

Author talks about the creative process and her difficult relationship with Beirut

'My real identity lies in my writing and the Arabic language'



March 8 is International Women's Day. In the coming days The Daily Star will publish a variety of articles on Lebanese women today and organizations that work on women's issues

Olivia Snajje
Special to The Daily Star

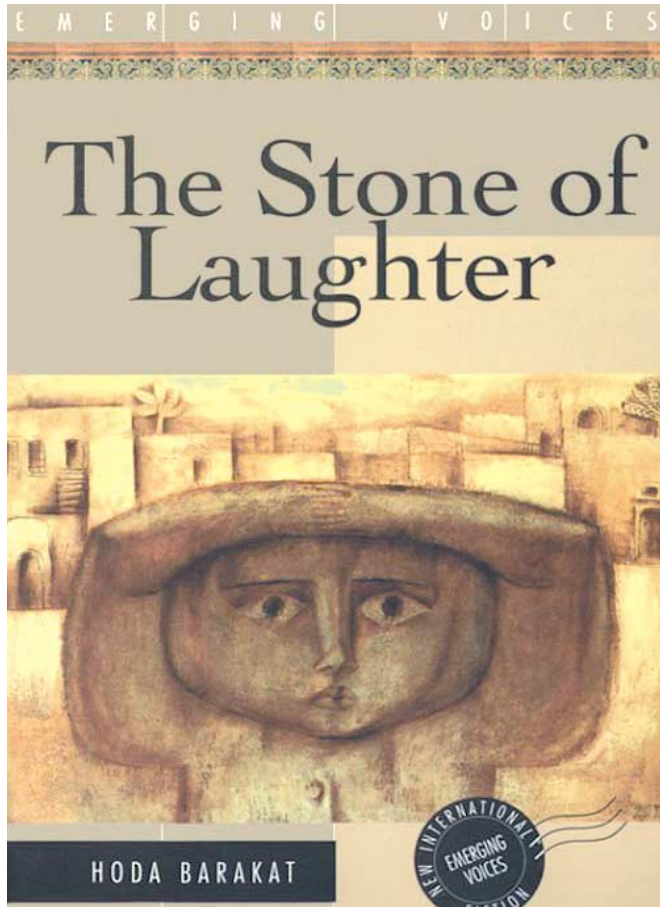
Hoda Barakat is exhausted. She is afraid her mind will go blank during the interview. Ten-hour workdays, hours spent in public transportation, and then there's the housework and children. And as news director of Paris' Radio Orient, the Arab community radio station, the impending war in Iraq keeps her phone ringing into the night.

But as she juggles daily life, fictional characters are developing in her subconscious; personalities slowly mature, eventually to become people on the pages of a book.

Barakat is the author of a book of short stories and three novels, all of which have been translated into English and French. The latest, *The Tiller of Waters*, won Egypt's prestigious Naguib Mahfouz prize in 2000. Because of time constraints, she explains, each novel takes her four or five years to complete.

She doesn't start out with a clear idea of the structure but allows her characters to "get into my nervous system where they have things to tell me. I build my novels on my characters when they have become obsessions." And until now, these characters have always been men.

"What interests me in my novels is the composition, not telling stories I already know. A female character would become too much a part of me,



The cover of Barakat's first book. Each novel takes her four or five years to complete

and I don't want that. Since the object of my desire is the opposite sex, of course that's why I want to use men as my subjects! It's like a leap in the dark."

In the case of her principal characters, though, the female gender is always hovering nearby: Her second novel's character is a man who is accused of murdering his female lover and a third main character, Niquila, has been shaped by his mother and his maid.

Hoda Barakat dislikes dwelling on the issue of gender and has worked hard to dispel the label of an Arab woman writer. "My greatest achievement in Europe has been that people have stopped treating me as such. Almost all the articles about my novels now skip over the issue of gender and go right to heart of the story."

Barakat grew up in Beirut, although she is originally from the Christian village of Bsharri which, she says, is known for its strong women. She was expected to obtain the highest marks possible in school, and claims she didn't have to deal with problems that many women in Arab societies face. She was even able

skillfully to negotiate marrying a Muslim at the outbreak of the civil war without creating a major rift with her family.

"I loved my family too much for that. My mother was the one who helped me the most, and in fact it was due to the way she educated me that I could even conceive of falling in love with a Muslim.

"The rest of the tribe, how-

'I build my novels on characters when they have become obsessions'

ever, just didn't understand. There had been perhaps one mixed marriage before me in our village. The woman fled with a Muslim from Baalbek and her brother brought her back and..." Barakat makes a slitting gesture across her throat and guffaws.

