Writing and Teaching Maternal Language in a Non-maternal Place

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First let me express my deep pleasure for being in Tbilisi. A big thank you to the ICLA and the local GCLA and to every one of the beautiful persons, efficient organizers who made this event a real success. A special thank you to Darejan Gardavadze who took the initiative to translate three of my novels into Georgian language. Otherwise, I would not have been able to stand here in front of you today.

I came to writing because of war. I came into teaching creative writing because of war too.

Though my first novel *"B as in Beirut*" invoked sad memory among those witnessing the war, it created an atmosphere of women solidarity. Despite prevailing violence, women characters kept on dreaming and on staying together as long as they could. In their isolated building on the green line of the divided city Beirut, where they lived, they kept on feeling and enjoying their gatherings and the hot food scents that come out from the kitchen of Khosepha, one of the female characters. A warm and happy memory I chose to turn to, in my writing, as if without this embracing frame, the rest of such a painful experience could not be approached. It is writing solidarity amidst pain. It is about presenting characters who are neither totally "in" nor totally "out" of the war scene. They are "in between, staying in the shadow of what

is going on out there in the street. They are the anti-heroes, as if they are living somewhere parallel to what is happening outside. However, "in-betweenness" is more than that. It is a state of being, that marked the lives of many including my life. Life on the verge of war, the continuous incertitude, the presumable tomorrow. "Inbetweenness", was a strategy of survival, that I gave to my female characters during times of chaos. It is from that particular place that my work transmits something of the war. It was a way out, from being face to face with stories of horror that I meant NOT to mention or write about. It might be my only way to be able to come around sad memories, first by turning them into writing and then by positioning my characters in an "inbetween" space. This survival strategy that became a writing technique and a place from which transmission can be possible for me, has many echoes with contemporary narrative techniques. Readers in our modern societies identify with such withdrawn positions, and it is not necessary to have lived the Lebanese war, nor the Arab chaos, to be in the skin of the characters. My characters are neither victims nor perpetrators nor ideologically involved. Hence, there are no obstacles to identification and empathy among the readers, whoever, and wherever they are.

Writing my first novel, "*B as in Beirut"* was a painful experience because it urged me to bring back memory details into my head, memories I was not able to deal with. I did not know how to deal with violence in words, how to use vocabularies that I never used in my daily life, It was not only fear from violence but from language itself. I cut out a whole chapter from my novel before sending it to print. I took out scenes I wrote, that till today, I am not ready to face. But writing was vital for me. Sharing experience eases down the pain and transforms it, while it finds a translation into language. Before narrating, or before writing, there is a state, allow me to call a "non-possessing" of expression, as if I did not have the means to get it out of me. That's why it took me 7 years after the end of the Lebanese war to be able to finalize and publish in 1997 my first work.

B as in Beirut led to writing *Wild Mulberries* a few years later, during which I went back to the university to work on the subject of war memory. Many questions were a result of my experience with writing *B as in Beirut*: Why, in our part of the world, there so much violence? Why does any socio-political conflict end up taking a sectarian or religious character? I carried these questions and went back to the beginning of the 20th Century, which is the time setting of my second novel *Wild Mulberries.* I wrote about a family

from Mount Lebanon who lived on raising silkworms. The general context is embedded in presenting Lebanon in its relationship with the outer world through European and American missionary schools, and through migration. It reveals a country whose basic characteristic is to be caught between different worlds. *Wild Mulberries* presents the problem of identity and memory from a woman's perspective where the narrator is in search of her mother's story, her past and destiny.

Writing a novel on women in war and the violence they witness, as well as on a family where patriarchal relations destroy the individual dreams, led me to a different type of work, academic research on Narratives of women in Lebanon whose family members disappeared during the war without knowing whether they are dead or alive. In my academic research I was fascinated by the women I interviewed. I found out that a great similarity existed between characters of B as in Beirut and the women of my research. Both tell their stories, and by doing so, they invent and reinvent strategies of survival. Although my academic work included a different methodological approach, it helped me, later, in creating a certain fictional atmosphere in my third novel, *Other Lives,* where during the Lebanese violent chaos, the young female narrator was in search of her disappeared lover. No doubt that my creative writing intersects with my academic writing and research. The horizon is open when we write, whether it is a novel or an academic treatise, even when we write about our own memory.

