

MARIAM AL-ZAROUNI: CRYSTALLIZING DIVERSITY

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Abstract

Mariam Al-zarouni is a prolific writer and artist in UAE: she is a poet, a novelist, a short story writer, a painter, and a sculpture. Her literary and artistic genre diversity has duly attracted the attention of both readers and critics due to the relatively brief span of time during which she has emerged as a female renown writer who has enjoyed a Pan-Arab fame, in addition to her connections with literary societies abroad. Interestingly, she embarks on a variety of contemporary issues that are related to her society.

This paper is devoted to the study of Al-zarouni's literary works: selected poems from her two Poem Collections. The selected poems mainly focus on her feminist criticism of the outcomes of the Masculinity ancient societal structure. Her one novel A Letter from Harvard is a fiction work that has been granted the A'wees award, and it has been written to discuss Juveniles' issues. In her novel, the novelist\poet elegantly introduces a great lesson that the basic way to improve and develop her society is that of science. She really displays poignant knowledge of the Juveniles' mentalities.

Key words: Mariam Al-Zarouni, Female Writers, Contemporary Arab Poets, Novelists, Feminism.

 <http://dx.doi.org/10.47832/2717-8293.28.8>

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Introduction:

Born in the United Arab Emirates, Mariam Al-zarouni is a prolific writer. She is a poet, a novelist, a short story writer, a painter and a sculpture. She was awarded a B. Sc. Degree in Biology, and this field of study has entitled her to work in the medical laboratories of the Ministry of Health, but she moved later to join a teaching career in the Ministry of Education. Currently, she is a freelance writer, presiding over the Poetry Club of the UAE Union of Writers of which she is still an active member.

Although she started her career writing poetry, which she frankly admits to have been totally prejudiced, Al-zarouni has penned a good deal of literary and aesthetic works in miscellaneous literary and art genres. As a poet, she has published two poem collections: the first collection is entitled (*Mumbles*), published in 2017, and the other, entitled (*No Longer Matters*), was published in 2021, and was translated into French as (*ce n'est plus important*); It was also rendered into Spanish.

As a fiction writer, Al-zarouni embarked on the narrative art later in 2018, when she wrote her first novel (*A Letter from Harvard*), which was meant to address the Juveniles and it won the *A'wees* عويس Award for Creativity in 2018. Moreover, she pursued writing fiction, and in 2022, she attempted a short fiction for kids entitled (*Daddy, the Big Canary*). Nonetheless, she conducted the following joint fiction works:

* (what Narrators Evaded of the Arabian Nights.) , 2021

* (The Flying Disc) , 2022.

* (Narratives of the Sea) , 2022.

Currently, Mariam Al-zarouni writes a weekly literary essay in the Saudi *Riyadh* Newspaper. Her reputation seems to have travelled abroad as well. She has been invited as a guest speaker in various National Arab and International Book Fairs: in Sharjah, Cairo, Tunisia and London. She has also attended numerous Poetry Feasts: *Tanta* International Feast, 2021, (The Spanish School Days), 2022, and most recently, she made a workshop and poetry readings (in Arabic and English) in the Scottish Orkney Islands, August 4, 2023.

The literary and artistic genre diversity of Mariam Al-zarouni's writings has indeed attracted the readers' and critics' attention, due to the relatively brief span of time during which she has enjoyed a Pan-Arab fame, irrespective of her literary connections with some art societies abroad. It is, however, assumed that the diversity of literary genres she has exercised does not (and ought not) mean the mere leading aspect of her distinction. For Al-zarouni, such diversity of genres is certainly not unastonishing, because there is always a subtle intuitive and thematic link among these genres, despite the fact that sometimes it may be misunderstood that painting, for instance, is much easier to handle and receive by the audience than "the other complicated set-up of literature." (Leavis, 1981: 359) For a real artist, what matters most is the artist's subtlety of treatment, which constitutes his\her originality: it is intrinsically his\her in and of itself. Hence, it is Al-zarouni's *per se*, as well.

Al-zarouni believes that any creative work (irrespective of its genre) is an instinct engendered from the "self" of its creator. It is a part of his\her own "self" "reshaped and re-presented within the framework of the writer's thought, intellect, philosophy, readings and awareness." The reader's responsibility is to live up to that experience, as well as to its devices of representation and aesthetic modes, so that he\she can manage to comprehend the perspectives of the creation stances, and to possibly self-project them on himself\herself, being one among the addressee. (Mahmoud, 2022.)

Given the fact that she is a writer and an artist, Al-zarouni frankly admits that it is never possible for her as such to explore what she wants to present in one genre. She suggests that the medium of expression depends on the subject itself: some subject can be effectively handled by writing, but another one may best be explored in painting or sculpture. It is therefore the idea and\or thought that decides the literary\artistic mode of representation. The novel, for instance, can best illustrate what poetry may fail to do.

