
Intraviews

Mona Rafea: Writing the Everyday War

I try to move my hands, but I feel they are tied up. I try to open my mouth, but I feel it is gagged. My eyes turn red from anger, and I feel the pain of fear in my gut. Because I fear. I... F...E...A...R. I fear writing what I feel, and what I see, because *they* are everywhere, their eyes follow wherever one goes.¹

أحاول أن أحرك يديّ لكنني أشعرُ أنهما مقيدتان، وأحاول أن أفتح فمي لكنني أشعرُ أنه مكتم. تحمرُّ عينايا من الغضب، وأصابُ بألم الخوف في أحشائي، لأنني أخاف، أ...خ...أ...ف، أخاف أن أكتب ما أحسّه وما أشاهده، وذلك لأنهم في كل مكان، عيونهم تلاحق المرء أينما ذهب.

This is the experience of living in Homs amidst the ongoing invigilation, as described by a local author who, publishing under the pseudonym Mona Rafea, documents the everyday experience of fear and struggle. Pointing to the security agents who report people for their words and behaviour, Rafea's writing recalls that of George Orwell's novel *1984*. The fear of being punished for speaking follows people into the grocery store, into the café, into the shoe repair shop, upstairs into the clothing store, and out into the garden. Fear continues in everyday life, in domestic spaces, until one is even fearful of saying anything at home. As has been long known in Syria, 'even walls have ears'. Thus the act of writing, even under a pseudonym, becomes an act of intellectual resistance.

All of Rafea's articles have been published through the Al Jumhuriya Collective ('The Republic'), an online progressive platform where Syrians can speak with their own voice. Established in 2012, the Al Jumhuriya Collective emerged at a time of extreme hope and cultural transformation following the start of the Syrian Revolution in March 2011. What makes Al Jumhuriya unique is its encouragement of a new style of writing: well-researched storytelling rooted in social and political reality. It is widely read not only by many Syrians inside and outside their country, but also by many people in Arabic-speaking countries and beyond.

In 2022, at an event organized to honour Rafea's work in Manchester, UK, by the Celebrating Syria Festival in collaboration with the Al Jumhuriya Collective, one of Al Jumhuriya's editors, Yaaser Al Zaiat, noted that:

Mona is the epitome of this new style and voice: cultural resistance in pursuit of truth, justice and beauty. In fact, there's a lot of lies and disinformation, war and genocide, ugliness and atrocities. Yet Mona's writing

is another beacon of hope that truth can be found, that justice can start from within each individual, and that beauty can be profound despite all the pain that surrounds it.

All of Rafea's writings are in Arabic, and only two of her articles have been translated into English.² Members of the Syrian diaspora such as myself, and particularly members of the communities displaced from Homs, have found in Rafea's writing a window onto the inside story of that city. Rafea describes everyday life in Homs, exploring themes of loss, trauma, gender, womanhood, masculinity, love, morals, and a life in waiting.

What I find profound in Rafea's work is her ability to bring the description of this everyday war so close to the individual human struggle. So it is not the war we usually hear about in the news of politicians and international organizations that features in her writings; rather, it is the everyday war that Rafea sees in the lives of the people around her: the experiences of girls and women in a time of war.

In 2019, Rafea wrote an article directed specifically at male readers. In it, she asks them if they have read the 'Tales from the Town of Widows'.³ 'Perhaps you should do so now', she suggests. Rafea writes about women in the city,⁴ their experiences and their pain because so many men of Homs have been killed, arrested, displaced, or taken away to join the military for who knows how long. She writes about the widows who have lost their husbands, their fiancés, their sisters, their mothers:

Choices are few here, until there are no choices at all, and the path itself closes, so that many women find their salvation in pursuit of a higher educational degree to guarantee their future and their prestigious position in society, and through it they gain a strong defensive card in the face of 'pity', which carries with it a lament of their situation. Some women rely on '*wasta*' [nepotism] to guarantee them the security of a government job, and to raise their moral and material balance in front of everyone. Some women simply give up, for there is nothing left for them but to stay in their family's home with loneliness, with anger, with waiting, and with longing for the child they have not born.

تقلّ الخيارات هنا، لتصل إلى مرحلة أن تنعدم، وأن ينغلق الدرب معها، لتجد نساء كثيرات خلاصهنّ في السعي للحصول على شهادة علمية أعلى، يضمّن من خلالها مستقبلهن واستقرارهن وموقعهن المرموق في المجتمع، ويكسبن من خلالها ورقة دفاع قوية بوجه كلمة «خطي»، التي تحمل الرثاء لوضعهنّ. بينما تلجأ بعض النساء إلى «واسطة» تضمّن لهنّ أمان ووظيفة الدولة، ليرفعن بذلك رصيدهنّ المعنوي والمادي أمام الجميع. أما من لم تحظ بهذه ولا تلك، فهي تستسلم ببساطة، ولا يبقى أمامها سوى البقاء في بيت أسرتها، مع الوحدة، مع الغضب، مع الانتظار، ومع حنين يمزق القلب لطفل لم تلده.

In another article, she writes about a girl sitting on the sidewalk crying, indifferent to the warplanes passing overhead. The girl is holding her baby, breastfeeding him, whilst covering her breast with her black headscarf. A woman in her forties cannot resist the tears of this 18-year-old girl and asks her to come with

her: 'The sympathetic 40-year-old watched the girl's tears dangle a little from the tips of her blackened eyelashes, before they fell off'.

