations that can be applied to the group as a whole, while also concentrating on the particular story of one individual. **AJ**

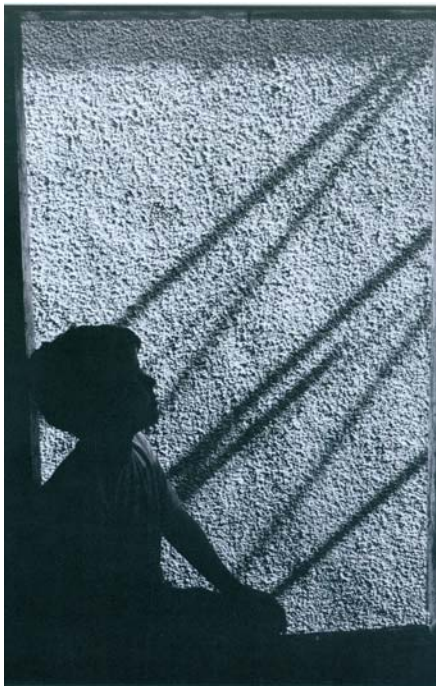
# Filling the Void

**BY BOBBY S. GULSHAN**

In the short span of his novel, Ahmad Harb captures a multifaceted society suffocating under the yoke of occupation. Harb's writing is deceptively simple; its surface does not ripple with saccharine poetics. Instead, this slim, seemingly straightforward novel is centered on life in the village of Al-Ein, and it employs form and structure to vivid and insightful ends.

**Remains**
By Ahmad Harb
Translated by Abdul-Fattah M. Jabr
Birzeit University Press, 2006, 117 pp.

The central symbol in the novel is a *kinf* inherited by Waheed, the narrator whose voice bookends the novel. The *kinf*, a humble wedding gift given to Waheed by his mother, appears in the first line of the novel, and very quickly Harb establishes the central narrative motif: that the very emptiness of vessels makes them useful, full of potential and life, and simultaneously tragic, void and negative.



"Nahr el-Bared Camp, Lebanon" from "In Hope and Despair" (American University in Cairo Press, 2003)

Harb uses this interplay of presence and absence to express both the state of his characters and the land they inhabit. The characters live a contingent and fragile existence, where identity seems as transient as borders and bypass roads. In his mother's *kinf*, Waheed places memories, scraps of notes, books, his past. And it is in the *kinf* that he imagines the bones of his grandmother, the great matriarch of Al-Ein, rattling out a song that takes him back to his ancestors and the Palestine that was their home.

The author expands the vessel concept in the story beyond Waheed's *kinf*. Harb gives numerous characters within the novel the chance to voice their own stories. We hear from Majid, the young revolutionary, struggling between his devotion to the *intifada* and his love for Wadee'a, whose voice also comes to life, recounting her own revolutionary activities. The narrative voice passes through several characters before Waheed's reprise. In this way, the characters become narrative vehicles, each a vessel whose emptiness Harb fills with a unique voice. Each recounts the trials of finding some sense of place and self in the midst of a convoluted and seemingly terminal intrigue. Who can be trusted? Who is an agent of Israel? Who really knows how to love and live in the face of gunfights and secret permits? Such are the daily challenges of the people of Al-Ein, characters hollowed out by their experiences, just as Palestine is made hollow and empty by the occupation. They all inhabit the *kinf*, and they are also like the *kinf*, simple objects that convey a particular place and time, full of memories and made empty again by remembering.

"Remains" proves exceptional in that it gives voice to individuals whose fate seeks to silence them. Though political intrigue plays a central role in the actual plot of the novel, Harb resists polemics, and shows instead how often what passes as political is ultimately personal and emotional. For Harb, the borders aren't drawn on maps in peace conferences but inscribed in the experiences of a land and its people. **AJ**

# Kaleidoscopic Novel Woven Around Syrian History

**BY DANIEL HUGH-JONES**

"The Dark Side of Love," a massive and kaleidoscopic novel by the Syrian-born Rafik Schami, comes to us translated from German, since its author has lived in Germany as an exile from his native Syria for almost 40 years. And yet there is an elegiac tone to the novel that makes clear how much its author misses Damascus and Syria, the land of his birth. It is perhaps due to the

"Soft Typewriter – Ghost Version" by Claes Oldenburg, 1963, from "Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology," curated by Germano Celant for the Guggenheim Museum.

almost palpable sense of love for a land little seen that "The Dark Side of Love" is reminiscent at times of Charles Dickens,

**The Dark Side of Love**
By Rafik Schami
Interlink Books, 2009, 900 pp.

or the Brazilian Jorge Amado, two other writers whose works are inseparable from the cities they celebrated and who also wrote on this scale.

Although Schami bookends the novel with an introduction and resolution that might suggest a detective novel (on page 6 a bus driver discovers the body of a murdered secret policeman, and in the antepenultimate chapter we witness the murderer set off to kill his victim), the scope of the intervening 800 pages verges on the epic. The novel tells the story of two star-crossed lovers from a small Christian village outside Damascus, each from one of the village's two main families, the Shahins and the Mushtaks, one Orthodox and one Catholic, who have been fighting a blood feud for a century and who would willingly kill even their own children to forestall a marriage with their enemies.

The threads of the story of the lovers and their families are, however, woven into nothing less than a social and political history of Syria over the 20th century, and Schami is ever awake to the parallels between the small scale and the large. The hero's boyhood miseries in a Catholic monastery are subsequently replicated on a grand scale when he is thrown into the Syrian gulag for his political dissent, and both episodes reveal the moral equivalence of his tyrannical father and the succession of dictators in political power. It is immensely to the author's credit that his descriptions of grand politics are as enthralling as the tales of murderous skulduggery in a tiny village riven by hatred.

Incidentally, I should point out that my use of the word "tales" is intentional. Myth and magic are seamlessly worked into the novel as a whole, and one cannot read this book without being made aware of its kinship to traditions of oral storytelling and such works as "The Arabian Nights" or the "Kalila wa Dimna." Like such works, "The Dark Side of Love" is composed of many (almost 300) short chapters – some no more than a few pages in length – and the result might have been fragmented, but such is Schami's skill that the work is immensely greater than the sum of its parts. As with a mosaic or a fine rug, the sweep of its narrative comes better into focus when we step back from its details and engage with the whole.

Finally, it would be churlish to ignore Anthea Bell's admirably lucid translation, which never comes between us and this fine novel. ***AJ***

# How Does It Feel to be a Problem?

**BY SUSAN MUADDI DARRAJ**

"Enemies living among us" – this is how Moustafa Bayoumi characterizes the perception many Americans have of Arabs in the United States. In "How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America," he focuses on young Arab Americans whom, he explains, bear the brunt of much of this hostility as they themselves are in a precarious period of their social development and their identity formation. "Even the most mundane facts of their lives," he writes, "such as visiting mosques and *shisha* cafes, are now interpreted as something sinister and malevolent."

**Being Young and Arab in America**
By Moustafa Bayoumi
Penguin Press 2008, 290 pp.

Bayoumi draws the model for "How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?" from an earlier work concerning another group in America facing suspicion and hostility. W. E. B. DuBois' "The Souls of Black Folk," published in 1903, asked the title question of Bayoumi's book. Written during the era of Jim Crow segregation, "Souls" offered American readers a portrait of the African-American experience. Bayoumi seeks to do something similar; in "How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?" he presents individual portraits – delivered in arresting, lively prose – of seven young Arab Americans, all living in Brooklyn, New York. He explains that Brooklyn boasts the largest Arab-American population in the United States, more than areas that one might expect like Dearborn, Michigan. Its urban environment also contributes to the diversity – Palestinians, Iraqis, Yemenis, Lebanese, etc. – within its Arab population, which makes it a suitable setting for Bayoumi's further investigation.

And yet, the sole complaint one can lodge against the work, which is admirable as a whole, is that it is not diverse enough. For example, of the seven young Arabs interviewed by Bayoumi, only one is an Arab Christian, despite Bayoumi's own assertion that "the Arab-American community is a majority Christian population." He adds that "Arab-American Muslims are at the

eye of today's storms," but goes on to explain that the American community at large, which knows little about the Arab-American population, does not discern differences, and Arab Christians have also been painted with the same brush of ethnic stereotype. The young Christian man Bayoumi interviews is also atypical of the Arab Christian experience: he feels compelled to join the military and serves during the Iraq war, he grows up knowing little of his Arab heritage, and he only recently has begun to feel connected to the Arab culture and to immerse himself in the political questions that tend to define the Arab and Arab-American experience.

Nevertheless, Bayoumi's book is an important contribution to a developing canon of work that seeks to explore the Arab-American experience (others include Steven Salaita's "Anti-Arab Racism in the USA," and Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber's "Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11). A compelling read, "How Does It Feel to be a Problem?" is filled with stories of young men and women who grapple with their identities, who suffer uncertainty, indignity, and even violence due topost-9/11 racism, as displayed in the opening story of Rasha, whose family was incarcerated for three months during the crackdown on Arabs after the terrorist attacks. One of the most appealing aspects of the book is the trend of young Arabs drawing strength in these troubling times from Islam; these include Yasmin, who takes on the prejudiced policies of her high school – and wins – and Rami, who seeks to be a role model for young Muslims. These portraits offer a picture of Islam as a faith that affirms life, dignity and love – in contrast to its maligned representation of Islam and Muslims in popular American thought. **AJ**

# Translation and Cultural Imperialism

**BY REBECCA JOUBIN**

In a wholly provocative approach, Kilito's "Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language" takes on the politics of language, bilingualism, translation and cross-cultural relations. Through a close study of al-Jahiz, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Battuta, al-Saffar and al-Shidyaq, Kilito manifests the way in which cultural hegemony sustains itself. He questions Orientalist modes of scholarship and unveils the hegemonic assumptions of Eurocentric comparative literature. He also deplores the inferiority complex on the part of Arab writers who look to Europe for inspiration and try to prove that they, too, are heir to that tradition.

**Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language**
By Abdelfattah Kilito
Originally published in Arabic as "*Lan Tatakalama Lughati*" (2002)
Syracuse University Press, 2008, 102 pp.

