

Stone and Flesh

'To the writer capable of seeing and thinking, free from prejudice or dogma, everything is material. Even her own life.'

Interviewed by Arzu Mildan, Varlık Magazine, May 2006

I had the strangest feeling as I was reading your latest novel, Stone and Flesh, that somehow women and men were created as materials for your novels...

I've always been intrigued by the fundamental existence of, and the relationship between the sexes. *Stone and Flesh* is a novel of passion and I took particular pains to avoid clichés. Love, lust and the communication -or lack thereof- between the sexes cover our whole lives; numerous rich and wonderful details of the human spirit are included, as are so many issues and impasses. As for love itself, the greatest universal game of all, with all its contradictions and swings; we'll never solve all our issues with love. That is why the thousand and one faces of love will always inspire literature so long as the human race survives. What I try to do is convey the emotions everyone experiences, knows and recognises into the language of literature from a distinctive point of view. And as I do so, I focus on our inner world, fantasies and memories so that I may be persuasive and enduring.

A shedload of books are published on the relationships between the sexes, mostly sprinkled with a good deal of titillation. There even are handbooks on this topic. How would you comment on this matter?

Such books find readership around the world, most are not literary, or are quite shallow and lack vision. Then there is a plethora of self-help penned under the delusion of overrated intelligence or marketing twisted, cheap sentimentality or sexuality. Books that handle relationships in truly sumptuous detail, pushing the limits of imagery and even sexuality shake us emotionally, as they successfully skirt tawdriness merit the title of literature. The rest is rubbish.

You referred to lacking vision. You're not talking of a physical disability, are you? Who could possibly become a writer in the absence of vision?

I was referring to mental blindness. To those who overestimate their familiarity with their topics. Borges, one of the greatest writers in the world may have spent the majority of his life as a blind man, but his ability to see people and the world in all their dimensions eclipsed countless pairs of sharp eyes. Seeing depends on

intelligence and sensibility. Everything that is part of life is material for the writer who can see and think unfettered by prejudices or dogmas. Even her own self and life.

Do you every feel you observe life to accumulate materials? What I mean is, do you find your actions directed by the thought, 'I might write about this one day' when you laugh, suffer, make love, or stroke a cat? Or did you somehow develop that viewpoint in time?

I won't conceal the fact that this was a frequent idea, one that still visits me from time to time. A writer has little choice but be a constant observer with a magnifying glass in her hands, and her best subject is herself. She examines herself minutely, seeking understanding before she can start. But of course you can't live like a detective all the time. I become excessively sensitive and much more observant as I write, wandering around with all antennae fully open, which is emotionally exhausting. That's probably why I separate my periods of writing and living. A good deal accumulates of its own accord during my relaxation period: sounds, instantaneous images, times, colours and smiles. And then, as I write, much I thought I'd forgotten suddenly pops up into the conscious. I use all that in a variety of ways. Then there are dreams. I have been known to rearrange and write my dreams.

Allow me to ask you how much 'material' in Stone and Flesh came from you.

A good deal in terms of my starting point, of what I've accumulated, internalised or observed. However, at the stage where you convert your ideas into words within a given structure, the story gains its independence from you. This is due to the fact that real life is largely ordinary. Literature makes it extraordinary and language gives it colour and flavour. In the novel's world, characters alter, events flourish and situations are transformed as they diversify. The novelist finds herself taking exits she had not considered previously as she writes, creates new storylines, ultimately becoming an enthusiastic spectator watching the treasury of her own imagination.

Ulya, the protagonist of Stone and Flesh, is constantly accompanied by an inner voice that questions, judges and deduces. She may seem braver than the other characters, but she is not. Their age difference prevents her from growing closer to Sina. In addition, Ulya is half German, and a woman who considers herself emotionally free... What, in your opinion, enslaves even educated women into this male-dominant viewpoint?

There are many women who –in theory- believe themselves to have overcome this

obstacle. But when it comes to the practice, those mental walls are very difficult to surmount. We women may display sufficient effort and courage to free ourselves from these chains, but we're never entirely free of the fear: the risk of being abandoned, suffering, humiliation, for instance. Women of a certain age may feel vulnerable in the face of the cult of youth and beauty. Lusty women on the wrong side of middle age suppress their own desires driven by the fear of old age, no longer being desirable; worse still is the fear of facing scorn. It's like buried alive. Men, on the other hand, rarely face such clear restrictions. One of the main themes of my novel involves the disparity in the standards and perceptions when it comes to the sexes.

