

## Heavier Than Radwa: ' Radwa', a Human Being , a Mountain , a Nation

Dr Nayera El Miniawi  
Associate Professor-Balqaa Applied University-Amman,Jordan

### Abstract

This paper will attempt to survey how the book entitled "Athqal Min Radwa"-Heavier than Radwa by the writer Radwa Ashour is a work that, as its title indicates, is a life story of an individual and also a historic story of a revolution of a nation to which the writer belongs. How the two stories of suffering and fighting are intertwined will be the target of this paper. The name 'Radwa' is a pun which refers to the author's first name as well as the name of a mountain in the Arabian Peninsula. The novel is a braided narrative of Radwa's experience as a cancer patient. It is a survey of a battle against difficult odds in the protagonist's life. It is also a historic book of resistance and fighting of a people against an oppressive political system. The research paper will survey how the book is a historic testimony as well as a literary document of the highest caliber. The special style characteristics will be surveyed to show how the content is delivered through the rich form. Stylistically the work abounds with rich narrative techniques, description, figures of speech, dialogues, monologues, and a variety of poetic lyrical quotations.

**Keywords:** Autobiography, pain and suffering, battles against cancer, Arab Spring uprising, revolution

### Spotlights on the Writer and the Book

Radwa Ashour is a university professor, a writer, a literary critic, a translator, and a human being. She is a person who is haunted by pain and suffering, not because of one single pain but two. In this book she represents these two pains. Ashour writes about a personal grievance and another one that was a whole nation's pain.

The first obvious pain in her book is the physical one that is caused by being inflicted with brain cancer. She has undergone five surgeries in the US in addition to enduring the pain of 25 chemotherapy sessions trying desperately to stop the spread of the disease in her body. In the first ten chapters of her novel, the writer focuses on her struggle against cancer: "...Four operations to the head ,each requiring nine to ten hours in order to remove parts of the skull bone and brain membrane. After two failed attempts to implant brain tissue, a Scottish surgeon is called on to perform something that can only be called a miracle."(El Wardani ).

This wasn't the only pain for the writer; however, the second pain is represented by a sentimental and psychological pain that affects the pride and the human desire in a life that is not marred by injustice, oppression, humiliation and tied freedoms.

Radwa shares similar feelings of physical pain, suffering, and sometimes emotional pain with nations.

The public pain was a result of the feeling of injustice, oppression, persecution, and even torture by dominant powers upon everything, whether by rulers, implementers of arbitrary decisions, security authorities, or even unfair academic leaders.

In her Book *Heavier Than Radwa* , the author gathers between both the general and the personal, the past and the present, the comic and the sarcastic, and the saddening in a style that carries a lot of significance of the book that its title inspires us, with the heaviness and steadiness of a mountain of the Arabian Peninsula. The mountain signifies the heaviness and the pressure of the pain and at the same time the heaviness, steadiness ,and the strength of facing the pain and oppression whether on a personal or general level.

The writer says: "The Doctor(her grandfather) has chosen the name 'Tariq' to his grandchild just like Tariq Bin Zeyad who has set Al Andalus free, and also like the ' Mountain Tariq' ".

However, when the grandchild was a girl (The writer herself Radwa), he chose a name of another mountain located near Al Madina Al Monwara, which Arabs used to take it as an example for steadiness saying (Be heavier than Radwa). Some Shiat teams say that the hidden Imam Mohammad bin Al Hanafeya lives there till it's the time for him to show up, and by then he will spread justice in the world instead of injustice. (Ashour, 6).

Thus, it is a symbol of the steadiness of the human, Radwa, the daughter, the wife, the professor, the historian, the political activist in front of all the pains as well as representing the steadiness of nations and proving its strength in spite of the pain which the writer shows by mixing the Arab Spring Revolutions which spread like wildfire to show the steadiness and the strength of nations' voice in front of political tyranny that believed that he will never lose the power. However, this has collapsed by the strength of crowds even if some were injured or even dead.

Since the public revolution has begun in Tunisia when Bou Azizi has burnt himself, this pain and death has become the flame of the public revolution that has extended from Tunisia to Egypt and other countries. Our author portrays the Egyptian revolution in the light of certain events or pictures that have taken place in some

Arab countries. In Tunisia, the picture of a street vendor –Bou Azizi– setting fire to himself and burning to death on the street has raged and ignited anger and revolution in the hearts of millions of Arab people both young and old.

A second picture which has also spread through the media is a TV footage of an elderly Tunisian citizen who talks from the heart about a generation to which he belongs. He laments that they have aged: they have become old, and they are exhausted and fed up.

Another image is one of a young Egyptian man whose name is Khaled Said. The camera of the writer now shifts to Egypt. Haled is a handsome young man who is arrested by the police. He is then beaten up to death in an attempt to force him to confess of a crime that he has not committed. His picture before his death with a beaming smile contrasts tragically with an after his death picture which shows a tortured and disfigured face. His pictures 'before' and 'after' his killing has inflamed more public anger and ignited revolutionary feelings.