At the core of his book is a preoccupation with the ethics of translation. Kilito shows that often translation serves as an extension of military conflict and economic power in the same way that Orientalism propped up imperialism. His definition entails that translation hovers between life and death, between love and death. Kilito writes: "Again, there is conflict, but it is no longer just between two languages; it is also between the liberal belief in promoting cross-cultural understanding through language learning, and a secret, obscene, jealous desire to possess one's native language so completely as to prevent others from using it for their purposes, which can only be perverse and dishonorable."

He criticizes Arab writers who yearn for their works to be translated into European languages, and laments that successful literary production entails translation. Indeed, he raises important questions on the integrity of such a purpose.

Yet, if scholars have acknowledged that Arab books that make it in translation tell us more about the host culture than about the target culture, and are subject to the politics of production, Kilito goes so far as to associate acquisition of another language as theft. Indeed, in highlighting the inability of fully understanding a foreign language, let alone one's own, he negates all changes for cross-cultural understanding. **AJ**

# Rethinking the Mediterranean

**BY ANDREA SHALAL-ESA**

In "Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity," Iain Chambers argues that the region is a far more complex, fluid and porous concept than generally understood.

Part love letter, part high theory, part travelogue, Chambers densely packed this slim book with important insights and a long overdue reclamation of the often hidden Arabic and Islamic history of the Mediterranean. Chambers urges adoption of a new "uprooted geography" that examines not so much a physical region but a malleable and continually changing web of cultural and historical currents.

**Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity**
By Iain Chambers
Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2008, 192 pp.

Throughout the book, he challenges the very concept of borders and calls into question the standard explanatory frames of historiography, sociology and anthropology.

Using texts, architecture, history, music, even cookbooks, Chambers applies the principles of archeology to excavate the African, Arabic, Islamic, Jewish and Asiatic contributions that

shaped the Mediterranean, but have been largely denied and silenced over the past 500 years.

At the same time, he also foregrounds Italy's own colonial past, highlighting the current amalgam of immigrants from places as far-flung as Sri Lanka, West Africa and China, and even the massive migration out of Italy and other European countries in the early 20th century.

Chambers is a professor of cultural and postcolonial studies in Naples, and the city – framed by the sea, the sun and a volcano – functions as his muse in the book. It provides many of the rich, "deceptively marginal details" that make this book a gem.

For instance, during a visit to the National Archeological Museum, Chambers finds a text written in 1287 by a Mongolian monk who witnessed a battle between the Neapolitans and the Aragonese. The text reveals "an unexpected overlapping of worlds that here seem strangely more immediate in their fluidity than those subsequently imposed via the rigid frontiers of a subsequent Western modernity." Too often, he says, Italy's own colonial past is excluded from discussion or study, revealing a culture that "studiously evades an encounter with its own colonial past." For instance, he notes that the 1980 film "Lion of the Desert," which recounts the Libyan resistance, has never been shown in Italian cinemas.

*Continued on page 37*

# Loving His Country Through 'Metadrama'

**BY MICHAEL NAJJAR**

In his play "Sulayman al-Halabi," Alfred Farag's protagonist exclaims, "I can see all of Cairo from here. Oh, how great and how miserable you are. My homeland, the fountainhead of my thoughts, my hopes, and the pulsing heart of all Arabs. Yet I grew to hate you, Cairo…Your affairs are no longer my concern." This monologue, written by Farag in 1964, was a prescient foreshadowing of his own future as one of the greatest playwrights of his generation.

**Alfred Farag and the Egyptian Theater**
By Dina A. Amin
Syracuse University Press, 2009, 321 pp.

In her study "Alfred Farag and the Egyptian Theater," Dina A. Amin posits that Farag "unquestionably ranks as one of the most accomplished Arab playwrights, writing plays that are intelligent and thought-provoking as dramatic literature as well as entertaining and profitable box-office hits." According to Farag, the role of theater was "to represent the hopes and needs of the masses" as well as to create a milieu in which Arab models could replace Western art forms.

Farag was a master of the one-act play. He composed dramas in both classical and colloquial Arabic, in poetry and prose, and dramatized the struggles of the oppressed. During his lifetime he was a journalist, a political prisoner, the first director of the Ministry of Culture's mass culture division and an expatriate. Throughout his self-imposed banishment, he never forgot his native land, obsessively writing about its social and political situation. After a decade-long absence, he received the Egyptian National Theater Jubilee Medal, and before his death in 2005, several of his last works were performed at Egypt's National Theater.

Amin asserts that Farag's dramaturgy evolved from the use of folklore and history in the 1960s to the application of the theatrical device known as "metadrama" in his plays of the 1970s. In addition, he turned his attention from the issues of Egypt's past to the new economic and political policies of the post-Nasserite governments. Amin defines metadrama as "a break in dramatic illusion that results in the work being 'self-conscious' of its own theatricality." Farag employs metadrama to create "self-conscious dramas and dramatic characters who reveal their self-aversion through a process of self criticism." According to Amin, this device was necessary because Farag, along with other

Alfred Farag by Zareh for Al Jadid

playwrights of his generation, suffered from censorship by the Egyptian government for expressing their political views with their art. Metadrama, therefore, became "one of Farag's major concealment strategies."

A complex analysis of three of Farag's plays comprises the bulk of the text, and Amin herself has translated and included those plays in the last section: "The Visitor," "The Peephole" and "The Stranger." She also includes Farag's earlier work "The Egyptian Hay Circle," and a monologue titled "The Last Walk." Her analysis of these works constitutes a deep textual reading rooted in her theory regarding Farag's use of metadrama. Having directed several of his works herself, Amin combines both literary criticism and directorial interpretation, providing profound insights into these plays.

There is currently a paucity of scholarship concerning Arab theater. Amin's contribution offers both a collection of Farag's plays in translation and a complex analysis of his works. Through books like this the breadth and depth of modern Arab theater can be exposed to Western theatrical practitioners and historians, who often overlook Arab contributions to the theatrical arts. Most importantly, however, Amin's work is a fitting encomium to a playwright who loved his native Egypt deeply enough to praise and criticize it with his art. ***AJ***

"*Memoire de Lieux*" (Memory of Places) by Helen Karam, 2008

# Women as Cultural Carriers, Victims and Innovators

**BY LYNNE ROGERS**

As part of a new series on gender and globalization by Syracuse University Press, a collection of 17 scholarly articles titled "From Patriarchy to Empowerment: Women's Participation, Movements, and Rights in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia," examines the wide range of women's engagement with society – from factory workers in Fez to filmmakers in Iran. Drawn from a conference on women's empowerment sponsored by the Fulbright Commission in 2002, the quality of papers, as with most academic conferences, varies from slightly pedantic to insightful and informative. The extensive tables of statistics, the helpful bibliography and the overall body of work will give young scholars a solid sense of the field. For the more seasoned scholar, the collection will reaffirm the importance of gender studies in the context of globalization.

**From Patriarchy to Empowerment: Women's Participation, Movements, and Rights in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia**
Edited by Valentine M. Moghadam
Syracuse University Press, 2007, 414 pp.

The first section focuses on political processes and women's participation. It includes articles on Palestinian women activists (written by the late Deborah "Misty" Gerner, to whom editor Moghadam dedicated the collection), political candidates in Jordan, the backlash against Afghan women under the Marxists from 1978 to 1992, the grassroots movements and various political parties in Turkey, the relationship between the state and NGO organizations in Tunisia and the need for developing communications networks in Morocco.

The second section centers on economic, social and cultural participation. Moghadam includes topics ranging from looking at the lives of the poverty stricken and the privileged, as well as the need for economic development in India, the status of rural women in Turkey, factory workers in Fez, the high drop-out rate of Bedouin girls in the Occupied Territories and the museum curators in Jordan. A brief yet informative article by Ibrahim al-Marashi depicts the vibrant film scene in that country and highlights the creativity of women filmmakers working under censorship.

In the final section on violence, peace and women's human rights, Evelyn Accad, an activist, critic and author, personalizes

her significant work with an honest urgency. In "Gender and Violence in the Lebanese War Novel," she confides "My belief that long-term plans to bring about social transformations are necessary to end the war system and bring about hopeful and lasting changes to a world falling apart led me to this analysis of the relationship among sexuality, war and literature." Other essays focus on the rise of depression in Nepal, the dangerous ramifications of dowry in India, the current cultural attitude towards *hudad* in Egypt and Tunisia and the obligatory article on bereaved Israeli and Palestinian women. In her closing essay, "Peace-Building and Reconstruction with Women: Reflections on Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine," Valentine M. Moghadam calls for transnational solidarity, stressing that only with the inclusion of women can "the nature of the state" be changed. **AJ**

# Writers Keeping Pace with Troubling Realities

**BY REBECCA JOUBIN**

Given the unfortunate dearth of scholarship on literary output in Iraq, Shakir Mustafa's "Contemporary Iraqi Fiction" is a welcome addition. By his selection of 16 writers, including women, Jews living in Israel and Christian and Muslim Iraqis living in Iraq or in exile, he offers a nuanced study of contemporary Iraqi fiction which touches on a rich tapestry of themes. Most important, by including Iraqi writers in exile and those within Iraq in one anthology he has contributed to breaking the cultural divide between those inside and outside – a gap which has existed since the beginning of the '70s when intellectuals within Iraq were divided between those who supported and those who protested the existing regime.

**Contemporary Iraqi Fiction: An Anthology**
Edited and translated from Arabic by Shakir Mustafa
Syracuse University, 2008, 202 pp.

"Iraqi fiction has been particularly well-suited to keeping pace with troubling realities in Iraq," Mustafa states in his introduction, which provides a much needed historical framework. He explains how in the past quarter of a century, Iraqis have lived through a bloody war with Iran from 1980 to 1988, the two Gulf wars of 1991 and 2003, a 13-year economic embargo that paralyzed the country's infrastructure and the population's spirit, the downfall of Saddam Hussein and a humiliating foreign occupation. While there is no way writers could avoid these sad realities, Iraqi writers have also written on such themes as love, music and the spirit.

Half-length oil portrait of a young musician playing the lute. She is wearing a miter headband and her hands are painted with henna, circa 1800, from "Islamic Art," Nicola Sursock Museum, 1974.