"My marriage opened another interpretation of the world to me and gave me a different political awareness. At least people in this world didn't tell me they were better than



the others simply because they were Christian!"

Barakat's introduction to the Muslim world also gave her a more in-depth approach to the Arabic language, which is key to her writing.

"I wasn't programmed to be very good in Arabic. In my school, they were very exigent about us learning French language and culture perfectly. This is not to say that they didn't respect Arab culture. It just wasn't given as much importance."

When the war began, she had recently finished a university degree in French literature. Children soon followed. Managing the war with two small children took up most of her time; nevertheless, she was able to write her first book and publish it in 1985. She had been mulling over the idea of leaving Beirut for many years, but it wasn't until 1989, when the war was almost over, that she made what she calls another leap into the dark.

"I didn't have any money, nor did I have a job elsewhere. My sister had a 20-square meter flat in Paris and I thought, at worst, it will be better than here. I hes-

itated so long about leaving because I knew when I left, I'd never come back. And it was an enormous responsibility taking the children away from everything they knew, as well as their father (who stayed in Lebanon)."

Barakat shivers as she recalls her last image of Lebanon. "We left in a taxi for Syria, and on the road to Damascus there were cars that had just been hit by rockets and were still smoking - with of course, the people inside them. I looked behind me and said 'My god, let all these people die, let the whole country die, and may all the gods curse it.'"

She wasn't able to return for five years and even now, she says, she has a very hard time. It is clear that the anger and pain she feels about Beirut is commensurate with the fierce love she had for the city.

"As soon as I get on the plane for Beirut my throat constricts, and when I see the mountains from the window I become hypersensitive. I'm only able to spend time in my village, which I didn't love enough so that I could be hurt by it. I've invented an innocence about my vil-

lage so that I can spend time there peacefully. I can't seem to calm my emotions and that's why, for the past 13 years, I've been writing about Beirut to try and level off these feelings. But it doesn't seem to work."

Hoda Barakat's current preoccupation is finding a global identity. She has started to feel that she may have something in common with the Africans and Asians she encounters in the city, who often have their own "Beirut."

"I left Beirut and I continue to leave Beirut, but I haven't arrived in Paris yet."

"Since I've had good press and have been decorated in literature, people think I'm part of the cultural landscape. But I'm not!"

She continues on a serious note: "My real identity lies in my writing and the Arabic language."

"When I get up in the morning I refuse to speak French with my children. I tell them I NEED my guttural sounds; I want my language which scrapes my lungs. I have to shout RHHH and GHH and KHHH!"

And what of authors who complain that writing a contemporary novel in Arabic is next to impossible since the language has not changed for 1,500 years?

"They don't know Arabic well enough," says Barakat emphatically. "It's a difficult language but open to contemporary use. It's up to writers to modernize it. Arabic is rich and malleable. But you have to approach it with great respect in order to break it down. I still study it by reading classics and checking in grammar books."

What about those writers who consider Arabic to be a sacred language?

"There are no sacred languages!" states Barakat. "The Koran can be sacred but not the Arabic language."

She says she always has one or two novels simmering away in her mind. "My future characters may not have lived through a civil war and might not have lived in Beirut, but all of them will carry the wound of having lived in a 'Beirut' somewhere."

Barakat's wound is the reason she keeps a low profile when it comes to the Lebanese press, giving next to no interviews. She simply doesn't want to have to explain her feelings.

"They probably think I'm arrogant because I'm well known. If only they knew how relative the term well-known is!"

STAR SCENE



Jean-Louis Qordahi and Mother Verona Ziade



Sister Germaine Abboud and Archbishop Roland Abou-Jaoude



Solange Gemayel



Butros and Marlene Harb



Josiane Skaf and Samia Samaha

Fourth Shams Youth Festival offers up a feast of artistic delights

Event features plays, workshops, movies, dance and music from Lebanon and abroad

Christina Foerch
Special to The Daily Star

With plays, workshops, movies, installations, dance and music from Lebanese and foreign artists, the Shams Festival opens its doors for its Fourth Youth Festival. The event's organizer, Hanane Hajj Ali, explained that "the festival is aimed at young Lebanese interested in arts, theater and cinema."

However, participation in the festival isn't limited only to young Lebanese. Many films to be shown during the festival come from abroad, theater productions will be presented by directors and actors from different countries, and some of the workshops will be also held by foreigners.

Within the cinematic category, the festival is showing feature-length and short films. Nominated and Oscar-winning short films from Germany will be presented, from 1992-2001 (including the animation film *The Balance* from Wolfgang Lauenstein, in German with English subtitles, and *Small Changes* from Andreas Borchert, also with English subtitles).