Telling a story, is writing about the lives of people and of places and the hope that lies within. Therefore, it was no coincidence to name my third novel *Other Lives*. These are the different strata of life one goes through. Our life is constituted out of these many layers that shape us and form the way we are. My family, for instance, is Druze who believes in reincarnation. When I was a child, the idea of reincarnation saved me from a lot of fear, fear from death and from the unknown, or the imagined "nothingness" after death. For so many years of my adult life, I suppressed this idea that is strongly embedded within Druze belief and culture. Later, I figured how the idea of reincarnation was present in me as a writer, and how it took on a different meaning and sense. I am not a believer, but the idea of reincarnation is often repeated in my writings. With time, I developed a new approach to this idea, as if I were to reconcile with a culture without merging with it. Reincarnation, the way I perceive it, occurs at every moment in our life. We do not

need to die to be reincarnated. Writing is a continuous reincarnation as well. In this sense, I have many lives, not just one.

Other Lives talks about women in a freshly Post-War Lebanon. One of the characters, Ankineh, an Armenian woman, came to Lebanon from Istanbul in 1921, chased by the Turkish army from the port city of what is now Izmir. The story of fear is also a story of adventure and survival. This story was based upon a long interview I had with an 87-year-old Armenian Lebanese woman whose memory was still vivid, and who shared with me her story of displacement from Izmir to Beirut. On the way, her parents were obliged by the Turkish army, to leave behind all what they owned, but they saved two Armenian orphans who came with them to Lebanon and who grew up in their new home. A second female character, Nadia, who is silenced by the pressures of a patriarchal system. Her words are muted by the religious phrases engraved on house walls, and the pressures family men imposed. Language itself found in religious books and in the discourses of men is used as a tool of intimidation and repression. Nadia lost the memory of language and went silent. She will not regain her ability to talk, nor to narrate, unless she leaves her home and learns a new language other than the Arabic.

Other Lives is concerned with post-war Beirut, war is over, but people keep on running away from their country and from its wounds that became a second identity. It is not only war, but its consequences that need to be considered. Why do people leave after war, while they survived and stayed during it? Why some commit suicide or become insane in the post-war period? These questions have to do with intimidated and silenced memories, have to do with broken lives that post war period did not address. This was the main theme of my last novel 'The *Weight of Paradise'*. It shows how wars destroy places of memory. To retrieve those places, there is not much one can do, except, I believe, through art and literature. Thus, writing can be a way to retrieve lost places, and to make of one's painful memory an experience to bear by sharing it with others.

I grew up in a society where sectarian or social diversity, was "de rigueur". Natural diversity too, coloured and influenced my work deeply. In my writings I defend diversity, sometimes with less hope and more doubt about its survival. I face painful memories by writing about the place I want to be in, the dream I never lived. This brings me back to what I have said before on "in betweenness": it is the state of not being totally in, nor being

totally out. Writing about Beirut, the golden days is a good example to explain my state of being. I am defending myself against sad memories by referring, in my work, every now and then, to a time of a city that existed, but I never witnessed.

I came into teaching creative writing also out of a war. In summer 2006 Lebanon witnessed an outrageous war with Israel. Southern families had to flee their houses. During that unforgettable summer, I was one of the persons who worked with traumatized children and adolescents, who took refuge in public schools and public gardens. My work was to help them overcome trauma through writing short stories and songs. That was a strong experience of how important is writing as a tool for moral and psychological support in times of violence.

In France, I started teaching creative writing in 2015. It is the first, and may be, the only creative writing class that is presented totally in Arabic language in the French universities. My students whose background is mainly from North Africa have an immense challenge in freely expressing and writing creative texts in Arabic language.

First, they were not used to write their emotions in Arabic language. Every time we started a new exercise that requires showing their personal point of view, they switched automatically to French. Is it the lack of vocabularies? Is it their linguistic poverty? We must dig a bit deeper to see where are the obstacles that prevent a 20-year-old student from writing about religion, or from calling parts of his or her body with their real names. At a time, they can do that using French or English language. The relationship between a young Arab living in France as a student or a citizen and his or her mother tongue is complex and needs a thorough research. It will suffice here to refer to the body of taboos the Arabic language had to bear in the last two centuries, and which the modern Arab writer must face and challenge before his or her creative text see light. In teaching, I have to face these linguistic taboos of what to say and what not to say, the names that cannot be mentioned in a text, the ideas not daring to be expressed.