So the girl tells her story, in which gendered violence is mixed with the violence of war. She married at the age of thirteen. Then her parents died. She had no siblings or acquaintances in Homs. Her husband smuggled them to an area outside the government's control to avoid military service. But she is not safe: 'She couldn't stand her husband's beatings, insults and drug use. She returned to Homs with her child, with no place to shelter, no money to support herself'. The girl said that she wanted to get rid of the child and asked the 40-year-old woman if she could help. 'I was forced to bring him with me, I don't know how to raise him, and I can no longer empathize with him as he reminds me of his father. I don't know what to do with him ... Can you help me? Is there a way to get rid of him?' The girl said all this whilst crying 'with her colourful eyes saturated with the blazing sparkle of childhood'. What choices did this girl have?

No one has ever written about Syria like Mona Rafea does. No one takes us so close with such vivid images and descriptions to the worries and anxieties of girls and women caught up in the war. She makes the trauma and injury visible at a time when an entire country is disappearing from view. Indeed, Syria has turned into one of those 'forgotten wars'. After eleven years of destruction, we rarely hear today about the country where over half of its population has been displaced. We rarely hear the voices of ordinary civilians trapped in this war, waiting for peace to come, fearful about the loss of their future after their past has already been taken from them.

The *everyday* then becomes the battlefield and a war zone—even when the troops and bulldozers are gone, even when soldiers and armies are no longer marching through the streets to arrest, kill or displace civilians. This interlinking of the everyday and war is what Rafea has been writing about since the start of the Syrian Revolution in March 2011. First living in Al-Waer neighbourhood in Homs when it was besieged by the Syrian government, then in a government-held neighbourhood in Homs after the siege ended, Rafea writes a history of suffering. It is a history of people who try as much as they can to live a life after loss: loss of home, loss of people, loss of money, loss of freedom, loss of status and loss of network support. It is a history that is often untold, silenced, incomplete and forgotten during times of war and its aftermath. It is a history of women, men and children whose lives are ruptured by the violence that manifests itself in everyday life.

At the end of the siege of Al-Waer, families had to teach their children to memorize songs for the government instead of for the revolutionaries. So the children quickly had to remember these songs, and pretend that they did not know any others. Even the children's drawings had to be burnt:

I would never have believed that I would participate in doing this that day, but I did participate in a group with one of the teachers to tear up and burn all the children's drawings, which were among the most beautiful of the entire Al-Waer neighbourhood drawn by the children; the teacher forgot to destroy them along with all the other evidence. Those drawings that tell with the children's eyes and hands the truth of what happened away from the gossip of adults and their exaggerations and wailing; they tell of blood, death, fear and of a deferred hope that has now become by virtue [of the situation] dead.⁵

لم أكن سأصدق أنني سأكون شريكة في ذلك ذات يوم، لكنني سأشارك إحدى المعلمات في حفلة تمزيق وحرق كل رسوم الأطفال التي كانت من أجمل ما رسمه أطفال حي الوعر كله، والتي نسيت المعلمة إتلافها مع بقية الدلائل الأخرى. تلك الرسومات التي تحكي بعيونهم وأيديهم حقيقة ما حدث بعيداً عن ثمرات الكبار وعن مبالغاتهم ونواحيهم، تحكي الدم والموت والخوف والأمل المؤجل الذي بات الآن بحكم الميث.

In her writings, Rafea offers us such scenes of an everyday life lived between the ruins and destruction, a life that somehow continues in the time of war. She paints a picture of the fears, anxieties and dreams of the people in Homs and describes their faces as she walks through the streets, imagining the worries and thoughts that occupy their minds. How do these people, she asks herself, navigate the world in their everyday lives? How do they dare to imagine the future? As if she were holding the reader's hand, she then guides us gently along to show us how life—despite everything—continues. People still choose which clothes to wear in order to look fashionable, still gather to celebrate a wedding, still mourn and grieve. Because, as Rafea says, despite our trauma, and despite the rewriting of history, 'we are still here':⁶

We are still here, in Homs. Strength still exists inside us. We walk and sleep, we eat and fear, and we dream. The important thing is that we still dream. And the only thing that we are so sure of is that no one can eradicate or remove what is in our chests, no matter how it seems otherwise.⁷

نحن ما زلنا هنا، في حمص. ما زالت الصلابة موجودة فينا. نمشي وننام ونأكل ونخاف ونحلم. المهم أننا ما زلنا نحلم. ويبقى الشيء الوحيد الذي نحن متأكدون منه أنه لا يمكن لأحد استئصال ما في صدورنا ولا نزعه، مهما بدا خلاف ذلك.

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ENDNOTES

¹ <https://aljumhuriya.net/ar/2018/09/20/ديستوبيا-رؤوس-أفلام-عن-الخوف/>

² Unless otherwise indicated, all the translations of quotes from Mona Rafeas's writing are my own. As I am not a professional translator, I apologize if I have not been able to do justice to the author's great work.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tales_from_the_Town_of_Widows

⁴ <https://aljumhuriya.net/ar/2019/02/13/كوكب-زمردة/>

⁵ <https://aljumhuriya.net/ar/2018/12/19/من-الوعر-إلى-حمص-البلد-عودة-إلى-حضر-الو/>

⁶ <https://aljumhuriya.net/en/2021/03/11/were-still-here/>

⁷ Translated by Alex Rowell.