Mariam Al-zarouni's passion for plastic arts lies in the fact that, for her, sculpture is a 'quiet' mode of expression, but, on the other hand, it requires huge creative efforts, simply because it gives the Clay the power to speak and reveal human impulses. Painting, however, is an "active pictorial translation exhibited by eye after having been intellectually and emotionally processed in the very mind and intellect." The colours, lines and shapes of one painting are deep-rooted 'realities' buried in the "self" as images; and no one is able to comprehend but that who acquires keen insight into 'awareness' of the beauty of life.

Despite her awareness of the nature of her prolific and diverse achievements in literature and arts, her passion for poetry is dated back to an early interest in words and sentence structures. In this respect, she declares that her "passion for verse and literature" belongs to her love of Arabic, for which she is highly indebted to her mother, in addition to the roles played by her teachers of Arabic: clear references to such passion and gratitude are evidently witnessed in *A Letter from Harvard*, where she acknowledges her respect of Miss Nada, her young teacher of Arabic: "This graceful charm (Miss Nada) has changed all my ideas about language, and intensified my relations with the school. . . . My passion for reading is attributed to her; she enhanced my fondness of writing. Therefore, I collected a pretty notebook wherein I started to write my own reflections." (Al-zarouni:2017 Ch.4; 2022; Hussein, 2019; and Hassan, 2022.)

More often than not, Al-zarouni reveals her fondness of verse, and declares that she has "experimented writing poetry unconsciously at an early age." Most likely, such statement recalls the commonly known idea that poets are born poets; they are not made poets. They are really haunted by the Muses of verse, and their talents and graces must be endlessly nurtured with what might foster their gifted geniuses, and assist them to achieve unique and remarkable status.

Interestingly enough, Al-zarouni has manifested a highly-celebrated richness of voice and imagination. Given that she is a well-read contemporary female poet, she aptly fulfills her

duties as an "unacknowledged legislator of the World", as Shelley (1975: 255) describes the poet. Mariam Al-zarouni responsibly reacts to the socio-political changes of her time as much as to the current literary movements, both thematically and technically. In her poem (Custom), she embarks on her societal ancient custom that hinders the generation responses to the new advancements in all human fields and knowledge. The poet in this poem is critical of the hierarchal, patriarchal masculine authorities. She considers such power an obstacle to people's endeavours to live up to the needs of contemporary life. Hence, people's frames of minds are caged inside the dungeons of ancient times.

Through her exquisite employment of subtle ironies that portray the newborn deliveries, she metaphorically replaces the normal female delivery by symbolic images which invite the newborns to *per force* grow up passive and even helpless. The newborns of our societies are doomed to be chained with "a necklace of Nays" once the "helpless heads" are "hurled to the world", and their ears are stuffed with "thousands of Bewares." Their cradles are tightened with "anti-dream" swaddles, hence when it is time for them to speak, strangers' as well as relatives' hands are readily prepared to close their mouths. The generation is therefore deprived of dreaming and open-mindedness. They should lag behind the world; it is not fed with milk, but with passivity, 'think-not's', and "no question"; and instead of bread, they are required to grow up with silence and ghost toys. (Al-zarouni, 2021: 'Custom' 7) (*translation mine*)

Culturally, Al-zarouni brilliantly manifests significant concerns in relation to existential questions of life, be they her own or inquiries into the Arab cultural identity. A poem for her is a condensed medium she employs to reflect upon human life issues. One interesting question she metaphorically investigates is the hierarchal masculine nature of the society which has set up specific man-made taboos and conduct. This poem is a frank representation of such dilemma. As an open-minded culturally-oriented poetess, Al-zarouni feels scared by thinking that before waxen "faces; she gets no responses from the statue faces", hence the silence and fear. These statues, identifies as men, utter but ancient speech that "leaks into my heart \ *blocks its chambers* \ [and] *narrows its vastness. (Italics Mine)*" She is quite aware that it is that absurd meaningless talk that suffocates the new generation and keeps it caged into the statue-faced philosophers' dungeons. In the sense of modern terminology, Al-zarouni's standpoint may be considered 'feminist', an issue she reflects upon more evidently in *A Letter from Harvard*, but the poetic stance illustrates as much, only if well meditated. In "Dreams of Stone", she addresses the man who keeps up with life "indifferent" but to his "hardness", and when he enjoys the tree "casting seeds in your own \ you thought of expanse," since he is hunted by the "dreams of tillage and harvest". (*Ibid.*,)

