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## The Political and the Cultural: A Conversation with Samar Yazbek

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Nayla Mansour interviews Syrian novelist and human rights advocate Samar Yazbek on Syrian politics, Assad's triumph and Islamist counter-revolutionaries, and the role of intellectuals and politicians amidst all of the mess.

NM: Why the silence, these last three years?

SY: It's been caused by a complex and interrelated set of reasons that lie between the personal, the general, aspects of organising my work, and some illness. I was in the process of setting up an institutional civil society project, and I was completely engrossed in it. I established the project with a team of women, and it was an important experience for us all, because we tried to create a democratic team and dive into the muddy waters of that vast moral morass. Along the way we had experiences that inspired us to be optimistic, to persist in our work and to insist on its importance, as well as experiences that reflected the destruction in our country; but the team was determined to continue working with integrity, in whatever way was least harmful to us and to others. This required a great deal of mental effort, and was a strain on the nervous system. We were a group of women attempting to find a democratic formula in our work that would avoid recreating the autocratic mode, so as to formulate a new vision of our relationship with work in general. This was an attempt to restore confidence in the spirit of collective work, and activate positive initiatives.

I have also been on the move, travelling around to take part in talks about the Syrian question, because I thought it was really important for us to address the Western media establishments and especially the Western political, civil and cultural gatherings and rallies. And I was also busy recording testimonies of Syrian fighters and activists in the North and in the diaspora. These testimonies were dense, and vast, and I needed to let them out and produce a book of them. Completing that book was the most painful task of my life. After I finished writing *The Gates of Nothingland*' (Published in English translation as *The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria*.) I

went through a period of illness and essential treatment. It was a gruelling phase, but it was useful: I went back to reading, and to organising things in my mind. At that time I was writing about the Syrian question for a number of European newspapers and magazines, and in the midst of all that I found myself beginning to write a new novel, which I have only just recently finished.

The violent conflict which we have witnessed – a conflict of barbarisms that contains within it a great popular revolution – has been like an earthquake. It's hell! Lately I've found my language to be insufficient in the face of it. There is another issue, which is that I don't feel the need to constantly declare my political positions and political identity, or to justify something or other. And I have to say that a quantum leap has happened in my life, and the nature of my relationship with the world, which has been completely recast. Ultimately, I am a writer, and I would prefer to remain a niche or marginal writer; that marginal place, that niche, is what I dream of, and what I am striving to get back to – the place that Virginia Woolf describes in *A Room of One's Own*. I am also attempting to make plans for my work, to avoid social media for periods of time, and organise the way I get things done. I see the act of working and accomplishing things as part of a certain accumulation of knowledge, and I see knowledge as resistance to hatred, because it enables things to be explained and unpicked. And that clarity is what we need, it's the goal we have been aiming for as a species throughout history: for the possibility of a dignified, free, and just life among diverse people, with as few defeats and losses as possible.

So it seems, from what you are saying, that you are spontaneously trying to preserve your individuality, or your

position as a writer. As an observer, one feels that you have refrained from political work or from joining any political body: you have refused to be a representative of the Syrian opposition, or to be part of a body representing it, although that role has been offered to you. This abstinence leads us to ask you about your definition of political work and political action, and why you have not been part of any political body?

I'm not a very social person, and I'm a bit cranky, which is not compatible with political work. I've got multiple aspects to my identity, but political work is not one of them, or not in the traditional sense of the word. I feel that currently the most useful political work is to do 'vacuum packing,' by means of the institutional civil society project that I mentioned earlier. This means that we are able to invent politics from within the very heart of the violence and build the capacity of people on the ground inside the country, or in the communities of refuge, so that they can continue the resistance. That way we won't find ourselves in a complete vacuum once the war is over. If we continue supporting those people they will be capable of leading society and bringing about the change that is desired, thereby allowing us to nurture embryonic cultural and development institutions to full term, so as fill the looming void. That void is one of the forms of nothingness that I have been seeing approach for more than three years (and that features in the title of my book). I see myself in this project. I also have an obsession that the West is trying to use us: the institutions of the opposition, as well as the international institutions that manipulate the Syrians' fate, all want to use us. Political and democratic work has its people, but I'm not one of them - I believe that my cultural, media and development role is a political act.