Mustafa cites migration, and subsequent contact with Western cultures in the past two decades, as having stimulated Iraqi literature. Those in exile, which comprise half the writers in this anthology, have dealt with issues of identity, roots and belonging.

The brief biographic descriptions, which introduce each other, serve to show that whether the Iraqi writer was living within Iraq or in exile, they faced many similar issues and suffered as a result of oppressive Iraqi politics. In "Shahrazad and Her Narrators," Lutfiyya al-Dulaimi shows how Shahrazad has been misunderstood by her biographers, who have not listened to a word of what she has said and thus betray the spirit of her thought. "No one asked me who I was and what I wanted. What got them were the masks, not my fragile humanity, anguish, deprivations or fears," Shahrazad complains to one of her clueless interpreters.

Mahdi Isa al-Saqr, another writer from within, in the "Returnee," tells the seemingly simple story of a widowed man, still in love with his wife. He imagines she has returned in the form of a cat at the funeral. Disregarding what others think, he picks up the cat and walks out of the funeral home, where friends and family were finalizing business deals and talking about the latest news. Samira al-Mana, who has lived in exile, has dealt with themes of those in the diaspora, far from their homeland. In the "Dormant Alphabet" we enter the world of Iraqi emigrants, their daily tensions in exile as well as the constant reminder of the oppressive regime which rules their homeland.

*Continued on page 37*

# Death Before Dishonor

"*Haja Tajoj*" by Suzanne Hilal, 2009

**BY HILARY HESSE**

One of the world's more ghastly cultural traditions, honor killing, is practiced in many parts of the Middle East and surrounding areas. In its most common incarnation, a woman is murdered by a male relative upon suspicion of having committed a sexual indiscretion with a man to whom she is not married. Her murder is meant to correct the misdeed and restore the family's "honor." The practice is particularly opaque for Westerners, who are thrown by the seeming illogic of cleansing immorality by means of even greater immorality. A tribal custom that predates Islam, most of the world's current cases are perpetrated by and against Muslims. According to a 2007 article in The New York Times Magazine, the United Nations Population Fund estimates that 5,000 such killings occur around the world annually, with an especially high incidence rate in Syria.

**Honor Killing: Stories of Men Who Killed**
By Ayse Onal
SAQI Books, 2008, 256 pp.

In "Honor Killing: Stories of Men Who Killed," Turkish columnist and television journalist Ayse Onal, acclaimed for her groundbreaking political talk show on Turkey's Channel 7, narrows the focus to Turks, many of whom are Kurds. Divided into 10 chapters, nine of which are named after deceased women, the book is a compassionate sociological study of the various dimensions and implications of the honor system. What separates it from other similarly themed pieces is that, true to the title, each tragedy is explained in part from the killer's perspective.

In the second chapter, Murat, who murdered his mother, says, "You too die with the person you kill." In this sense, honor killing is equally a crime against the self. The result is that, far from hating these men, we cry for and with them. In "Honor Killing," the true culprit is the system itself, to which all fall prey. Onal demonstrates that these attacks have not one victim, but two: the murdered and the murderer.

While the book's contents are anything but uplifting, Onal has carefully arranged the chapters so as not to overwhelm the reader's emotions. She has also steered clear of redundancy, making sure that each chapter adds something fresh to our understanding of the issue. "Honor Killing" contains a plethora of scenarios: some women die virgins, while others die while pregnant, some die at the hands of their fathers, while others take their own lives. Most of the men say they felt they were left with no option but to kill those they loved; it is as if they had been socially checkmated. With regards to murdering his sister, Mehmet Sait says, "She's your blood. BUT, if push comes to shove, you kill her, my friend." Along the same lines, Battal says, "You either destroy your honor or your sister. If you don't choose the latter, you can't walk amongst those around you as a man." This sense of Darwinian struggle pervades the cases, suggesting that, for those ensnared in the honor system, physical and social survival are on a par with one another.

Because Onal only met one of the 10 females whose lives she describes, she was confined to reconstructing their stories based on interviews with those who knew them. Consequently, many of the thoughts and feelings she ascribes to the women have necessarily been extrapolated based on her own understanding of human behavior. Despite this unavoidable weakness, the book is both a credible study and a fascinating read. The layman stands to gain substantial insight into a complex and painful social problem that may not disappear anytime soon.

So what is honor? At one point Onal asks a group of irate villagers for a definition. Disgusted by a question with so obvious an answer, they walk away without responding. In fact, one of the book's key points is the extent to which those trapped in the honor system seem to take its existence for granted – almost on faith. The ability to distance oneself and critically examine the concept is simply not there. Honor appears, though, to be the sum total of one's social currency, and to be closely associated with the control over valuable resources, such as women. Tragically, mankind most often kills over resources. **AJ**

# Twelve Tales of Trial and Tribulation

BY LYNNE ROGERS

With her youthful publication of the seminal novel, "Sitt Marie Rose," the Lebanese-American writer and artist, Etel Adnan, set some very high aesthetic standards for her work. Now, her new collection of stories attests to her enduring power to defy boundaries and to engage her readers. Her title story, "Master of the Eclipse," pays tribute to the deceased modern Iraqi Kurdish poet, Buland al-Haidari.

**Master of the Eclipse**
By Etel Adnan
Interlink Pub Group, 2009, 168 pp.

In his poem, "Mailman," Buland wrote that "…mourning connects one festival with the next" and Adnan's opening piece remembers her friend's stories and poetry from an Italian arts festival held during the first Gulf War. A memory story, the narrative fluctuates between the distant and the recent past, between Buland's and Adnan's memories as the dexterous story flows into literary criticism and biography.

Buland's self-described shame over his love of Saddam, and Saddam's magnetic and manipulative support of Iraqi poetry festivals, quietly reveals the complicity of artists armed only with ideals. When an obnoxious American critic shows up to ask Adnan about the angels in Buland's poetry, she attempts to elucidate the mystery and once again illustrates the binding concerns of Arab and Western poets. In the story, "The Power of Death," about a Syrian man who remains haunted by his desertion of his young Swedish lover after her death, Adnan's edifying tale uncovers the damage of the walking away from the gift of cross-cultural love. In these two stories, she also lays bare the role of the artist as the narrator and assumes the posture of empathetic and informed listener while acting as the go-between for the reader and Adnan's memory of another.

Adnan returns to the problematic media, the war in Beirut and the subsequent framing of perception in the short story "The American Malady," which shocks the reader in the tradition of Guy de Maupassant. Gender and gay critics will applaud the quietly sensitive "First Passion," which gently recaptures an innocent love experienced before one has the vocabulary for it. Always an experimenter, Adnan's second part of this collection contains four concise short stories set in the Arab world; each can be read either as a realistic glimpse into the underbelly or a symbolic exploration of real political problems. These 12 diverse stories should appeal to both the erudite reader and the one who simply wants the pleasure of a good story.**AJ**

Etel Adnan

# Contemporary Iraqi Fiction

*Continued from page 35*

Another writer, Mahmoud Saeed, experienced firsthand Iraqi prisons and has been residing in Chicago since 1999 as a political refugee. In "Bitter Morning," Saeed talks of realities in Iraq, of the economic embargo, but chooses to open his story with the laughter of a baby in a crib.

It is noteworthy that this anthology often highlights several selections by each author, usually chosen to show variations in themes in the work of even one writer. While it features many well-known writers, it also pays a significant amount of attention to younger, less-known writers.**AJ**

# Mediterranean Crossings

*Continued from page 33*

"Mediterranean Crossings" finds its great strength in such poignant observations, which drive home Chambers' urgent appeal to scholars to widen their lenses and seek out what has been persistently overlooked, ignored and denied.

Chambers says the answer is not simply to overturn prevalent views and a Northern framing of the world, but to "follow signs, suggestions, sounds, smells and silences that propose a complex, open-ended narration of historical time and its cultural composition." In this case, the result is an important new work well worth a read.**AJ**

# Differences: Avoiding Misconceptions About Islam

BY ROBERT LIVERMORE

In "Imams and Emirs," the late Lebanese social anthropologist Fuad I. Khuri addresses the often-tense relationship between Islamic sects and Islamic states, which is a topic of no small importance to the contemporary world. Khuri focuses on how geographic, ethnic and historical factors combine to affect differently, in different locations, the relations between state authority and religious or spiritual authority. True to title, the former is depicted as an emir, while the latter is portrayed as an imam. Of course, Islam is not a monolithic religion and almost half of the book is devoted to Khuri's detailed exploration (one of the pleasures of the work is the visible depth of his scholarship) of the differences between Sunni Islam and various other religious sects and minorities, including the Maronite Christians, the Orthodox Christians and the Jews.

**Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam**
By Fuad I. Khuri
Saqi Books, 2006, 270 pp.

The author distinguishes "between religion and sect on the basis of the centrality of religion as *din* and its adaptation to state structures, as opposed to the peripherality of sects and their attachment to the doctrine of the sovereignty of the community." Khuri glosses the crucial word "*din*" as religion, which is common scholarly practice, although the Arabic word has a broader range of meaning that can include submission, and punishment or sanctions. He also describes the differing responses to Islamic sects and religious minorities that reside in Islamic countries, such as Christians and Jews.

Mirror case painted in lacquer on both faces and on the interior, circa 1840, from "Islamic Art" (Nicola Sursock Museum, 1974)

His broad point is the fundamental difference between the Sunnis and the other sects in terms of their attitude toward the state: "The theme is that whereas the Sunni focus is on the sovereignty of divine law and the centrality of the state, sects focus on the sovereignty of the religious community." The sect's focus is a function of, among other things, the legacy and the location of the specific sect. Khuri goes on to consider in depth the historical, geographic and religious contexts of various sects, such as the Druze, the Awayis, the Yazidis, and even the Maronites, who share certain characteristics with the first three. Differences between Sunni and Shiite views of Islam and Islamic law affect their notions of authority and state sovereignty, and, in turn, those conceptual differences influence and sometimes determine both individual and collective interactions with state and religious authority.

