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## NEGOTIATING POST-WAR LEBANESE LITERATURE

A Conversation with Rashid al-Daif



**Keywords** Lebanese civil war; Lebanese Communist Party; Beirut; identity crisis; Yusuf Bek Karam; post-war Lebanese literature

### Introduction

Rashid al-Daif is one of Lebanon's most prominent and prolific writers. Born in 1945, al-Daif is a novelist, poet, and Professor of Modern Arabic Literature (with a doctorate from France) at the Lebanese University in West Beirut. Eight of al-Daif's 13 works of fiction (12 novels and one collection of short stories), originally published in Arabic, have been translated into English and/or French as well as into other languages. English translations include *Azizi as-Sayyid Kawabata* (1999; *Dear Mr Kawabata*), *Fusha Mustahdafa*

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*bayna n-Nu'as wa n-Nawm* (2001; *Passage to Dusk*), *Nahiyat al-Bara'a* (2001; *This Side of Innocence*), and *Lernin English* (2007; *Learning English*). Published in 1995, al-Daif's *Azizi as-Sayyid Kawabata* has been one of the dramatic moments of contemporary post-war Lebanese literature. After being selected as part of the European Cultural Foundation's "Mémoires de la Méditerranée" series, it was immediately translated into English, French, German, Italian, Polish, Spanish, Swedish, and Dutch. Al-Daif has also published three volumes of poetry and a number of papers and articles on the Lebanese novel and on the subject of intercultural dialogue. His novel *Fusha Mustahdafa bayna n-Nu'as wa n-Nawm* (2001, *Passage to Dusk*) was made by Simon Edelstein into a movie entitled *Passage au crépuscule* (Geneva, 2000); and another novel, *Tistifil Meryl Streep* [2001; *Meryl Streep Can Suit Herself*], was the subject of a play by Algerian-French writer Mohammed Qasimi, produced by Nidal Achqar in Arabic and French in 2006. Al-Daif's work has attracted numerous critical articles and books, by Samira Aghacy, Stefan G. Meyer, Ken Seigneurie, Paul Starkey, Mona Takieddine Amyuni, Edgar Weber among others. These focus particularly on the dynamics and politics of al-Daif's simple style and language, his use of autobiographical details, the role of place and space in his writings, and their representations of the reality or surreality of war.

Sakr, who is currently writing a doctoral thesis partly on al-Daif's works, interviewed<sup>1</sup> the writer in City Café, one of al-Daif's favourite haunts in the Lebanese capital Beirut, on 11 January and again on 20 March 2007. Both English and Lebanese Arabic were used during the interview and Rashid al-Daif subsequently approved the English translation.

**RS Your involvement in the events of the Lebanese civil war has two aspects: first, as a militant member of the Lebanese Communist Party and, after 1978, as a novelist creatively negotiating the horrors of the war and the subtleties of the human crisis while also confessing a disillusionment with direct political engagement and with the grand narrative of Marxism. How do you perceive the relationship between them?**

RD The war has left a deep impact on me. I have realized, as a result of my involvement in the 1975 events, that war is not a casual occurrence in man's life. Rather, war is an integral part of man. It has unravelled man in all his brutal nakedness to me. War made me realize that wherever man exists, war exists. War is paradoxically part of man's humanity. That was the greatest disillusionment and disappointment after the war. This discovery has profoundly marked my writing and has formed one of its major driving forces. Indeed, it underlies the major themes and plot of *Azizi as-Sayyid Kawabata* (1999; *Dear Mr Kawabata*). Undoubtedly, this insight is not absolutely new in the context of human thought and the history of ideas. However, its significance in my case lies in the fact that I have attained it as a result of my concrete experience of the war. The war proved that many of the Marxist theoretical paradigms do not provide an adequate groundwork for elucidating the reality—the events that actually occurred. None of the available conceptual systems could explain this rebellious reality. What we were witnessing during the [1975–90] war was absolute chaos: the Christian labourer was killing the Muslim labourer; the Muslim was killing the Muslim; the Christian was killing the Christian. The repercussions of the Palestinian strife, the Syrian intervention, the Arab–Israeli conflict, and the American–Soviet struggle in Lebanon all contributed to

this chaos. Thus, I reached the conclusion that this chaotic reality cannot be seized by means of any of the political or philosophical grand narratives. When Marxism failed as a theoretical tool for systematically interpreting the world, I lost my belief in all such systems of thought and sought refuge in writing. I felt that the world cannot be explained but it can only be told. I realized that only literature can *tell* [al-Daif's emphasis] the world.