When we talk about the revolution, and work, and so on, you use the pronoun 'us.' How would you define 'us' using another phrase - what is your sense of belonging, of affiliation? Or how do you define yourself politically within your multiple identities?

'We' are those who are still in conflict with Assad, fighting under a national democratic agenda, since the first moment of the revolution, and in conflict with Daesh, and al-Nusra Front and the jihadi militias, and all those who have hijacked our conflict. We are a very weak third side in the conflict.

Can you give a definition of this side you mention? A socio-economic and political definition? Can you give a description of this side's features?

It has no features! And that's the dangerous thing, it's not a coherent faction or bloc, it's a collection of individuals and small factions that are not sufficiently interlinked, and I think that this side will remain in that state of fragmentation and division for a long time to come. It is not possible to define the human factions now as they are variable, shifting and displaced. We are talking about a war that hasn't ceased in five years, an unceasing earthquake.

So where did the phrase 'national agenda' come from then? There must be an inclusive political position or some narrative there!

It's based on certain principles from which the peaceful protest movement started out - certain basic demands that people went out into the streets to make in the beginning. Because of those constants, those principles, I say that we are are fighting for our homeland. Throughout the timeline

of the revolution I have been staring at that fixed point from which the popular protest movement began, and that has been my own constant. As for the 'us' I refer to, it's fragmented in this shuddering earthquake that's shaking us all along with it. So it's difficult for us to name a collective inclusive self at the moment: there are many obstacles in the way, and it will take a long time for us to come together into a single cohesive bloc. Perhaps our children, or our grandchildren, will be able to do so.

I'll put the question differently - because the answer is important to many categories of Syrians, who may be more numerous than they are believed to be: why has the shuddering earthquake altered the principles of so many Syrians, but not of the group you are talking about?

I think that the crimes and violence that people have been subjected to would have easily been enough to turn them all into monsters, but this has not happened across the board. That was proved by what happened recently during the short truce, when groups of Syrian people went back to protesting and abandoned the black flag, raising the revolutionary flag instead. I see the movement of history within its temporal context, within the movement of historical groups, and within the circumstances of the production of violence itself. Those people did not simply give in to reactions: new circumstances were created in their lives, and these were circumstances that triggered certain things in their lives. The violent conditions have not arisen spontaneously, whether it be arming the Islamist groups, or the introduction of immigrant fighters into Syria, or the impoverishment of the Free Syrian Army and the assassination of its senior leaders, or the distribution of Islamic brigades or Daesh across the map, or the various

movements that I can no longer keep track of – as I think many of us no longer can – and their chaotic prevalence, and the rise of mercenaries. And also the climate was perfect for all of this to unfold, after half a century of despotic rule by the Assad family and the unprecedented barbaric violence to which the Syrian people have been subjected.

It's clear that what has happened has not simply been following the natural course of the protest, as it started out; there has been a deliberate intervention in order to derail it. There has been an international and regional intervention, delineated by the intelligence services, the details of which we may perhaps come to know in the future, after the fact. We are currently in the midst of it all. What I wanted to say was that people are in such inner turmoil right now that they are not rising up, because the current humanitarian conditions are atrocious. People may change because a long time has passed, and it may be hard to build new generations in the right way for the foreseeable future. The shifts that have happened are related to the interests of the major states, who have made Assad into a long arm with which to bring about the destruction of Syria, with Iran and Russia's help, and American and Western back-up. Post-independence Syria was a fledgling state which could have become a democratic one, but it was strangled by successive military coups culminating in the Baathist one, and then finally Assad the father's military coup. When we look at that continuous collapse, and the nadir that we have reached, we see the sectarian violence that has exploded, and we can see why we who are in conflict over our homeland with Assad have not been able to form a single united hand. We see why our intellectuals have not been able to form – as the intellectuals of Germany did during

the Second World War – a firewall for the process of change. And we see how the violence machine's jagged blades have skinned us alive and torn into us, in terms of our human relationships. This collective self that your question urges me to identify does not exist: it's in tatters.