Ulya says, 'Sometimes something happens, and it takes me a while to realise what it is not.' There is a delay in our perception of much that takes place, the sadness that emanates from being late, missing something, and the worry of irreversibility... This sensation has been following me since Dead Male Birds...

Time is one of my main themes. In *Stone and Flesh*, I question how we perceive time. I suspect I structure the philosophical dimension of my novels on the relationship between people and time: being late, missing something, being unable to go back... All this is truly poignant, which is why I focus so much on recollections and flashbacks. I convert the present into a flexible simple present tense, and ruthlessly forage inside the memory as I wander around within. 'However unreliable memories may be, albeit glossed over...'

Ulya and Sina failed to connect romantically, at least as might have been expected, prevented as much by their own inner worlds as their widely divergent lifestyles. They were both shaken to the core. Ulya struggles to work out later what it was that they had. Is she a little conservative perhaps? Why can't she even open up to her own sister?

She does, but abandons the attempt when she realises that words, definitions and familiar love affair expectations prove inadequate to express that emotional connection, worse, that details trivialise her story.

Ulya and Sina both have suffered losses, that is, their pasts determine their emotions and behaviour; there even is a connection due to B. They're not indifferent to politics, which provides another main guideline for the novel. You have consistently included the political developments of our recent part in your novels. And yet you're never referred to as a 'political writer'. How do you explain this?

I establish a historical background in my novels, and ask at the start: which year and time? Where, and what was happening there at the time? How were these people positioned? The answers take me to an era, to a situation. I worry that the characters will lack credibility if I fail to establish the spirit of the time. I am convinced that the projection on individuals' lives of continual economical, social and political change in unsettled and turbulent societies such as ours offer the novelist wide opportunities. I make good use of this wealth to spare my novels, characters and their lives from shallowness. True, I don't write political novels, but there is a political dimension to how I view everything and everyone. Thank you for your comment all the same, since the temptation to affix crude labels and pigeonholing people is prevalent in our society. My novels have yet to be examined in sufficient depth. For instance, I am not, and never have been, a writer who only focuses on women's issues, or on love. But I create worlds where these things exist, because that's how life is.

Is there any difference in writing and creating between the time you published your first novel and now? What I mean is, have you developed methods to ease the way as you establish your novel, or is it still as painful as it once was, or take as long as it once did?

It used to be much easier for me to write. Perhaps because I wrote only short stories. I used to create a story in one sitting, in one night, but no longer. Novels demand much more in terms of time and dedication. And since I tend to be hard to please, I may even be spending even longer on the manuscript. I write and re-write each word and sentence over and over again. I can only produce my novels after much deliberation, days and days of desperate hard work, since I agonise over the tension, the style, artistic intensity and intellectual dimension. Not much has changed, in other words.

You are a highly productive writer, with four books published in the last five years. An indication, perhaps, that you have overcome this difficult process of writing?

Quite possibly because all I do is write. I do try to use my time effectively. And using a computer has increased my speed significantly. The other thing is housework: a regular cleaner is hugely helpful. I no longer go out much, preferring to stay at home and work hard. And finally, the reader's interest is a massive encouragement.

Renewed interest with every new book, flattery, being remembered and popularity... You were always held in high esteem, and now that the popularity phenomenon encompasses

writers, visibility, magazine covers and bill-boards come as a matter of course... What does all that mean to you?

This interest is highly flattering, of course, but it did take time and hard work. Strange as it might sound, but all I want to do is disappear from view once the book is published. To avoid obligations, exhaustion and tension. Not to have to explain my book, trusting the insight of the reader and the critic instead. Sadly that's not how the system works any longer. Unless you're prepared to support your own book, it vanishes along with you, sinks into the silence. Whether we like it or not, books have also become commercialised. So many are published, and competition is rife. The publisher, who's invested in the product has to market it, and to comply with the requirements of the publishing market, or go bankrupt. I do support the launch of my book within the parameters previously agreed with the publisher, and it is important that the publisher respect my principles, but I don't necessarily enjoy being in the limelight. It makes me a little grumpy. I try to put up with it and long to retire back into my own world.

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