My students needed to know that Arabic language is capable of reflecting their feelings and thoughts, and like them, their language suffered through the long years from the body of taboos that was exerted through mainstream channels, family, religion, school, media, political institutions etc. This takes me back to tell you a story around my second novel Wild Mulberries. In this novel, one of my main characters was a Druse woman

who wanted to become a member of the religious establishment but was not accepted because her nephew drank alcohol. I described her as an ordinary woman who stands in front of her mirror and looks at her body and pulls off her white *mandeel* (which is a typical druse long head white scarf that religious or old Druse women wear). She was angry and had to criticize the religious men who refused her request. It took me time to find the appropriate words to put them in her mouth.

She was a conservative old woman, so how can I find the exact words that fit her personality and age. I thought I succeeded, but it seems I did not. After publishing the novel, I received letters of intimidation, condemning my novel and accusing me of stigmatizing the religious women and the religious establishment of the community!

They used the word rudeness and *Ayb*. ''*Ayb'* which is an Arabic word that means shame, is connected to different gender meanings. For women it is related to their bodies and sexual life, for men, it is most related to their social behavior in the public sphere.

I often told this story to my students, and I asked questions like: Why language scares that much? why it scares those in power? How to liberate the language itself from falling in the trap of the *ayb*, of the official fiction, or from adopting the fabricated values of the masculine power. Why a song in Egypt led to the imprisonment of the poet who wrote it and the one who worked on the song videography. The song named *balaha*, and *balaha* means in Arabic a date fruit of a palm tree, and it was the nick name, used by the opposition, of the Egyptian president Sissi. The Egyptian film director and videographer, who worked on the video of the song Shadi Habach was imprisoned for more than two years with no trial. He died in prison in 2021.

While the singer Rami Issam saved his skin in taking a refuge in Sweden! Sharing these questions and stories in the Arab world with my students, urges them to question the language of institutions, and encourages them to find the answers themselves, through writing their own stories.

Adding to the work on the content of the creative writing, I had to work with my students also on the form. Shall we use the high classical Arabic while writing or the *aamiyah,* or the modern *fusha*? Let me first tell a personal story to explain what I mean by these two words *aamiyah* and *fusha*. My son, then seven years old, came to me one day with an Arabic reading book asking me to "translate" a phrase he did not understand. He used the word "translate" and, of course, he wanted me to "explain" with

colloquial or spoken Arabic, or '*aamiyah*, the sentence written in classical Arabic, or in *fussha*. He did not understand at that age why Arabic is two "languages," as he put it, while the French that he began studying in his early years is one language. Arabic language surely is not two languages, but it is difficult to explain this to children.

In an article published a few months before his death, the eminent Palestinian-American scholar, Edward Said, argued that the debate on the need to reform Islam, as well as the Arabs and their language, reflects an extraordinary lack of the daily experience of living in Arabic. Said was perfectly correct by referring to the Arabic language as an experience of life, something we live and live in.

Perhaps Gibran Khalil Gibran, the Lebanese American writer, perfectly expressed the idea of bringing together *fussha* and '*aamiyah* in an article he wrote in the mid-1950s, about the future of the Arabic language. He argued that there must be a third language that grows out of people's changing lives and ways of expressing themselves. To Gibran, this third language – which Edward Said called the modern *fussha* – must be a combination of feelings and of thoughts. It is not a coincidence that both writers who searched for ways to modernize the Arabic language had a very rich diversified education and later spent their life far from their homelands.

In my two novels I wrote outside Lebanon, Other Lives, and Weight of Paradise, it was a new experience to recall memory when the time and space of the novel is one's homeland. It becomes writing the memory of far places. Every time while writing I felt I wanted to put myself in an airplane and just go back and see the places I was writing about, talk to people who inspired my story, but I stayed there, glued to my chair. I was more able to play with words, with language itself to move easily between *fusha* and *aamiyah.* Playing with words becomes a survival device, and instead of physical traveling, it becomes a long virtual journey accompanied by a language that is continuously created and subsequently destroyed.

