correspondents abroad

The Self and Autobiography

SHERIF HETATA

I WAS FORTY-ONE YEARS OLD WHEN I STARTED TO WRITE FICTION. UNTIL THEN, DESPITE THE MANY NOVELS I HAD READ IN Arabic, English, and French, I wrote only studies and books related to politics and, sometimes, health. But at that time, after my release from prison, I met the well-known novelist and feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi, and one year later we married.

Nawal insisted that I had a gift for artistic expression and encouraged me to write. So after several fumbling attempts, I wrote my first novel. It was called *Al-ʿAyn dhat al-jafn al-maʿdaniyah*, which means "the eye with an iron lid." The novel was about prison and political prisoners, but I think it was different from the novels about prison I had read. What distinguished it was an attempt to reflect the inner thoughts, the dreams, the feelings, the images and memories that flashed through the minds of the main characters (men and women) as they lived their prison life, were tortured, went on hunger strikes, were placed in solitary confinement, planned escapes, or faced death. It was concerned with how they survived prison or broke down under continuous stress and what had made them join the revolutionary movement or decide to abandon it. The jailers, officers, secret police, judges, and prosecutors were included in this attempt.

Tracing the selves of characters with whom I had lived or whom I had known was what seduced me most and made me write a narrative about things I had lived. In all my novels the self remains important in the text. The author's self is always there, following a devious path, or hidden here and there, unaware of what is happening to it as he writes or half-conscious at certain moments that he has written "himself." To some extent all novels thread the authors' selves into their cloth. Some novels, like those of Henry Miller, are very much the story of the author's life.

Autobiographical novels and autobiography have become more common. In a world where individuals are victims of the global system, autobiography emphasizes the value of a person's life. In Japan the pressures of an autocratic patriarchal society may explain why novelists

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there have tended to write about their lives. Many women writers reflect themselves in what they write, perhaps as a protest against the patriarchal norms that imprison their lives.

I do not feel that we can draw strict demarcations between autobiography and fiction. This is particularly true when autobiography is written not to provide a chronology of events related to the authors' lives, with an account of the things they have done or that have happened to them, but rather to narrate the story of a self, of its trajectory through life, of the experiences that made the writers the human beings they are.

Autobiography is at its best when it is written in a language and a form that are close to those of fiction, when it moves freely in time, captures the imagination, and lets it soar on an independent flight. Autobiography should tell the reader how the author became a self; it should tell of experiences, choices in life; it should reveal the things we suppress or fear or hide or show under false colors; it should present the truth of the individual self, how the self relates to the world, to society, to family, to a spouse or a lover, to friends and rivals, to the system and values that govern life. These are the treasures autobiography can open up for us, the insights it can provide. Autobiography is a carrier of creativity, of an individual experience of life. This is its essence, which must not be left to sink in a morass of events, of facts, of places, of developments we can always read about in other books, in history or biography or social studies or travelogues or anything else. Autobiography possesses something specific that differentiates it from other writings. Its subject is the individual self.

Most, if not all, male authors of autobiography avoid writing about the inner self. Men in a patriarchal society divided by class are accustomed to exercising power, to controlling, to constructing, to bringing order to chaos, to concealing weakness or replacing it with strength, and to molding things to their will. The self is a construction, an image that must be maintained. It is part of the order in which men live, and they are afraid that like any construction it might collapse.

Within this outer construction the inner self remains hidden, carefully protected, like an oyster in a shell. Writing is a form of power, of influence over others, and it can be used to buttress this outer construction of the self. Language is composed of symbols and represents reality, but it is not reality. Language can be used to create a construct of the author.

The self is riddled with weaknesses, with rationalizations and contradictions built up carefully to maintain an edifice. To reveal this is not easy. Novels often express indirectly what an author would not wish to say openly in an autobiography. To some extent they are an escape from individual and social pressures that prevent us from showing who we really are, what we really think or do.

The reluctance to reveal one's self is particularly powerful in the Arab region. Autobiographies by authors from Arab countries are usually meant to win a battle (often political) with someone, to give a different account of events, to describe the author's prowess in one or more areas of life. The author's self remains carefully hidden. The self, the inner, secret self, is something a man (or a woman) in our region does not write about.

The social pressures to which writers are exposed in the Arab region are extremely strong. Politics is taboo, especially if critical of the powers that be (mainly the head of state) or the inner workings of the system. So are religion and sex. In Egypt neoliberal policies have engendered a religious fundamentalist backlash. If women are mentioned in an autobiography, it is almost always as loving mothers nurturing their children. Occasionally a wife may crop up as a faithful appendage, but generally men do not speak of their wives in an autobiography. Lovers and prostitutes, hetero- and homosexual relations are never mentioned. Patriarchal tradition remains entrenched in Arab society even though extramarital sex and homosexual relations are common.

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I started to write my autobiography in 1993 and finished the three volumes in 1998. It was called *Al-Nawafidh al-maftuhah*, which means "open windows." Most of it was written while I was teaching at Duke University, in Durham, North Carolina, almost ten thousand miles from home, living in a house surrounded by a forest and a silence broken only by the rustle of leaves and the occasional birdsong. Perhaps after reaching the age of seventy, I was reviewing my life from a distance, thinking that death was moving closer, trying to defeat it by living on in the written word. Maybe I was trying to say to myself and others that there was something worthwhile in my life. Maybe the oppression under which we live made me want to cry out, to say I am still here, to dispel the anonymity forced on us by a global system that silences our individual voices.

For many long years I had remained a silent person. My self was confined in a shell created by a Victorian English mother brought up in the ways of discipline, an unhappy family, a medical school ruled over by patriarchs of science, years in a clandestine party, and years in prison, sometimes in solitary confinement. My self needed a woman like Nawal El Saadawi to set it free.

Perhaps women will help men write real autobiography—that is, if literature and art and other beautiful things survive the neoliberal fundamentalist crusade we are now witnessing.

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