**RS We are meeting in Beirut, the city where you have lived, fought, and written your works. After several wars fought and novels written, how do you imaginatively see Beirut now? Is it a blank page on which you inscribe your vision? A war-torn Beirut? Or an idyllic Beirut?**

RD In my imagination, Beirut is anxiety; it is a dangerous city that creates anxiety. It is stable in its contradictions and its insecurities. At the same time, Beirut is the easy life. Although it is small in space, it is dense and intense. It is a small version of a global megalopolis. But Beirut is a fragmented city. The fragmentation in Beirut creates anxiety. In Beirut, one feels as if one is riding a storm. To live in Beirut, you have to learn to take your siesta riding the storm.

**RS The post-war reconstruction of the Beirut city centre has been a polemical issue in Lebanon. While some critics like Saree Makdisi have noted the involvement of the reconstruction project in a “simulacral” diffusion and “spectacularization” of history, others like Samir Khalaf have emphasized its contribution to the re-creation of Martyrs’ Square as a “hybrid” and “emancipatory” public sphere where several layers of colonial, eastern and western, heritage are negotiated. In your recent novels, the globalization and spectacularity of the Lebanese urban space are portrayed as both integral and conflictual features of contemporary Lebanese life.**

RD First of all, since I am not a professional urbanist or sociologist, I am not qualified to evaluate the reconstruction project. However, all I can express is my perspective as a resident in this city for the last 40 years. Personally, I adore the reconstructed city centre irrespective of the economic stakes of the reconstruction project. It is one of my favourite areas in Beirut. I find that the expression “urban memory” is part of an intellectual vocabulary that is somewhat dissociated from concrete reality. Lebanon, in its former socio-economic structure, created the former city centre. Lebanon has changed. The idea of restoring the former pre-war features of the city centre seems to me a childish dream divorced from life. We must trust life—even though it may prove untrustworthy! As to the impact of globalization on the Lebanese urban sphere, I first of all would like to reiterate that I am not an expert in such matters. Still, I do not view globalization and spectacular culture as recent post-war phenomena but rather as persistent features of the Lebanese space in this century. Their recent manifestations are only more conspicuous than earlier ones. For instance, long before the 1975 war, Hollywood movies were shown at the same time in Beirut, London, New York, and Paris. However, nowadays, we are literally bombarded with this spectacular culture. Still, this culture is a symptom of globalization but not necessarily a cause of fragmentation or corruption. In my novel *Tistifil Meryl Streep* [2001; *Meryl Streep Can Suit Herself*], the

narrator is excessively disturbed by the satellite television channels that introduce what he describes as imported lifestyles which supposedly corrupt our morality. In fact, this narrator seems unaware that previous forms of the spectacular media had the same influence. Satellite channels only quickened this process and relocated it in the domestic interior. As such, this narrator's perspective exemplifies the misconceptions with respect to spectacular culture and globalization in Lebanon. By the way, the American University of Beirut and the Jesuit University of St. Joseph—both missionary educational institutions—introduced western lifestyles into the Lebanese public sphere well before the end of the 19th century. Let us not forget that since the dawn of the 19th century, Lebanese immigrants have also built such a cultural bridge with the West and its artefacts.

**RS The anxious individual, the fragmented consciousness, the traumatized and psychologically destroyed self, the abused and distorted memory, but also the individual insistence on survival are issues manifested in your writing. Are you portraying particularly the state of the Lebanese self during the war and in the post-war period?**

RD My characters are anxious, experiencing an essential *mal de vivre* or malaise that is at the same time a lack of inner peace and an inability to adapt to the new conditions accompanying the war. For some social groups in Lebanon, the war was a sort of carnival. For others, it was trauma and anxiety. My characters are traumatized. In my novels and my poetic writings, there's an invitation to fear. This invitation is at the same time a call to respect and appreciate life and to reaffirm the value of life. In *Lā Shay'a Yafuqu l-Wasf* [1980; *Nothing is Beyond Description*], one of my poetic works, I write "I fear without shame." The easiest choice is death. It is more difficult to choose life. Fear is intelligence. It is an invitation to people to have more than two eyes and more than two ears so that their attention doubles up. Contributing to life is the hardest endeavour. Death is the easiest choice. Fear is not cowardice. Advocating fear is a reaction to the inflation in the culture of martyrdom. Dying for a cause is an ideology that has been dominant since the beginning of time and that is anchored in the Arab culture and all the other cultures in my opinion. It is time to serve the cause without having to die. Advocating fear is an invitation to develop new ways to serve the cause. Accordingly, the characters in my novels are not marginal, neither are they accursed—*poètes maudits*. They are minoritarian but at the same time effectual. They contribute effectively to the construction of a new future . . . or a new present. This last reformulation of my thought is based on my conviction that the future does the present no favours. The sacrifice of generations for the sake of the future is a totalitarian kind of thinking—political or religious—that needs to be altered.