European shorts are showing from France, Greece, the Czech Republic, Armenia and Syria, (such as *White Wedding* from Stephanie Duvivier, in French, or *Portrait* from Lucy Simkova - in Czech with English subtitles).

Lebanese students, as well as independent film-makers, will show their short films, including the prize-winning short film *The Chair* from Cynthia Choucair (in Arabic).

Egyptian director Radwan al-Kachef, who recently died, will be honored with a retrospective of his work, including his first film, *A Woman from the South*, in Arabic, and three of his best-known feature films: *The Magician*, *Blue Violets* and *Palmwine* (Arabic with English subtitles). Czech-Lebanese director Sacha



Hajj Ali: "An important cornerstone of the festival is the workshops"

Gedeon will also be honored, with two of her feature films shown: *Indian Summer* and *The Return of the Idiot* (in Czech with English subtitles).

Yet despite this myriad of cinematic offerings, "the main focus of our festival is theater and our main target is the Lebanese youth," Hajj Ali said. "We offer workshops for young actors and give theater groups who usually don't perform in a real theater the chance to perform in the Beirut Theater."

Theater students will show their work in different disciplines including mime, performance and plays.

"Usually, we choose what is best from the student's works, and Shams is their forum to perform," the organizer said.

A group of young amateur actors from Ehdén will perform the classic play *Oedipus*, by

Sophocles. A theater group from the Beddawi refugee camp will present a play by English writer Edward Bond, with input from French director Nathalie Garot.

Some presentations are coming from abroad. A German theater group will give a performance showing all the things that can be done with a roll of paper and two dance groups from Africa will perform some not-so-traditional dances.

The well-known Syrian actor Bassam Kouza is presenting a play he directed with his Syrian theater company.

Another interesting presentation is the screening of an amateur video documenting young drug addicts in a therapy center in Jounieh, using theater in part of their therapy.

"The Shams Festival," Hajj Ali added, "takes the first step

toward accepting drug addicts as human beings and artists."

But there's still more.

"An important cornerstone of the festival is the workshops," she continued. French dance company *Del Vento* is coming for its second consecutive year and will train actors and dancers in a two-week dance workshop. The group will then give a performance at the end of the festival.

At last year's Shams Festival a workshop was led by Georges Hashem, which trained four student directors and four actors in front of a camera. For months they did exercises analyzing what was good and bad about their performances, learning about continuity and how to turn single scenes into a continuous film.

The students then edited 45 minutes of their recorded ex-

periences, which will be shown at this year's festival.

Hassan Preisler, a Danish actor who has taught acting at various Lebanese universities, will give a two-week workshop on Method Acting. A jury and the audience will judge the results. The audience is included in the voting process throughout the festival, and each night they can vote for their favorite artist.

The festival will also host the conference of the International Committee for Francophone Theater. Participants from different French-speaking countries are holding their annual conference in Beirut as well as attending the festival.

Lebanese artists, actors and film-makers will then gather for yet another conference, discussing the challenges young Arab face in the creative arts.

In between the perfor-

mances, the festival will show off its latest music production, a CD that was recorded by musicians across five nights of the festival.

Shams also hosts two installations by Lebanese artists from AUB and ALBA - the Academie Libanaise des Beaux Arts - the latter by graphic design graduate Deborah Fares. Her installation, *Mon Liban - Lubnani*, is a set of giant scales where each visitor can take a stone and place it either on the positive or the negative side of the balance. At the end, the Lebanese will finally "know" whether positive or negative feelings about the country prevail. Whatever the outcome, a stone with Shams Festival written on it should certainly be placed on the positive side.

The festival runs through March 27. For more information, call 03/506279 or 01/736850

Hospital celebrates anniversary

Jihane Akoury
Special to The Daily Star

In 1927, Abbe Joseph Selwan Geitaoui founded the Hospital Libanaise-Geitaoui. Seventy-five years later, the hospital is celebrating its jubilee by organizing a number of activities, one of which was a gala dinner held Friday at the Metropolitan Hotel.

The hospital's "75 years of authenticity, its roots in Lebanon's history, its better-quality services and avant-gardism in medical techniques" have earned the hospital the Order of the Cedars medal.

On behalf of President Emile Lahoud, Telecommunications Minister Jean-Louis Qordahi presented the award to Mother Verona Ziade, who chairs the hospital's board of directors.

Speeches concentrated on the hospital's past achievements, present activities and future projects, with many words of appreciation to those who played a role in making the hospital become a helping hand to those reaching out for it.

Photos by Mohammad Azakir

JUST A THOUGHT

Don't forget to love yourself.

Soren Kierkegaard
Danish philosopher (1813-1855)