Another important images that are portrayed in Radwa's book are those of the young martyrs faces with their smiles, and again their 'before and 'after' pictures. It is explained that many of those have chosen to scarify their lives in the front rows of the confrontations with the police force on the streets in order to spare the lives of the more educated who were given a safer more secure positions in the street battles to keep them safe as they would be the leaders in the future.

The Tahrir Square in Cairo has become a major image of resistance against the leadership and government and solidarity among the people. The media showed coverage of millions of people streaming to the square in a unified stand against the state's status quo demanding a change in the present regime.

Again another picture of a street vendor is depicted by Ashour. This time unlike the Tunisian vendor who has burnt himself alive, that Egyptian vendor is a 'beleelah seller' in Tahrir square. 'Beleelah is a type of sweets made of grains of peeled wheat in milk and sugar and nuts. "... To Ashour, in this outstanding carnival-like cultural confluence the Egyptians are marvelously employing all the inherited and acquired energies in service of the revolutionary act. The beleelah vendor would shout ' The beleelah carriage sends greetings to the Egyptian people .Our beleelah is with nuts ,raisins and almond .' "( Elnamoury,p.3).

Ashour describes how personal and general pain has been united as follows:

"It is a coincidence that I'm now under the surgery in the hands of two surgeons who are using their scalpels in my head, and Tunisia is under fire after Bou Azizi has burnt himself. There is no relation between the two events, but I'm linking them because of history. Not both of the events are related to me directly but it might affect my life and how it will go on. I will watch the old man who says, "This is your chance ,Tunisian youth. You can give Tunisia what we couldn't give because we got old." He stresses the articulation of sounds, as if this would give him a chance to overcome a lump in his throat or a restrained tear. "The personal pain represents and resembles the general pain" He repeats "We got old ,"and trying to reach this historical moment. This man's face, hair, and speech take me back to my own self-image, and utter with my own tongue, me, Radaw, the daughter of Meyyeh Mostafa, the woman in her sixties who got old for such a moment. The video that was on all TV channels on the 14<sup>th</sup> of January, made me cry, and yes I did cry though crying was a luxury that I couldn't have afforded in those days".

(Ashour,48-49)

### **The Style of the Book**

*Heavier than Radwa* is an autobiography and not at the same time. It is a biography of a human being who is erudite, delicate, and who also plays many roles in her life just like millions of people."In the case of writing this overt autobiography, I do not need but to look around, behind and inside myself to see or to remember as though I were engaged in a process of copying...where th mind alone tells what I have already experienced, seen and felt. As though it were a machine fed by memory, producing words... .Who says that the events and figures have been already inscribed? Their presence in the real world does not mean that they are inscribed, since writing them requires reading ,formulating them and finding relationships that connect them in a coherent structure.(Ashour,pp.252-253). The reader can feel how the writer mixes the personal with the general. We can see her there in the inflamed events in Al-Tahrir Square and others of Egypt's streets while she is at the top of pain wearing a big hat to protect her head that has serious surgery effects. She is there with her body, but her soul and mind are there in the middle of the national pain. She can see as well as the reader through it the sites of disorder, hoopla, revolution, and suffering, whether it was at universities, Egyptian streets or at homes, the homes and houses of pain.

Radwa Ashour says :

"The repression authority has used many ways to stop this, for example, breaking up the protests by violence, following the revolutionists, beating them up, arresting them, torturing them and handing them to military trials, or even simply killing them deliberately with armored vehicles, and then their skulls got broken and their limbs got cut-off, or a direct hit or shot in the head or eyes, or nerve gas, which is internationally forbidden.

They will never go (repression authority) but by a lot of blood. My old hunch was not mistaken, but my

mind couldn't anticipate this savage way, where blood is being shed in a massacre after another and an incident after the other". (Ashour,211-212).

This symmetry and similarity between pain, wound and the blood of the public crowds just like what has happened with Albugaizi, Radwa Ashur and many others.

Radwa writes about how she was in deep pain and then she smiled because Mubarak has fallen down! She says:

"I fall asleep and wake up; doctors and nurses come; give me some medicines, some strong pain killers, when Moreed and Tamim said to me (Moreed Al Barghouthi is the husband and Tamim is the son): "Congratulations, Mubarak has been toppled." I wasn't able to jump over the bed, to cheer up, to laugh and not even to participate in the conversation, so I just smiled." (Ashour, 76).

The book is under studying; it is an autobiography because the name of the writer Radwa has written the title, but at the same time, it is not only her name; it is a name of a mountain, a title of a situation and some human attributes that impose itself on individuals and people. The writer says "It is a writer's project to write an autobiography by starting to talk about my mother, my father and my siblings. Then she moves on to talk about the part of her own stories. I was 64 years old when I started writing it. I understand that these years will inevitably escape from their boundaries because the different age stages are known as overflowing our lives, and jumping without permission to what came before or around, and extends in a complex history and geography". (Ashour, 7).