Like to the 1959's Confessional poets: Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, Mariam Al-zarouni seems to be identically concerned (out of her private satisfaction and sensibility) with her self-improvement. Undoubtedly, she believes herself personally more vindicated than the social structure she denies. Indeed, Al-zarouni's prolific works manifest

an evident confessional impulse. In her poetry collection, for example, her poem "To Daddy", she directly addresses her father, be her real or fictitious, recalling how they used to lead their life: it was mere "arguments and disputes never nurtured." Although she acknowledges her father's death is a "loss", she plainly disproves him: "You should have guided me\ -before you'd departed- \ all the pathways, \ that seek us, \ and see all things\ and pass all boredom and hope," Her inclination to seek self-improvement drives her to blame him for not guiding her the pathways away from anything that never belongs to them, and away from anything that "no longer matters." It is most likely that Al-zarouni's address to her Daddy is reminiscent of Sylvia Plath's confessional poem (Daddy) (Plath, 1974: 54), where she openly says: "You died before I had time -----\ Marble-heavy, a bag full of God\ Ghastly statue with one grey toe, \ Big as a Frisco seal". Mariam Al-zarouni's address is certainly void of Plath's cynicism and ridicule, though, like Plath, she holds her Daddy responsible for not guiding her the right pathways.

The world intellectuals understand well that the racing ceaseless changes of the world seem to have been endangering the human values. The contemporary capitalist plans have widely rendered everything in the present time" plastic, provisional . . . and disposable." (Eagleton, 2016: 38-40) Scholars are scared that other aspects of non-material ethos might similarly be subject to be "re-shaped and re-modelled", including even the "human mentalities." In the midst of such heinous "changes", the Arab intellectuals, regardless of their insights into life philosophies, start feeling the necessity to help their people understand the dangers around them, and, on the other hand, to make the best use of the profitably constructive aspects of the new advancements, and employ the best means to build their society soundly, appropriately and in such a way as to keep their national identity and respect their human values.

Given that Mariam Al-zarouni understands well that the new Western culture focuses mainly on the materialist values of life (even if it would demean the human impulses), she therefore undertakes to dismiss whatever acts she considers contrary to her Arab values and mentalities. Hence, the objection to whatever calls for the death of moral human ethics and virtues. Undoubtedly, she condemns such cultural norms as the atrocities that threaten man's dignity and self-improvement. She practically encourages the Arab social communities to benefit from the instructive values of the "Other's" modes of civilization. This is what implicitly her *A Letter from Harvard* deals with. She evades direct sermon-like moralization, but, more effectively, sets up an example for her targeted readers, the juveniles, to follow. Al-zarouni, the painter, brilliantly employs 'painting with words' to treat her topic, a technique that secures more interesting reception on part of the readers.

She has previously declared that her experimentation to write the novel is unlike that of poetry: she has embarked on dealing with poetry quite early and 'unconsciously'. Her fiction writing is accordingly consciously experimented when she has endeavoured to a write a novel for the juveniles. Such task must indeed be difficult to manage, for it requires appropriate insight into the psychology of the addressees as well as a medium that effectively arouses

their suspense, interest and expectations. Such kind of work commonly necessitates keen insight into the addressees' world and frames of mind.

Notwithstanding she has prolifically experimented a variety of literary and artistic works, Al-zarouni is indeed highly aware of the fact that what differentiates one genre or mode from another is only the medium of expression: it is the idea under examination that matters; the mode of presentation is only a vehicle wherein a thought is embodied and thence presented for the audience, be it by fiction, verse, painting or sculpture. She also understands that the 'theme' she is occupied with in her fiction exercise requires the narrative mode to better and properly illustrate and convey. Hence, the writing of *A Letter from Harvard*.

Despite the fact that the novel is a work of fiction, the novelist brilliantly resorts to employ the First Person (Protagonist) narrator as a device to tell the tale. Since the work is a narrative of a personal experience which the novelist\protagonist has both undergone and contemporized, it is most subtle and logical that the author resorts to employ the First Person (Protagonist) Narrator. This medium is indeed best suited for displaying the events, simply because she is either the character involved or she is only an eye witness, who sees and hears what has been going on. The employment of the First Person Narrator is so effective that it tempts the reader to passionately and intellectually share the character's experience, hence motivating him\her to adopt the ideas raised as truisms with no hesitation, irrespective of all limitations normally imposed by the reader's feeling and mentality. The narrator\protagonist is therefore legally licensed to convince the reader accepting the narrator's ideas, which is genuinely the novelist's intended desire.