So that means that the members of the group you mentioned, who are persisting in the notion of 'fighting for the homeland,' have not all been subjected to the same humanitarian conditions, and that may be the reason for our fragmentation: we are not all subjected to the same violence. So does that mean that this group is not capable of defining itself politically, at present?

We have definitely not all been subjected to the same violence. What violence we have been exposed to, although it is of course real, has been much less, because ultimately we have survived, and that is important to acknowledge. It's essential that someone lives and carries on: we have survived in order to extend as bridges, to be witnesses to the crimes against humanity that have been committed by the world, and are still being committed. I wake up every morning and ask myself how the sun is able to rise once again. How? With all those who have died? With all the victims who I feel in my throat as I breathe? How can we carry on reaching out, as bridges? It requires a great deal of toughness, and among my multiple identities I have a lot of that – as well as a lot of fragility. To work on extending bridges might sometimes seem like a slow death, and that applies to everything: love, friendship, the relationship with Syria, the relationship with the West which is sometimes trying to use us and attempting to turn us into a tool. How can I resist? How can I remain in the margin I dream of, as a writer, when an attempt is made to use me? I define myself



as a different being to what those narrow frameworks delineate. In my opinion the role of the intellectual is to expand her knowledge and develop herself, and expand and develop her defences against ugliness in all its forms, from Assad, to the fundamentalist militias, right down to the West's well worn attempts to use us, or the violence directed at us from our own side.

A large bloc of Syrians want to live in security, and want to get rid of Assad and his regime. The just thing would be for us to put ourselves in their place, and then see how we manage under those conditions and judge ourselves on that basis. From there, the collective self would start to form. I also feel that we - we who have not been dragged along behind certain parties' interests or behind sectarian discourse - we are becoming ever fewer in number. This is because our morale is being exterminated (even if not our physical bodies), or we are being abducted or disappeared, or because we retreat far away for fear of sinking into the filth. That's the big question: who are 'we'? I don't dare to ask that question at the moment, and instead I'm trying to shatter the evil bit by bit, without thinking about all of it at once.

Anyone who follows your process will notice that there is always the desire there to establish moral positions. There is a consistency in the nature and the amount of work, there is caution around political participation, and a persistent national discourse. There is also the desire for solitude as a writer who has not been completely submerged by the reality of the situation and still writes, is still present. Could you see, in advance of it happening, that you might become an example? Or did it all happen by pure coincidence?

I'm not an example, and I'm not fit to be an example, neither in my personal life nor in public life. All there is to it is that I'm a woman who refuses all types of repressive and hypocritical institutions. I uprooted myself, and for the first time here in exile I feel that I was uprooted from something which I did not want to be uprooted from. I uprooted myself from the institution of the family and from my cultural and social circles, to get married. And there were usually little battles being fought around me without my taking any interest in their outcomes. Sometimes I don't know how to behave towards the battles that revolve around me and about me. How can inferiority be discussed, for example?! I'm not an example and I don't want to be an example, that idea is inhuman and tends towards the creation of idols. We don't designate someone as an example or a hero until they die, or if their performance takes on superhuman qualities.

But it seems that you have a certain tendency, whether conscious or unconscious, to be a heroine - at least in terms of the social losses that you talked about. Wouldn't you say so?

I'm not a heroine! That was a personal choice I made long before the revolution. And that is the context of my personality: I did not take into consideration the narrow-minded society and the way it saw me. I always coveted my personal freedom, and wanted to make my dream come true - I wanted to become a writer. And that's what happened, because I was not subjected to the narrow prescriptive frame. And I don't know why the private and the public were intertwined and overlapping in my life to such an extent, sometimes I would take decisions that seemed crazy to others, but I knew exactly where they

would take me.