The historical and geographical dimensions have main features in the narrative of Radwa Ashour's book. The geography and safety dominate the events of the book: some in Egypt, Tunisia, and USA, hospitals, universities, streets, squares and others in an accurate detail and of profound implications. The historical dimension is characterized by the accuracy of the historian and the creativity of the author of the autobiography. Different time layers of the past and the older past nested professionally with the present and perhaps anticipate some rays of hope in the future.

The writer mixes the past with the present just as she does in mixing tragedy with irony lightly and fluently. "In the middle of this twisted drama, both comical and wailing, there was another kind of drama taking place, not on stage or a political scene, but in my head. The speech here ladies and gentlemen is not metaphorical; I mean my own physical head that consists of brain, nerves, tissues and bones, skin, and an annoying tumor behind my right ear, which begins very small just like an almond and then starts to grow up."(Ashour, 23).

The book language is Standard Arabic and sometimes it is mixed up with some colloquial language when a situation requires reality and variety of the speech.

The writer quotes or cites a poem for the son Tamim Al Barghouthi which is from the public poetry in an Egyptian accent, which she considers as a motive for the youth to go to streets and express their pains, anger and revolution. Tamim says at the beginning of his poem:

"Hey Egypt, it is too close, it's only a couple of days and everything will show up  
Our day has called us, and the day of villain is not appearing  
Only a piece of misfortune is remaining from this country  
If you don't believe me, just come to the square and see for yourself  
Hey people, there is no ruler but of the imagination of the doomed people  
Those who will stay at their homes after this will be considered as traitors."  
(Ashour,64)

Radwa Ashur is reviewing the events – even the painful ones-objectively and accurately just like the scalpels of a surgeon, and at the same time she is narrating things emotionally and intimately makes the reader sometimes cry and sometimes laugh owing to her ironic style of her disease, herself and owing to different human attitudes.

You can see Radwa the lady of sixties who has a childish sense, who sometimes kicks something in the street stealthily before anyone could see her, and so think that this woman has lost her mind.

Her style is distinguished by the use of proverbs and folkloric songs that sometimes highlight her idea without overeating or overloading. For example, at the midst of her physical pain, when the surgeon wanted to remove the bandage totally from the injuries, the writer expresses her pain taking the advice of Sayed Darwish's song about porters. The opening lines say:

Get your belt tightened; it is the only thing that would be useful for you"  
It will come a day where your master will get it fixed  
If it really bothers you to carry things upon your back,  
It is just better for, you hey, free man than ask others for financial help."

Asking others for financial help in the songs turns here to have another sense,

i.e., that is asking for moral help even if both meanings here signify an action that breaks human pride. (Ashour, 92).

"Heavier than Radwa" is a story of a nation retold through the personal story of the author and

protagonist –Radwa.It is a story which a mountain range provides the pun in its title and sheds the general tone or mood of strength and steadfastness that colour the 'mountain' as well as its name barrier –'Radwa' the human being and the 'nation' to which she belongs. It is a story of a fight, a battle and a victory on two parallel levels: a woman against her illness (cancer) , and a mother country against oppressive circumstances.

*Heavier than Radwa* is an autobiography as well as being a historical biographical document .The book is like a mosaic of thousands of little details of incidents and images where the particular and personal form and reflect the public and general . It is a story of suffering, endurance and victory of both a nation and a woman 'in other words- a mother country' and a ' mother'.

## References

### Primary Source:

Asour,Radwa. Athqal min Radwa (Heavier than Radwa ),Dar Al Shorouk Publishing , Cairo, 2013.

### Secondary Sources:

Elnamoury,Mona.Radwa Ashour on the Train of Images in the Egyptian Revolution .Arabic Literature.By MIYNXQUALEY,on February 19,2012.

El-Wardani,Mahmoud .Book Review: Ashour Battles Cancer,Old Regime,and Regimes in Newest Work.The Arab Spring Conference.

<http://englishahram.org.eg/News/86782.aspx>.Monday,18 November,2013.

El- Wardani, Mahmoud .Book Review : Radwa Ashour's Last Words. Ahram online. Wednesday 24 June 2015.

Orabi, Osama. In "Heavier than Radwa"-Autobiography and the Aesthetics of Confession ,September 5,2013)

Turner,G.W. Stylistics .A Penguin Books Ltd. England.1973.

### Further Reading:

Al-Hassan Golley,Nawar.Arab Women's Lives Retold-Exploring Identity through Writing.The American University in Cairo Press.2007.

Al-Hassan Golley,Nawar.Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies-Shahrazad Tells Her Story.University of Texas Press. Austin.U.S.A. .2003.

Ashour , Radwa, Ferial Ghazoul, Hasna Reda Mekdashi (eds.).Arab Women Writers .The American University in Cairo Press .Cairo & New York.2008.

Sabbagh,Suha (ed.).Arab Women Between Defiance and Restraint . Olive Branch Press. U.S.A. 2003.

Widdowson, H.G. Practical Stylistics .Oxford University Press.1992