**RS This sense of fragmentation, trauma, and fear is often negotiated in your novels by an insistence on revealing the unconscious and the irrational, and on describing states of delirium, dreams, etc. Is the irrational a way into or out of the crisis? Is rationality part of the human crisis?**

RD In some respects, reason is the tragedy of man. It is the evidence of man's misery. Reason cheats and manipulates in order to give us the illusion that death has a cause and

an ultimate meaning. Man, by means of instrumental reason, invents wars and convinces himself that death has a purpose. War is the tool or machine of death. I am convinced that the cycle of death would be halted if the machine of war were restrained since war causes all of these deaths. Yet, at the same time, a certain form of reason creates religions, the purpose of which is man's salvation. Reason also creates technology for the sake of man's salvation. Hence man's crisis can be summed up as such: reason is the proof of man's misery. However, there is no salvation without reason.

**RS Throughout your works, the sense of personal fragmentation is in perpetual tension with the presence/absence of community. Are you dramatizing a crisis of identity?**

RD In my novels, characters suffer from a crisis. In *Azizi as-Sayyid Kawabata* (1999; *Dear Mr Kawabata*), the narrator Rashid suffers from something that is distant and elusive. He can only grasp his own past and present but cannot glimpse a future. His crisis is to some extent focused on his identity. His sense of belonging is fraught or pregnant with anxiety. He suffers in his relationship to his environment. In *Lernin English* (2007; *Learning English*), the narrator Rashid also has an identity crisis. He has a problem with his father. He is a Christian from Zgharta. His father's name "Hamad" is not accidental or spontaneous. "Hamad" is a typically Islamic Arabic name. The root of "Ahmad" and "Mohammed" (the Prophet's name) is "Hamad". In *Lernin English*, there is a lot of doubt as to Hamad's fatherhood of Rashid. This doubt contributes to the narrator's identity crisis.

**RS In *Ghafflat at-Turab* (1991; *The Inadvertence of the Soil*), the crisis of identity seems to be spatially dramatized around the monument of the nationalist and anti-colonial hero Yusuf Bek Karam. What is the significance of this memorial symbol in the framework of the novel?**

RD In *Ghafflat at-Turab*, a Christian community in crisis revitalizes its communal symbol. When there's no horizon, there's a return to the past. In Yusuf Bek Karam's monument and tomb, situated around and in the village church, respectively, as in many postcolonial memorial spaces and also in all civilizations, heroism and sacredness are united. They function as a template for communal resistance.

**RS In *Taqaniyyatu l-Bu's* [1989; *Technicalities of Wretchedness*] and *Ahlu z-Zill* [1987; *People of the Shades*], the house becomes the spatial matrix for both the dissolution and the revitalization of personal memory. At the same time, the house is the fragile locus for the construction of an identity poised between a traumatic past and an uncertain future. To what extent, in the context of war, is the materially threatened house a reflection or refraction of both an existentially and politically threatened home?**

RD The war has shown me that nothing is certain and nothing is acquired. As children, we thought that our house protected us. The war has revealed that this is an illusion. According to the logic of the war, there is no binary opposition between a protective

interior and a threatening exterior. War has also blurred the distinction between night and day. In time of peace, a closed door is a means of security. In time of war, the door loses its functional value. At any point, it can be broken, razed, or bulldozed. Even the nation that we took for granted as a natural given has proved to be otherwise. It also can be annihilated. In *Ahlu z-Zill* [1987; *People of the Shades*], the metaphor of the snakes emerging from where the house is to be built expresses the idea of the threatened house, and hence the threatened home, since snakes are perceived in Middle-Eastern culture as extremely harmful beings and bad omens.