The religious practices of Sunni Islam, Khuri argues, are expressed through the operations and interactions of a formal state that is ruled by an emir. Shiite religious practices, on the other hand, are often hostile to formal state structures, especially when the state is ruled by an imam who belongs to an alternate or less prominent Shiite sect. Sunni and Shiite versions of Islam differ markedly in their view of what Khuri calls "The Centrality of Religion," expressed by the Sunnis through their "control of the state, the city and the estate." Conversely, in Shiite practice "the moral internal deterrent" exists and works "as an instrument of control only in small-scale homogeneous communities – families, clans, tribes and neighbors – and not in ethnically complex structures. In complex societies, the 'sultanic' deterrent prevails."

Much of this is fascinating from an anthropological point of view. In a section titled "The Peripherality of the Sects," Khuri uses tables and maps of data relating to the geographic distributions of Shiite sects throughout the Muslim world to show that "peripherality [i.e., geographical marginality – dispersion or distance] combined with a strong sense of territorial

exclusiveness work together to magnify the sects' image of themselves as unique, special, divine creatures." Moreover, he argues that religious minorities, e.g., Jews or Christians residing in Sunni Islamic states, "adopt and adapt to the ideology of government," while the Shiite sects and the Maronites reject it.

In a chapter of particular interest, given current conditions in Iran, Khuri describes the political processes and religious attitudes of the Shiite-ruled state. He argues that the political fragility and social unrest of modern Iran vividly illustrate two contrasting attitudes that are implicit in Shiism. One is rebelliousness against any form of secular or sultanic rule, even if those in charge are Shiites. The other is a piety that sees Allah as a critic of any political arrangement, but which also feigns indifference to such when opportunities to affect or change that arrangement do not exist. However, should opportunity becken, the truly pious are emboldened to rebel, which leads to periods of social unrest and political rebellion. Certain state practices and recent events in Iran reflect this political schizophrenia.

This combined with the non-incorporative characteristics of Shiites – they allow virtually no room for the adaptive practices of minorities and other Muslim sects – contrasts with the relative political tolerance of Sunni-run states.

The intolerance of a Shiite ruling elite and the belief that Allah is always critically looking on are major sources of domestic disorder and disputes with foreign countries.

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# Embracing Inbetweenness

**BY MICHAEL NAJJAR**

Arab Americans have always occupied an interstitial space within U.S. racial classification, often ruled as "honorary whites"

**Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora**
By Sarah M. A. Gualtieri
University of California Press, 2009, 296 pp.

or "not quite white." This liminality is at the heart of Sarah M. A. Gualtieri's book, "Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora." Gualtieri posits that "questions about race were central to the construction of Syrian ethnicity in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century."

Chronicling the period from the late 1880s to the end of World War II, Gualtieri studies the "tensions in the history of Syrian experiences of race" and the ways in which Syrian immigrants vigorously battled for their "white" status in U.S. courts. As her comprehensive study shows, this status was granted more often to Christians than Muslims, yet another example of the confusions regarding race and religion. Gualtieri researches diaries, newspapers, oral histories, letters and travel accounts as an "excavation of the principal sites of Syrian ethnicization" during the first wave of Arab immigration to the United States.

Rather than rely on a traditional enumeration of historical facts, the author reexamines previously held notions regarding concepts such as Phoenicianism, which she regards as "an important ideological tool in the construction of a specifically 'Lebanese' (as opposed to Syrian) nationality." Her analysis of the period correctly concludes that Syrian emigration was due primarily to the changing economic conditions in Syria at the time, and not to escape from the Ottoman regime or 1860 civil war. Nor was it an expression of a migratory trait handed down by the ancient Phoenicians. She also addresses the thorny issues of gender, sexuality and marriage practices of the period;

From "Between Arab and White"

demonstrating how these were intricately tied to the incorporation of Syria into a capitalist economy, thus causing profound changes in the sexual division of labor.

The most harrowing chapter recounts the 1929 lynching of Syrian-American grocer Niqula Rumi following the police killing of his wife, Famia, in Lake City, Florida. This tragedy is one of the most appalling, and least-chronicled, incidents in Arab-American history. Gualtieri's reconstruction of the events,

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# Telematic Installation Mirrors Postmodern Warfare

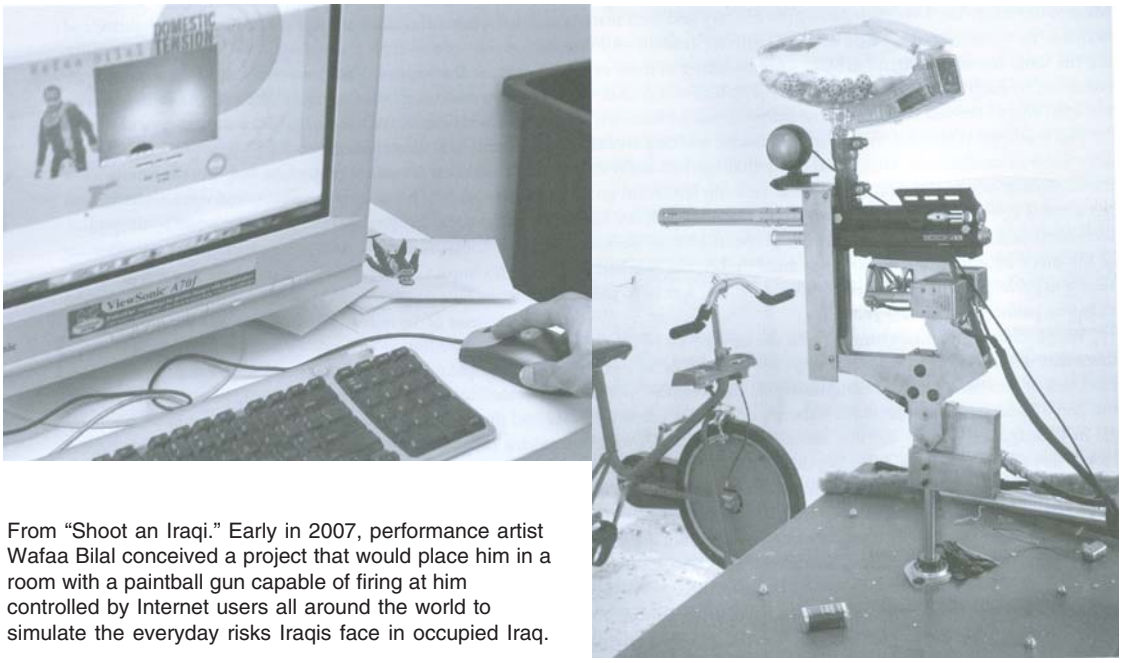
**BY BOBBY S. GULSHAN**

It has been observed that art does not, in fact, imitate life. Art can only, and at best, hold up an imperfect mirror to life, one which exaggerates certain elements while neglecting others. Perfect imitation is never possible.

**Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life, and Resistance Under the Gun**
By Wafaa Bilal and Kari Lydersen
City Lights, 2008, 177 pp.

Wafaa Bilal's "Domestic Tension" interactive art installation went far in smoothing out the wrinkles in the imperfect mirror of art. His experiences creating, implementing and living in his installation are chronicled in the book "Shoot an Iraqi." The book gathers Bilal's reflections on the "Domestic Tension" experience, as well as recounting his own life growing up in Iraq.

"Domestic Tension" relied upon numerous cultural inputs for its execution. The basic premise was to create a space in which Bilal would be under constant threat from being literally shot at. A paintball gun was rigged to a robotic armature, and this gun was controlled and fired by someone logging on to a website, and targeting Bilal while he worked, ate and slept in a gallery space dedicated to the installation. By making the firing mechanism available through a web-based interface, Bilal exposed the voyeuristic and disembodied aspects of postmodern warfare.




From "Shoot an Iraqi." Early in 2007, performance artist Wafaa Bilal conceived a project that would place him in a room with a paintball gun capable of firing at him controlled by Internet users all around the world to simulate the everyday risks Iraqis face in occupied Iraq.

Contemporary warfare has entered the realm of the virtual, where presence is telematic, and death is delivered from a distance. The parallel created is that between online gaming and computer-based warfare, where unmanned drones and cruise missiles are guided by a computer operator hundreds of miles from the eventual destination of destruction.

Bilal also set up a chat room where the participants could talk to one another and himself. The chat room revealed that depersonalized violence can often expose, or even generate, violent attitudes, as numerous participants spewed forth venomous comments such as "shoot the rag head" and "kill him." In some sense, "Domestic Tension" shows us how when we don't have to actually confront a living person, it becomes easier to hate them, easier to want to shoot and kill them.

The book collects diary-like entries that recall the challenges, technical issues and personal recollections of the artist. We find out that a hacker managed to infiltrate the program and found a way to override the firing mechanism and turn the paintball gun into a fully automatic weapon. More poignantly, Bilal reflects upon the stress and fear of living under constant threat. However, like many people who live under the unrelenting strain of fear, eventually even Bilal grows numb. On day 20 he recalls, "I've realized I have lost fear of the gun... This is a dangerous development, because when you get cavalier and careless you get hurt." The artist becomes a gateway into the personal, the intimate experience of someone in war (or warlike conditions simulated through artifice). And this is perhaps where both the installation and the companion book achieve their greatest success. Bilal effectively challenges us to go past the computer screen, go beyond the telematic presence of virtual battlefields and television news graphics, and to delve into the hearts and minds of the besieged. Thus, he includes not just a diary of his days under the paintball gun, but also reveals intimate stories about life growing up in Iraq. Bilal's portraits of family life in a country under constant siege expose strain, fear, heartbreak, dislocation and even occasionally black humor. The reader is confronted with an honest and sparse tale of ordinary Iraqi's suffering in the crossfire.

Hope prevails in Wafaa Bilal's story. He escapes the wars, the refugee camps, and eventually comes to Chicago to pursue the artistic visions that provided him solace during American bombing campaigns. And even in the occasionally vicious violence of the "Domestic Tension" chat room, others logged on and found ways to support and protect Bilal during the installation. Both the artwork and its accompanying diary shows us the potential of personal narrative to transmit feelings that are universal to humanity.

# Between Arab and White

*Continued from page 39*

and the aftermath that haunts their descendants to this day, is disturbing proof that racism, extralegal violence and white supremacy have been a part of the Arab-American experience from the beginning. Gualtieri reasons that "understanding the link between the racialization of Syrians and blacks helps explain why a common pattern among Syrians was to reaffirm and invest in whiteness."