Writing about my experience with the Arabic language, does not only m from my being a female Lebanese writer, but also from my experience of the cultural, political, and social changes Lebanon witnessed during the last three decades of the twentieth century and the first decades of this Century. These changes, no doubt, affected my language.

During the Lebanese war, we got afraid of the idea of losing what we thought we possessed. Our literature was transformed into an attempt to ar-

chive the country, piece-by-piece, place-by-place, fragment-by-fragment. It was the fear of loss that made our literature take the nature of an archiving device, where one needed to register the slightest detail. It was the fear of burying people's stories and forget them similar to the destiny of thousands who disappeared. *Weight of Paradise* is an example for this kind of literature.

While Dr Irma Ratiani was presenting the history of the Georgian literature, a phrase sounded so precious to me, as I felt the very much similarities between Georgia and Lebanon. She quoted the late famous poet Iliya Chavchavadze saying ''Ourselves belong to us''. I believe nothing is stronger than literature to keep ourselves belonging to us, even in a wounded country like Lebanon. Marguerite Duras once said, one must be stronger than her writing in order to be able to write. When it comes to writing about a place like Lebanon, one must be stronger than herself to talk about 'writing' itself.

I keep wondering how I can write amidst all this. How can I reincarnate in writing, a "memory" in the literal sense of the word? A challenge that forces me to return to history, rereading and unpacking questions of identity, murderous identity, as the French writer of Lebanese origin Amin Maalouf called it, it is linked to the history of the peoples of the entire Middle East, whether they are Kurds, Iranians, Palestinians, Arab Jews, Arabs or Turks.

Living abroad, no doubt that questions of identity began to take on new dimensions. It is also linked to the challenges of how to use and relate to my own language and writing in a place that does not understand them. Writing itself can become a home. It occupies the place of home and accompanies a kind of wakefulness while moving through so many transient places; I live today in a place of shrinking dreams, in streets that are not related to my memory, in places that make me question if I would ever be able to carve the letters of my language in their stones.

These places are intractable. Both intractable and attractive, I don't know if I prefer to remain outside them or go right inside. If I go in, I'll narrate the seductive fullness of remaining on the margins — that is to say, I'll always stay on the outside to some degree. These are migrating people's places, in which writing looks like nothing but itself, and in which travel and movement change words. I write what my senses capture on my daily hunting these new places. I write my transformation and the transformation of my language. I write and I meet other people whose life became a part of a placeless-ness, just like me, and who write it in another language.

I travel light. I keep my language; I stay attached to it and make it something ever present. It's in my suitcase and my body, my memory, my papers and my books. It's in a song whose opening lines stick in my head whenever I hear it sung. Somehow writing is able to continue on, out of place – It can capture transient memories on virtual walls. It's the life of those living in a world that is not the one they came from. It also migrates between two worlds, two places, two histories, two cultures – even between multiple places and multiple worlds.

As a "foreign writer," I divide myself in these places, without moving. I furnish these places of language with my senses. I see them, listen to them, and touch them through writing. But this language becomes at certain moments a house of glass. It becomes a face of the rejected and the unwanted. It is even approached, as the language of terror and hatefulness. Now I keep asking myself a new set of questions: How can I, as a writer and a creative writing lecturer, stand facing the storm. How can I bring back to my students the faith in their mother tongue? How can I make them see its ability to love, and to show mercy. How can I convince them that it is the language of poetry, when at certain moments of terror, they did not dare to carry an Arabic book in public.

How can my language liberate itself from its unwanted stigma. Now, as an Arab writer, I have many things to do on top of writing. Writing a text is not enough. Being an Arab writer in the west, brings my language and the question of my identity(s) more into the light. My language, my identity, and those thousands of fragmented mirrors between them. As an Arab writer, I am not a writer and full stop! I am a fighter, a negotiator, an unveiled, a scandaliser, a ''foreigner'' in the alleys of mainstream literary history. In a word I am a survivor. I am what I am, I have a voice. I am condemned to hope. Yes, indeed I am.