**RS Your novels, particularly *Azizi as-Sayyid Kawabata* (1999; *Dear Mr Kawabata*), contain autobiographical material which has compelled critics including Samira Aghacy, Mona Takieddine Amyuni and Paul Starkey to focus on this aspect of your writing. What is your own sense of the function of autobiography in your works?**

RD I constantly use signals that invite the reader to think that the narrator is related to me personally. These signals are secondary. I mention the name “Rashid” as my first-person narrator. I introduce details that link his career to mine, describing him as a university professor etc. The first person creates a playful elliptical relationship between the personal “I” and a plural or communal “I”. I’ll give you an example. In *Azizi as-Sayyid Kawabata* I describe the process of my own birth. What I am actually doing is describing a plural “I” perspective of birth. My “I” is as close as possible to the collective perception, that is, how people in general perceive birth.

**RS What are the constraints on a novelist’s freedom in his appropriation and manipulation of the autobiographical form?**

RD There has been a dominant tendency in Arab—and other—literatures to argue that literature must serve society. I think that literature is an ambitious, opportunistic, and even Machiavellian art. I am not saying that the novel must be Machiavellian. Rather, I am saying that this is the method of my own novelistic practice. Therefore, I employ all means so that my novel attains its completion. I bend facts, including autobiographical ones. I do everything to complete my novel. My personal principle is: reality is in the service of the novel and not the opposite. Realist writers have tended to serve reality as if it were God.

**RS Your novels contain not only a great amount of autobiographical material but also historical material related to Lebanon. What is the role of the Lebanese writer/thinker nowadays with respect to issues pertaining to Lebanon?**

RD I do not write a “pure” ahistorical, atemporal novel. The detective novel can be a “pure” novel. My characters are very much anchored, rooted in the times and spaces in which they live. However, my characters are not patriotic. They are moved by human emotions and ethical problems. Politics is built on ethical bases. For instance, my novel *Tistifil Meryl Streep* [2001; *Meryl Streep Can Suit Herself*] highlights the ethical issue of loyalty and betrayal. It sheds light on problems in the relationship between traditional



mores and contemporary realities. Shedding light and engaging in the debate on these issues contribute to constructing a new political basis. A practical example is reforming the relationship between marriage laws and ethical mores. When I raise the issue of marital or couple problems, I am contributing to the debate on the basis of which a new policy is conceived. The issues that I shed light upon contribute, even in a modest fashion, to the reconstruction of personal consciousness, especially with respect to the Arab native. For instance, my most recent novel, *Awdatu l-'Almani 'ila Rushdih* [2005; *The German Returns to his Senses*], has created in readers a sympathy for homosexual individuals. It is supposed to contribute to the remodelling of the consciousnesses of its readers. From this perspective, my invitation to fear paves the way to a reform of consciousness. I am going against the dominant rhetoric. Let us not forget that rhetoric determines the conception of the world within a given culture, especially Arab culture. This dominant rhetoric consists of the ideas that death leads to life; that earth needs blood in order to blossom; that martyrdom fertilizes earth in order for it to bloom with freedom. This is the prevailing trend of thought in Arab culture. I think that it is dominant in every culture. Nowadays, this rhetoric/dream is being realized powerfully. Martyrs, martyrs, martyrs ... every day. As I mentioned earlier, there is an inflation in the martyrdom culture.

**RS Lebanese literature in translation stages a linguistic and cultural encounter with several “others”, namely the Arabic language in which it is originally written but which is distinct from the Lebanese spoken vernacular and the target languages that are still sometimes associated with the colonizer. Do you see these translations as an effective negotiation of the encounter or as a loss of origin in the chaos of difference?**

RD Every translation is a necessary failure. When I write in the Arabic language, my writing is a participation in a linguistic, rhetorical, and hence ideological, debate. Unfortunately, this debate cannot be translated into any other language. This is absolutely not the mistake of the translators. It is the consequence of the specificity of the Arabic language. In *Tistifil Meryl Streep* [2001; *Meryl Streep Can Suit Herself*], the narrator's speech comprises appropriations from a thousand-year-old Arabic text, *at-Tibb an-Nabawi* [nd; *Prophetic Medicine*], by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyei, on intimate marital relations. How do we translate such a text?

**RS As closure to our many-sided conversation, what is your opinion on post-war Lebanese literature? Do you see it as a monument or as an anti-monument?**

RD I think that there are no monumental Lebanese works of literature—novels or poems. Rather, I find that the collection of all these works constitutes the Lebanese literary masterpiece.

## Note

1. See Obank's notable 1999 interview with Rashid al-Daif.



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