The epilogue, "Becoming Arab American," examines post-World War II Arab-American history and how issues surrounding Palestinian rights led to the creation of multiple activist groups that affiliated themselves with Arabic-speaking peoples across lines of nationality. Gualtieri credits Arab-American coalition building, feminism and the ongoing struggle for representation within the U.S. Census as elements of Arab-American collective subjectivity. Ultimately, she concludes, Arab Americans have decided to "embrace their inbetweenness rather than to resist it." Gualtieri's painstaking research and expansive purview make this one of the most important additions to the Arab-American studies canon to date.***AJ***

From "Between Arab and White"

# Love Letters Unite East and West

BY REBECCA JOUBIN

"Epistole: A Love Story in Letters" recounts the story of Fatima and John, whose college relationship was abruptly severed when John left Lebanon and immigrated to America. Although each married, had children and went their separate ways, they remained in contact and their love stayed alive through a series of letters, later found and published by Fatima's son Tariq, who learned upon their death that John was his father.

**Epistole: A Love Story in Letters**
By Hanna Saadah
Almualif Publishing, LLC, 2007, 360 pp.

Neither John nor Fatima are able to find another true love, yet the impossibility of their love becomes clearer as time goes on. Indeed, the lovers' turmoil in their letters mirrors the turmoil in the world around them. While Fatima chooses to stay in Lebanon and resists adding to her homeland's brain drain, John finds it impossible to return to his birthplace and uplift his people. John remembers nostalgically what his grandmother had said before he left for America: "America takes our best youth and leaves us with the rejects," yet when his mother asks him to return he responds: "Why should I sacrifice my joy for the sake of a utopian dream that is already a nightmare?"

Author Hanna Saadah

Nevertheless, Fatima holds on to the hope that he will return to Lebanon and writes to him: "You don't have to believe in my fairy tales; however, you must realize that even though you are East-born and even though you have chosen to become a West-grown man of science, it only takes one believer for things to happen."

While Fatima lingers on the hope that she will be reunited with John, he relegates her to a dream, like Lebanon, that he can never return to. The sense of frustration in the impossibility of their union increases as the letters move through time. During the span of years that the tormented lovers write to each other, there is marked instability in the region, such as the Lebanese civil war, the Qana massacre, the Gulf War, and the fall of Baghdad.

The sense of frustration in the impossibility of their union increases as the letters move through time.

The distance that separates them and makes their love impossible is reflected by a larger lack of human understanding and compassion in the world surrounding them. While the impossibility of their love becomes increasingly evident as time goes on and they lay bare their souls to each other, Saadah's novel ends with a message of hope, tolerance and understanding as East and West find natural and unexpected harmony among the characters. What seems like tragedy transforms into redemption and glorious love.**AJ**

# Imams and Emirs

*Continued from page 39*

In his conclusion, Khuri asks: "What does it mean in the course of the evolution of state and religion and the dialectic relationship between them, to have one group adapt to state authority and others to the sovereign community?" The question contains a cautionary note that is directed toward Western decision-makers, who must devise policies toward Islamic nations. He warns against two errors: "monolithism," the practice of treating Muslims as if they were "an undifferentiated lot," and "fundamentalism," the idea that all of the various social and cultural movements linked to Islam are by definition fundamentalist. I can imagine no more effective way of avoiding such misconceptions about Islam than by carefully reading this book.**AJ**

# Encyclopedia of Arab-American Artists From Cityscape to Calligraphy

**BY D. W. AOSSEY**

The arts and culture have deep roots in the Arab psyche, and the craftwork and ideas that Arab Americans bring to the fine arts combine to form a rich mosaic. A new book titled "Encyclopedia of Arab American Artists: Artists of the American Mosaic" by Fayeq Oweis does an excellent job of showcasing the contributions and promise of about 100 Arab-American artists, presenting their work in their words and telling their varied and interesting stories. With an emphasis on the visual arts, the talented individuals profiled in this collection of short biographies work in a wide array of media from watercolor and oils, to sculpture, mixed media, installations and even collective murals. Their individual visions are brought to the forefront in abstract terms as well as overt symbolism, and their various approaches to the visual arts ultimately achieve a cohesive whole.

"Planting Olive Trees" by Helen Zughaib, 2004, from "Encyclopedia of Arab American Artists: Artists of the American Mosaic."

Thematically, patterns emerge as the artists' stories unfold. Struggle and dispossession as both mindset and way of life naturally play key roles; struggle against oppression and corruption, against foreign occupation, against despair and hopelessness. War and peace, the Palestinian Diaspora and the chaos and bloodshed that have so decimated parts of the Arab world and the Arab nation often serve as points of departure.

**Encyclopedia of Arab American Artists:** ***Artists of the American Mosaic***
By Fayeq Oweis
Greenwood Press, 2008, 336 pp.

In "Strange Fruit," Moroccan-born multimedia and conceptual artist Abdelali Dahrouche leads the observer across a gallery floor strewn with mock cluster bombs to view a painting of an olive tree. In "Nothing personal, just economic interest" or "We are not the last," the surrealism of Lebanese American Chawky Frenn awakens our basic hopes and fears. In this disturbing painting we find a woman casually holding her young son in her arms as they face an apocalypse. On side panels, meanwhile, gutted sheep hang from a butcher's hook.

Traditional art plays an important role in the Arab world and many Arab-American artists have adapted these cherished and popular forms. Calligraphy and the written word, cornerstones of Arab artistic and cultural expression, transform themselves in the art of Arab Americans. In Hashim Al Tawil's oil and mixed media "Monument for Iraq", a strange combination of the ancient and the modern come together in a textural, almost cuneiform Arabic script. "Calligraphy Door" by Nahda Alsalah Balaa imposes a passage from the Qur'an over a rustic wooden door, slightly ajar, representing an open door to knowledge.

In the racially-obsessed West, our unique identity as Americans of Arab heritage often defines our artistic outlook. Adnan Charara's "I am Arab American" features a busy assemblage of scattered faces that work to form an American cityscape. Miro-like in its simplicity, the work projects an abstract element that effectively captures the racial "otherness" of the Arab-American experience.

"Encyclopedia of Arab American Artists" also brings together a curious mix of the generations, lending insight into the many ways things are seen. Nostalgia plays a role in the multi-media art of Joyce Dallal, for example, expressing a

longing for a more stable past, while a quest for justice in a nebulous future underlies the work of Rheim Alkadhi. As well, it is interesting to notice the symbolism between the generations with marked differences; for example, in the esoteric lines of Zahi Khamis and Sari Ibrahim Khoury relative to the bold, in-your-face concept art of Emily Jacir and the photography of Aisha Mershani.

"Untitled" by Mohammed Al-Sadoun, 2005, from "Encyclopedia of Arab American Artists: Artists of the American Mosaic."

There is much to appreciate about the artists profiled in this excellent volume as each has a compelling story and deep dedication to the arts. As a journey through the pages of "Encyclopedia of Arab American Artists" makes clear, the significant talent and contributions brought to the visual arts by Arab Americans is impossible to ignore and a certain collective presence exists with all of those included in this rich text. Indeed, rather than being just a compilation of names and biographies, this work demonstrates that Arab-American art as a whole is more than just individual expression, it is the projection of a collective destiny.

# Helen Karam: Artistic Quest

*Continued from page 16*

is essential to the fabric of Lebanese society. But the problem is that we work with such little support. Some artists are forced to play the game to survive and cater to the *nouveau riche* curators and buyers. Others go underground in order to keep their freedom.

**How have you managed to survive and remain true to your art all these years?**

I make no compromises at any price. I teach art at the American University in Beirut, and thus I make a good enough income to survive. This gives me freedom in my art, since I create from my heart and true belief in human rights. I refuse to be forced to think about what will sell; I will not allow anyone to own me. For true art is not about possession. The artist needs freedom to create. **AJ**

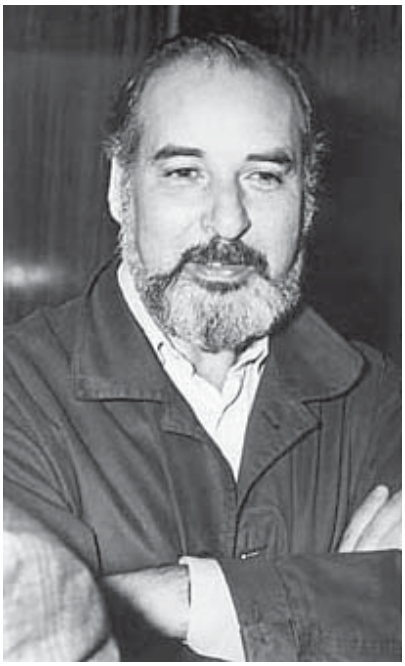
# Dreaming in Morocco

**BY PAMELA NICE**

From the first words of "Leaving Tangier" to the last, Tahar Ben Jelloun's characters are dreaming of leaving Morocco. Is it the siren call of Toutia, the sea maiden, who lures men to "burn" the short distance to Spain? Or that universal human need to "sail the sea as long as the tiniest light still flickers in the soul ... to follow the ultimate flame" to find beauty in the world? In between these questions lies a novel about the cold, hard realities of Moroccan life as they struggle with these dreams.

**Leaving Tangier**
By Tahar Ben Jelloun
Translated by Linda Coverdale
Penguin Books, 2009, 275 pp.

Ben Jelloun shows how poverty, corruption and the lack of employment fuel dreams of leaving Tangier. But the life of a Moroccan immigrant in Spain – even one who enters legally – is its own nightmare: "... a kind of descent into a void, a tunnel of shadows that warped reality." The novel is structured so that each chapter focuses on a specific character in his journey to or from Morocco. These dreamers are skillfully played off each other as their experiences converge and separate.


Tahar Ben Jelloun

The main characters are Azel and Kenza, a brother and sister who both escape to Spain under the patronage of Miguel, a Spanish art dealer. Azel, though heterosexual, becomes the homosexual Miguel's valet and lover; Kenza, through a "white marriage" to Miguel, finds a new life separate from him. Ben Jelloun charts their divergent paths, beginning with their reasons for wanting to leave Morocco, which reveal differing gendered experiences.