A Letter from Harvard is plainly meant to convincingly encourage the Juveniles to 'think' how they can start up to secure their fruitful future life. The novelist righteously believes that the direct moralization address is often repetitive, hence consumed up and redundant. There must be an approach more persuasive and effective to 'teach' the generation. In the midst of the huge challenges brought about by the wake of the Third Millennium, it is the responsibility of the culturally-oriented intellectuals of the Arab World to seek the most powerful means of persuasion to resist the toxic side effects of what Terry Eagleton's (Eagleton, 2016: 39) as the "Masters of the Universe". The novel is indeed significantly effective in encouraging the Juveniles to tread the best pathways of success, because, like drama, it exercises attractive means of impact on the readers\audience by creating imaginative pictorial scenes that tempt the audience to share the protagonist's passion and success, especially if he\she is of his\her age. Educationally, the impact of the images insinuates the readers to imitate the protagonist's example of successfulness.

Characteristically, what enhances the reader's reception of the events is the employment of the First-Person(protagonist) narrative technique. The narrator herself is the main character who successfully endeavours to achieve an outstanding work, both personally and nationally. The novelist aptly tempts the reader\audience to use, not only logic while developing her arguments, but also 'emotional component' to make it more convincing and

appealing. Psychologically, Al-zarouni supposes that the plainspoken preaching certainly brings about what psychologists call "Reverse Psychology". As the novel itself can be partly autobiographical, since it embarks on a real and/or fictitious experience of a juvenile, the novelist is after orienting her readers to take an attitude she considers prosperous to their future. Having been herself a juvenile student, and having been well understanding of the psychological effects of means of persuasion on her as well as her generation, she subtly evades to make her appeal with unpleasant motivation on part of the addressees. The novelist knows that exercising pressure psychologically emerges a threat to the addressee's freedom, hence the arousal of attitude and behaviour of 'reactance' displayed in the forms of 'action' 'emotion' and 'attitude' which are unpleasant to the desired effect of the theme presented.

In *A Letter from Harvard*, such persuasion technique is employed to serve the novel's didactic *motif*. Sermon-like moralization is contemporarily no longer appropriate for the age's mentalities. Mariam Al-zarouni's treatment of the juveniles' expected problems is interestingly and logically reasonable. The presentation of Alya'i's problems and life experiences is an epitome of her classmates'. The novelist's principal objective is to explore such issues, and the proper responses on part of the female students. Most crucially is indeed Alya'i's and Faisal's love story. Biologically and psychologically, most people of such age are subject to undergo emotional and/or passionate experiences that are misinterpreted as love. The Arab socio-cultural mentality and masculine societal structure consider love experiences between the male and the female of such age-inappropriate taboo-like. The novelist is aware of such mentality, therefore, her 'message' to the Juveniles' is to re-direct their feelings towards more profitable alternatives. Alya'i's so-called love feelings to Faisal has proved unreal: once he finds what feeds his entertainments (when on a trip to Germany), he never remembers Alya'i. Here lies the subtle instructive message!

Unfortunately, Al-zarouni's message seems to have been misunderstood religiously and socio-culturally; therefore, voices of surveillance mostly from masculine authorities have been raised to object to the novelist's discussing the love story scenes. It is perfectly unquestionable that such voices have fully misinterpreted the novelist's educational objective. More disappointedly, some female figures mistake the scene as enhancement to undertake such emotional experiences. Al-zarouni herself reports that some Arab female voices reprove Alya'i's love scenes considering them taboos. Most bitterly, those who have attacked the scenes are supposed to be open-minded. The misreading of the incident is part of the collective memory ancient education strategies of upbringing the females in the Arab societies. The novelist's experiences as a teacher must have equipped her with similar practical incidents. As she is widely-read in the psychology of the Juveniles, Al-zarouni is expected to gain keen insight into such 'love feelings' and transient confusing emotions that can be transferred into powerful urges of building fruitful skills with authentic intimacies and connections that widely assist in brighter scopes of future life. In the novel, Alya'i's emotional experience has been replaced by a genuinely rich drives of 'science love' and therapeutic efforts for distinction. Alya'i internationally achieves a highly-celebrated fame and richness of voice, especially when her

name has now been associated with World best university ever. She has become a model, every schoolmate and juvenile envies for greatest success.

It is most likely, however, that Mariam Al-zarouni skillfully deals with a postcolonial issue all people (of the East in particular) may unconsciously suffer from. The Western Culture has endlessly exploited the socio-political deteriorating situations of the Arab communities to make people feel inferior, hence the West, being superior. Culturally, the West maliciously feeds such feelings as a means of 'control' and 'dominance': they seldom miss the opportunity to apply their theory of the 'Other', who is always portrayed as 'next'. Al-zarouni is intellectually familiar with the Westerners' treatment of the 'other' as inferior, but she is nevertheless mindfully conscious that her people are not lesser, nor are they inferior. Her novel is a call for the Arab generations to highly trust their own talents and keep in mind that the 'otherness' is just a fable! The novelist's treatment of such issues is crucial to encourage her people seek the scientific means of distinction, not merely nationally, but equally internationally, as well.

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