Azel is a law graduate who can't find work in Morocco and ends up hanging out in bars, drugged with *kif*, and frequenting prostitutes. An arrest leads to a gruesome act of sodomy by the local police. This is, ironically, the catalyzing incident that leads Azel to prefer life as Miguel's lover in Spain to any life in Morocco. We follow Azel as he slowly deteriorates in Spain, becomes impotent even with his girlfriend, and finally has his throat cut for spying on Islamists there: "The Brothers had slaughtered him like a lamb sacrificed for Aid el-Kebir."

Azel's destructive path is contrasted to that of Kenza, whose dream of leaving comes from "a burning wound inside her . . . the wound of waiting, ennui, and a future whose mirror had shattered." In Spain, under the benign protection of Miguel, she lives separately, finds work, and finally, love. Though the affair ends badly and she attempts suicide, she does manage to survive. Her story is one of personal strength and growing self-knowledge, even in desperate circumstances. She finally realizes there is no future for her in Spain and decides to return to Morocco.

Into these two main stories, Ben Jelloun interweaves three liminal characters who live on the edge of dreams. Malika is a delicate teen-aged girl who catches pneumonia working in a shrimp factory in Tangier – evidently an occupational hazard. She befriends Azel before he leaves, and we visit her periodically throughout the novel. Her dreams of escaping her life in Morocco become indistinguishable from the delirium of her advancing disease. She dies imagining herself entering a boat to cross the strait. "It is in eternal silence that she quits the country. She has finally left. Forever."

Another character challenging reality in the novel is Flaubert, a Cameroonian who has emigrated to Europe and is only on a visit to Spain. He is an upbeat character who, unlike Azel, loves his homeland and dreams of returning. In the last, fantastical chapter of the novel, Flaubert imagines himself a fictional character looking for a novel he'd like to be in – a fitting metaphor for any of the characters.

Moha is a totally fictional character, a North African wise fool, who ends the novel as the last to board the dream vessel returning to Morocco. Who is Moha here? "He's the immigrant without a name!" As he said in an earlier appearance in the novel, "I, too, am on fire. I burn like this [news]paper that does not tell the truth, that says all is well, that the government is doing everything it can to give work to our young people, and that those who burn up the straits have succumbed to wild despair."

Ben Jelloun is a controversial writer in Morocco, since he emigrated to France in 1961 and writes in French. Some Moroccan critics accuse him of being anti-Moroccan because of his depictions of the seedier sides of Moroccan life and negative portrayals of Muslim characters. This novel is no doubt more of the same to such critics. The focus on the sexual behavior of the characters may also inflame them. But the last chapter, a dream of returning to Morocco, full of fantastical elements, seems to reveal an underlying homesickness, a reverie opposite to that of the title. Is Ben Jelloun saying that a Moroccan never leaves Morocco; always dreams of return? Unfortunately, for the author it is only in fantasy that Morocco becomes the desired destiny.***AJ***

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# Contributors

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**Sami Asmar** ("Mansour Rahbani, Legacy of a Family and a Generation," p. 10; "Issa Boulos Brings Al-Hallaj Back to Life," p. 19) is a California-based writer, space physicist, and musician.

**Mohammad Ali Atassi** ("Taking on Sexual Harassment in Egypt," p. 8) is a Syrian author and critic. His articles and reviews appear regularly in An Nahar Literary Supplement.

**Elie Chalala** ("A New Life for Arab Rationalism?" p. 2; "The Issue of 'Dialogue' in Islamic Culture," p. 4; "A Prize to Celebrate: Abdellatif Laabi Wins 2009 Goncourt Literary Prize for Poetry" p. 52 ) is an editor of this magazine.

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**Rebecca Joubin** ("Helen Karam," p. 14; "Walid Agha Searches for the Spirit of the Letters," p. 17; "Growing Accustomed to Beirut's Scars," p. 21; "To The Heart of Islam: A Convert's Journey," p. 23; "Translation and Cultural Imperialism," p. 32; "Writers Keeping Pace with Troubling Realities," p. 35; "Love Letters Unite East and West," p. 42) Rebecca Joubin is assistant professor of Arabic at Davidson College.

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**Pamela Nice** ("Dreaming in Morocco," p. 45) is a documentary filmmaker, theater director, and teacher of Arab film and literature.

**Lynne Rogers** ("Documentaries Reveal Complicated Interactions Between Israelis and Palestinians," p. 20; "Guns and Ghosts in the House," p. 22; "Two Documentaries about Egypt and Syria," p. 24; "Women as Cultural Carriers, Victims and Innovators," p. 34; "Twelve Tales of Trial and Tribulation," p. 37) is a professor and author of many articles on the Palestine question which have appeared in professional journals and books.

**Sarah A. Rogers** ("Creating the Nationally Imagined Community," p. 25) is an art historian who specializes in modern and contemporary art of the Arab world. She is currently a Terra Foundation Post-doctoral fellow at the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, where she is researching American artists who worked in Beirut during the Cold War.

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**Andrea Shalal-Esa** ("The Politics of Getting Published," p. 6; "Rethinking the Mediterranean," p. 32) is a Washington-based journalist with a great interest in Arab-American literature.

**Michael Teague** ("Mockery as Resistance," p. 11; "Maronite Family Life in Early 20th Century Lebanon, and Journey into America," p. 26) is a Los Angeles-based writer and graduate of French Literature from the University of California, Irvine.

**Pauline Homsi Vinson** ("Young, Female - And Arab American," p. 29) is an adjunct assistant professor. Her publications include articles on Arab women writers and translations from Arabic to English.

**Zareh** (Illustration of Alfred Farag, p. 33) is a Los Angeles-based artist. His artworks and graphic illustrations have appeared in many publications, including Al Jadid.

## Walid Agha: Spirit of the Letters

*Continued from page 17*

During February 2009 I have a joint exhibition with three other Syrian artists in Berlin, Germany. In September 2009 there is a conference on Arab poetry in Cuba, which will be honoring the late poet Mahmoud Darwish. I will be presenting paintings on the poetry of Nizar Kabbani. ***AJ***

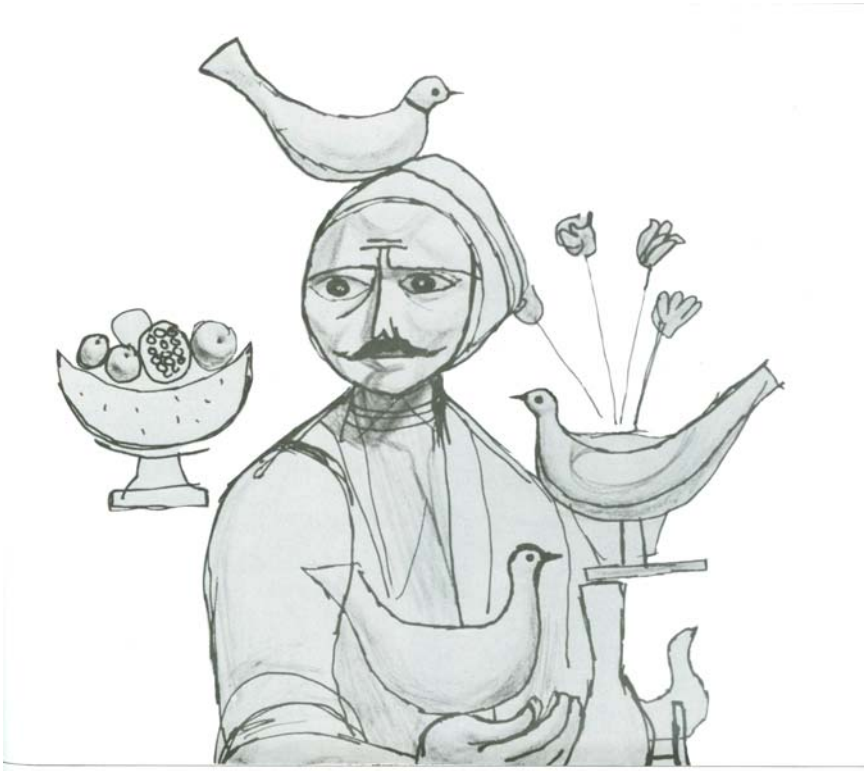
# Abdellatif Laabi

*Continued from back cover*

him the prize in 1987. Another recipient of the poetry prize was the French-Lebanese-Egyptian Andre Chedid, who won it in 2002.

I

Laabi's journalistic career has made a lasting political impact on many readers and intellectuals. The avant-garde literary journal *Anfas/Souffles,* which he founded with other Moroccan poets in 1966, was originally envisaged as a meeting place for poets, but quickly embraced a broad variety of Moroccan creative talent, including painters, filmmakers, playwrights, scholars and philosophers. This experiment reached other cultures of the Maghreb, sparking a literary renaissance in North Africa. Sadly, and all too typically, the revival was cut short when the journal was banned in 1972.



"Bird Seller" by Jawad Selim

In an interview with Kristin Prevallet in 2001, Laabi discussed in detail the magazine's experience: "We were 23 years old when we started [*Anfas/Souffles*]. There was Mohammed Khair-Eddine, a major poet and novelist who died a few years ago in total poverty. There was Mostafa Nissaboury, who lives in Casablanca and continues to write and publish. And then there are all those who came later. Many writers – from Morocco, Algeria … It was not just Arabs who participated in the project; there were Africans, several French writers, a German writer… The fact remains that this was a magazine that allowed an avant-garde movement to be born, to express itself, and therefore to help the literature that was coming out of Arab countries move forward." Anfas/Souffles led to the founding of Forward in 1970, which, according to Uthman Tazghart of the Beirut-based newspaper Al Khbar, was considered to be the most avant-garde organization in the history of leftist opposition in the Maghreb.

The Morocco of today is very different from the one ruled by King Hassan II. It was under his watch that *Anfas/Souffles* magazine was stifled on the grounds that it posed a danger to public security. In 1972 Laabi and Abraham Serfaty received "dawn visitors," a nickname for security officers. Laabi was sentenced to 10 years in Kenitra prison on charges of conspiring to overthrow the regime. Serfaty began engaging in clandestine activity, only to be arrested two years later. His 17-year jail term (1974-1991) earned him the nickname "sheikh of political prisoners," according to Uthman Tazghart of Al Khbar. In contrast with the tactics of his predecessor, the current monarch, King Mohammed VI, has appointed poet and novelist Bensalem Himmich as minister of culture.

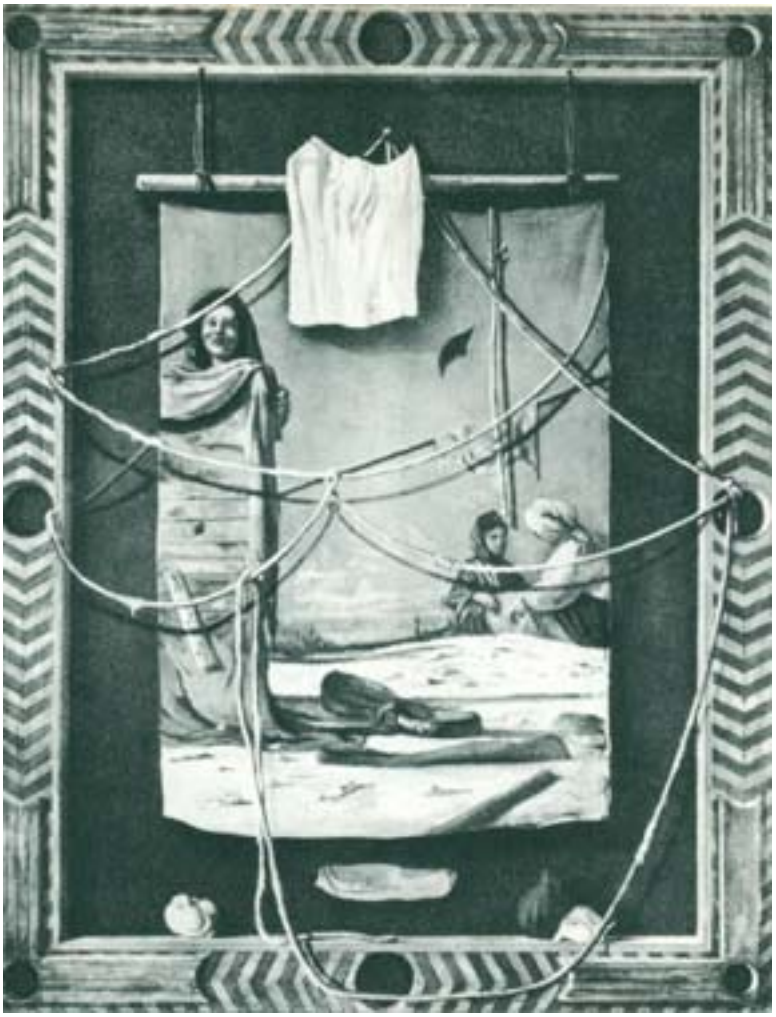
Abdellatif Laabi has never in his work separated the realms of politics from those of culture and literature. His texts, according to Abd al-Raahim al-Khusaar of the Beirut-based newspaper An Nahar, are born of personal experience, which started with leftist dreams that were refined in the dark cells of Moroccan prisons.

In an interview with Kristin Prevallet, Laabi said, "I am someone who fought, politically and intellectually, against dictatorship in Morocco. I do not separate the work of the intellectual – the production of ideas and symbolic value – from the work of being a citizen." He adds, "For me, poetry is too closely connected to life and what it stands for. What is life if not dignity, liberty, the ability to express oneself freely?"For his refusal to distinguish between the two, he was repaid with eight years in a Moroccan prison cell.

While he was in jail, Laabi's cause was adopted by various groups that defend prisoners of conscience, including Amnesty International. He was also awarded the Prix de la Liberté by the PEN organization, and the Prix International de Poésie by the Fondation des Arts in Rotterdam. Although the broad campaign of international solidarity led to his early release from prison, Laabi continued to be seen as a threat by the Moroccan state, which forced him into exile in France.

What does it take to shake one's faith? Apparently Laabi's imprisonment, torture and humiliation did not affect "the spirit of the poet's vibrancy, or his rebellious temperament." He remained "a voice calling for rights and freedoms in his country, demanding democracy, social justice, voicing criticisms of extremism, advocating the rights of women, gays, and repressed minorities – not to forget his relentless solidarity with the Palestinian people," wrote Uthman Tazghart in Al Akhbar.

The likes of Laabi are not very numerous on the Arab cultural scene nowadays. Many of the intellectuals who championed progressive causes and made critical thinking a vital part of contemporary Arab discourse are either dead, have been crushed by the state, or co-opted by Gulf money, which has an iron grip on the world of information throughout the region. Today's Arab intellectuals are left with essentially two choices: either work for Gulf capital, with its attendant political and moral implications, or work for state apparatuses, with similar results. In either case, they become no more than professional propagandists. And of course, this is only if they are fortunate enough to have a place in either private Gulf enterprises or state bureaucracies. While some might dismiss Laabi's unjust imprisonment as a relic of a dark Middle Eastern political past, Syrian writer Michel Kilo, who was sentenced to three years in jail, and recently released upon completing his sentence – all for daring to sign a petition mildly critical of the Damascus regime – would undoubtedly be of the opinion that state repression and censorship are alive and well in the Arab world.



"*Panneau Pour une Decoration Murale*" (Pannel for a Mural Decoration) by Eugene Berman, 1936, from "*La Peinture Dans Le Monde,*" 1928

II

The issue of language in Laabi's writing is complex and multidimensional. He has steadfastly rejected the term "Francophone," which is commonly attached to non-native writers of French. For him, "Francophone" is a loaded term with political implications. "I don't really like the term 'Francophone.' Aside from the fact that it's politically charged, the term is reductive. It's a means of confining very diverse literary experiences – each of which are distinct – into a singular issue of language," he told Kristin Prevallet in a 2001 interview conducted for the web magazine Double Change.

Laabi's rejection of the Francophone label is a means of decolonizing the "Moroccan mind," as he put it; decolonizing the economy and government is not enough. Writing in French, like any native French writer, is his means of doing so. Distinguishing non-native writers from native ones is a colonial legacy, meaning that even when non-natives excel they are merely considered "good pupils." As Laabi put it, "We are not 'pupils' and we want be finished with colonial history."

While he makes no apologies, he offers common-sense explanations. Writing in French was not a choice; it was the only language he knew. He is comfortable with French and he writes in it because, as he told Kristin Prevallet, he did not grow up in an independent and free country where he learned the language of his own people. But the relationship with French is not quite that simple: **"**What happened after that is a very long story – one of love, of hate, of rejection – concerning the French language. Now I am at peace with it. The colonial experience was what it was; it was tragic, but some things were brought in as well. I do not hold any grudges and am no longer enslaved, but I am a product of this history. I have only lived in France for 15 years; all that I have written in the past and continue to write today is in touch with the reality of Morocco and the Third World – and I write in French. I am very comfortable with French, but I would not say that one language is superior to another..."

Though he does not write in Arabic, Arabic remains very alive and awake in him. "My birth-language is Arabic, my

writing language is French. Perhaps what makes what I write unique is that the two cultures are intertwined. Even when I am writing in French, my Arabic language is there. There is a musicality to Arabic, and these words enter into my French texts. I think that people are not seeing the originality of this phenomenon, which is currently happening worldwide," he told Kristin Prevallet. Mahmoud Abd al-Ghani of Al Akhbar newspaper echoed this point, saying, "Laabi is a poet in French, but his mother tongue constantly resides in him, whether or not he is conscious of it."

Although Laabi's writings violate mainstream French literary conventions by championing the avant-guarde and rebelling against "established standards," the French appear to have accepted him as one of their own and have honored him with some of their most prestigious awards. Laabi remains preoccupied with his artistic identity, which is subject to constant change. According to Mahmoud Abd al-Ghani, Laabi writes poetry when his sentiments cannot be expressed in novel form, and he writes theater when narration becomes too confining. His translations of Arab literature into French reveal a lot about his ties to and love of the Arab world and letters. He has translated works by Mahmoud Darwish, Mohammed al-Maghout, Hanna Minah, Abd al-Wahab al-Bayati, Samih al-Qassem. In responding to the Goncourt decision, Laabi mentioned the possibility of publishing his complete works in Arabic at a Syrian publishing house.

III

Awarding Laabi the Goncourt Prize is as much an occasion for indignation over his treatment by the Moroccan government as it is one for celebration. When fellow Moroccan poet Abd al-Raheem al-Khasaar was asked by Al Hayat newspaper to comment, his answer was: "Laabi is one of the poets whom I spend the night reading with love; nowadays, there are few poets whom we stay up late reading, and Laabi is among these few." Al-Khasaar regretted that Laabi's work had not received similar recognition from the Moroccan government, since, in addition to his progressive political past, Laabi does not write in Arabic. Al-Khasaar continues: "This man, who started reading Dostoevsky at the age of 14, and continued writing for 53 years, enriching world literature with more than 30 books, most of which are poetry, and who is now 67 years old, was not honored in his country. Instead of his country offering him a single prize, it granted him eight years in jail and gave him the number 18611 as his prison identity number. I believe the prison years were also a prize."

Is Laabi a household name – a well-known Arab poet in the company of Mahmoud Darwish? The answer is "no," but not without explanation. "Despite his popularity, truthfulness and the fertility of his imagination, he is still exiled from our contemporary culture, unread and unrecognized. Thus, his influence on current Moroccan poetry is limited. There are two reasons. The first is circulation – it is difficult to have access to his poetry, either original or translated. The second is aesthetic, mainly due to the feeling among many that the era of commitment or engagement has gone. Laabi's appeal lies more in his charismatic personality than in his writings," said Abd al-Latif al-Warwari in Al Hayat newspaper.

IV

Laabi has had a rich career. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in literature in 1964 from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in Rabat, which was followed by a secondary school teaching career that lasted until he was arrested in 1972. After being released from jail in 1980, he left for France. In 1985, he earned a degree in advanced studies from the University of Bordeaux. He returned to Morocco in hopes of renewing his residency there, but soon went back to France, disillusioned. Despite this disillusionment, Laabi kept moving between France and Morocco as a "migratory bird," to use the words of Abd al-Rahim al Kussaar. Since 1988, Laabi has been a member of the Academe Mallarme.

Laabi has written a number of collections of poetry, novels and plays in French. It was during his imprisonment that Laabi's creativity fully matured. Among his works are "*L'Œil et la nuit*" (The Eye and the Night, 1969), "*Le Règne de barbarie"* (The Reign of Barbarism, 1976), "*Sous le baillon*" (Under the Gag,1981) and "*L'Écorché vif*" (The Tortured Soul, 1986). In these works, which he terms prosoèmes, Laabi strives for a refined, lucid and angry language free from the pseudo-mimetic function of prose. In "*L'Echorche vif,"* he fearlessly incorporates personal material, such as letters to Mario de Andrade and to his son. In "*Le Chemin des ordalies* "(The Path of Ordeals,1982), Laabi transforms his prison letters, later published as "*Chroniques de la citadelle d'exil"* (Chronicles from the Citadel of Exile, 1983) into a lucid prose-poem, fashioning one of the most memorable accounts of imprisonment ever written.

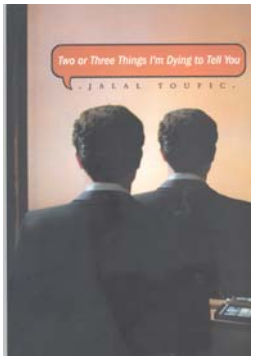
He is also the author of "*Autobiographie du voleur de feu"* (Autobiography of the Thief of Fire,1987). Other works include a theatrical piece titled "*Le Baptême chacaliste*" (The Jackal's Baptism, 1987), and the poetry sequences "*Discours sur la colline arabe*" (Discourses on the Arab Hill, 1985) and "*Histoire de sept crucifiés de l'espoir"* (History of the Seven Crucified by Hope,1980). In 1980, a collection of essays by distinguished authors and scholars regarding his work was published as "*Pour Laâbi."*

Other works include "*Le soleil se meurt*" (The Sun is Dying Out, 1992), "*Le Spleen de Casablanca"* (Casablanca Spleen, 1996) and "*Tribulations d'un rêveur attitré"* (The Tribulations of a Professional Dreamer, 2008). These works dwell on human emotion and are preoccupied with the defense and promotion of greater justice and freedom.

Laabi's views about the politics in the Arab world were best expressed in 1991, when he wrote in *Jeune Afrique*: "Everything which the Arab reality offers that is generous, open and creative is crushed by regimes whose only anxiety is to perpetuate their own power and self-serving interest." Nearly two decades later, some of Laabi's perceptions and uses of language have changed, but nowhere do we discern an optimistic or positive view of the political present or future, regardless of who is the minister of culture in Morocco. **AJ**

### Two or Three Things I'm Dying to Tell you

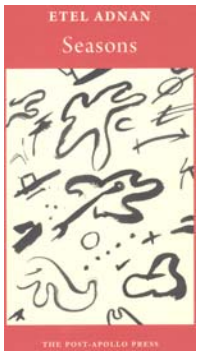
By Jalal Toufic
145 pages. $20
ISBN 0-942996-55-0




What was Orpheus dying to tell his wife, Eurydice? What was Judy dying to tell her beloved, Scottie, in Hitchcock's "Vertigo"? What were the previous one-night wives of King Shahrayâr dying to tell Shahrazâd? What was the Christian God "dying" to tell us? What were the faces of the candidates in the 2000 parliamentary election in Lebanon "dying" to tell voters and nonvoters alike? In his sixth volume Jalal Toufic goes on investigating his environment with his magnifying lenses."There is nothing else in literature like it," writes Publisher's Weekly. He is an "amazing writer" says Richard Foreman.

### Seasons

By Etel Adnan
2008, 77 pages $18
ISBN: 978-0-942996-66-1




"Seasons" is a series of prose poems concerning the seasons, but that's a starting point. It's in fact a meditative endeavor that encompasses the whole of "Being" in new, innovative ways. The boundaries are blurred between mind, body and matter throughout. The poet takes us (and herself) into nooks, crannies and abysses numberless as the sands. Surrender and revelation throughout.

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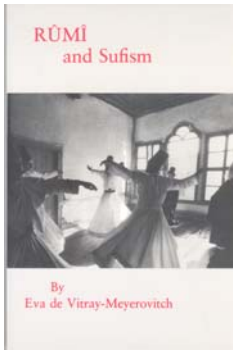
Illustrated with 45 photographs, charts, and maps; index and bibliography
1989 2nd edition, 167 pages. $12.95
ISBN: 0-942996-08-9

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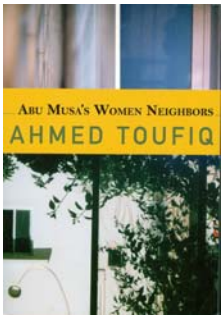
### Abu Musa's Women Neighbors

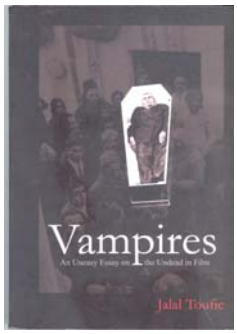
By Ahmed Toufiq
2006, 338 pages. $18
ISBN 0-942996-56-9




*"Abu Musa"* is a novel translated from the Arabic by Roger Allen and is an unforgettable book. Abu Musa is a Sufi saint whose Maqam can still be found in Salé, a suburb of Rabat, Morocco. Ahmed Toufiq has recreated the circumstances of his life. He tells his tale with love and care for the history and culture he depicts as well as a tender exploration of the human soul. Toufiq made it accessible to a modern and international audience. Already a motion picture in Morocco, the novel is to have a German edition soon.

### Vampires: An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film

By Jalal Toufic
With color and black and white photographs.
295 pages. $26
ISBN 0942996-50-X

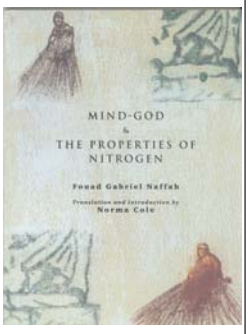



Jalal Toufic uses the meataphor of cinema and the character of the vampire in particular in order to read the historical period we are living in the Arab East right now. The vampire is the character that most renders the situation in Lebanon and the whole region, living "disaster surpassing disaster." Drawing on altered states of consciousness, films, psychiatric case studies and mystical reports, the author tackles many dubious yet certain characteristics of the undeath state, and analyzes the current Lebanese art and political scene through these lenses, and his encyclopedic mind joins it to the whole history of cinema. An absolute must for the readers and teachers of modern Arab cultural studies.

### Mind-God and The Properties of Nitrogen

By Fouad Gabriel Naffah
Translation and Introduction by Norma Cole; Pastels by Irving Peltin
2006, 96 pages. $24
ISBN 0-942996-53-4

Lebanese poet Fouad Gabriel Naffah's "Mind-God and The Properties of Nitrogen" charts the mind's progress through the material world to the realm of pure spirit. Crystalline and elusive, his poetry frustrates our tendency to consume form and meaning whole, without first appreciating the subtleties binding them more closely together. Fouad Gabriel Naffah is one of the great poets still unknown in the U.S. to be discovered at last thanks to the masterful translation of Norma Cole. Cole further distills the text, disintegrating and reintegrating its spirit into English. Beautifully illustrated by Irving Petling, who contributed five pastels for the cover and inserts.



*Editor's Notebook*

# A Prize to Celebrate: Abdellatif Laabi Wins 2009 Goncourt Literary Prize for Poetry

**BY ELIE CHALALA**

Literary prizes in the Arab world are hardly occasions for celebration. With the exception of the Sultan Bin al-Owais Award, a good number of literary awards have been greeted with cynicism and skepticism. Many of the prizes are tainted by Gulf or state money and sponsorship, as well as by scandals. Criticism has been directed towards the criteria for selecting candidates, the qualifications of the administrators of the prizes, and, importantly, the qualifications of the committee members, the qualifications of the administrators of the prizes, and even the qualifications of the judging committee members themselves. Too often, personal and political considerations trump all others, with prizes being handed out to those closest to the award juries and most supportive of state policies, rather than the most talented.

Abdellatif Laabi by Mamoun Sakkal for Al Jadid.

However, the awarding of the 2009 Goncourt Prize for Poetry to the Paris-based Moroccan Abdellatif Laabi is an encouraging exception, giving us real reason to cheer. Choosing Laabi is a hopeful sign since, in an era of Gulf money and Gulf-controlled media, it has been a rarity that a literary prize is awarded to an openly critical progressive like Laabi, who served eight years of a ten-year sentence in a Moroccan prison for nothing more than having shared his political and literary works with his own people.

Sixty-seven-year old Laabi is a poet, novelist, playwright, translator, teacher and journalist. In 2009 he received the Goncourt Prize for poetry for his "life achievements," according to the Goncourt Literary Prize statement. Press reports cite the publication of a collection of his works by La Defrance publishing house as a critical factor in his victory. The prize was to be awarded to him at a ceremony January 12, 2010. The Goncourt jury included fellow Moroccan Taher Ben Jelloun, Françoise Chandernagor, Patrick Rambaud, Michel Tournier, Edmonde Charles-Roux, Robert Sabatier, Jorge Semprun, Françoise Mallet-Joris, Bernard Pivot and Didier Decoin.

Responding to the Goncourt decision, Laabi issued the following statement: "This award is a kind gesture from the Goncourt Prize jury, and I receive it with satisfaction, and I take this opportunity to announce that there will be a new book in January titled 'An Unexpected Book.'" In the new book, Laabi aims to revisit some of the stages of his life and career as a writer.

Founded in 1985, the Goncourt Prize for Poetry is to be distinguished from the prize for the novel, which is more than 100 years old. And unlike the Goncourt for the novel, the poetry prize is not awarded on the merit of any particular piece, but rather for the recipient's entire body of work. Consequently, it is given only to well-established writers with an impressive publication record. Laabi is the second Moroccan to win a Goncourt Prize. (Laabi was also recipient of the Alain Bosquet Prize in 2006.) The first was Tahar Ben Jelloun, whose novel "*La nuit sacrée* (The Sacred Night) earned

*Continued on page 48*