That's what I mean: you knew where those decisions would take you . . .

Yes, that was usually the case, but not always.

Where does that awareness of yours spring from?

I was aware of the importance of innovation, and of overcoming the barriers of fear, in order to create freedom. Perhaps from my painful personal experiences, or my passion for reading? From a certain sensitivity inside me? I am still researching the question of freedom. I have had a lot of intense conflicts, both within my character and with the society around me, and I have tried everything that I wanted to experience. I'm forty-five years old now, I've seen a lot of different places in this world, and I'm also discovering how life is made out of mistakes. And I've discovered that my capacity for confrontation is strong, but in my own way, not by getting involved in little battles. Things were being said about me that I didn't recognise at all! I would follow them with curiosity, and carry on allowing myself the luxury of only lazily following the lives that other people imagined for me. I think that my consciousness was formed bit by bit out of my life experiences and my writing. I consider myself to be someone who is just trying to be a writer, and I will continue in this way. That has made me understand the importance of the margin, the niche: not so that my voice is not be heard or not present, but in the sense of my not being an image and an instrument of something conventional and from the usual mould. For that reason I am conscious of the choices I have made, and I always say that freedom is hard and slavery is very easy,

love is hard and hate is very easy. One of the hardest formulas to balance is for our voice to be heard while we preserve the marginal position that we desire for ourselves.

Let's talk about your critical stance. The distance, or the margin, of which you speak is also a critical margin: you were critical and discerning, in *The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria*, looking at consequences and warning of them. How would you map your critical response to the situation, thinking chronologically from the beginning of the popular uprising until now, taking in the major phases?

So that I don't get caught up in the details that a chronological description of a difficult and complex period like the Syrian situation would require, I'll just say that I was a witness, and that I saw with my own eyes how the fight for the homeland turned into a revolution and then into a war and an international conflict using Syria as its battleground and the Syrians as its fuel. But I saw that the revolution was still ongoing in a certain way, powerfully resisting getting suffocated, despite the agreement the entire world had reached to kill it off by means of everything from Assad's tyranny to religion's tyranny and the tyranny of the international community.

NM: You are aware of the international game being played out in Syria, and of the complexity and difficulty of the situation on the ground. Do you have a vision of how we might mitigate the impact of this international game on us?

SY: It's not possible to relieve it completely! We just do what we can. Of course I'm aware of the hell we are living through, but I work as if we were still in the first days of the

revolution. That doesn't mean I turn a blind eye to the defeat of the dream, however: I call things by their true names, I don't beat about the bush. This is a defeat, but it will be temporary, because some day this barbarity will have to stop. We must open our arms to defeat, just like we open them to victory, and that is how we must also greet the violence directed at us as individuals and as groups. We must face it, not turn away from it. We must face it in the most feasible and human ways we can, so as to move forwards in creating justice. And we must bear witness, in front of everyone else, to what has happened. Telling our stories is part of resisting this defeat, so that others cannot fabricate our memories as they always have done, historically.

Is this international game inevitable?

It seems that there is something bigger than all of us. And it seems to me that we have entered, in our region, a barbaric conflict that has a religious shell, but a political and economic core. And we are pawns. How can we persevere with dreaming, in the midst of all this? I don't know. I will not live in a fantasy world and say that we have brought down Assad: we haven't brought him down because he is protected internationally. We know who is protecting the militias, as well, and we know what the Free Syrian Army's situation is, and we know about the psychological, social and economic meltdowns happening today in Syrian society. We know the huge tax that the Syrians are paying right now, whether inside the country or in their places of refuge, and we know that it is the poor who pay the highest price of all. Even among Assad's supporters, the poorest of them are paying the price for this savage war.

Let's talk about multiple identities, a topic that's close to your heart. In the feminist sense of the word 'multiple,' or 'plurality' [these words are both from the same root in Arabic] are you conscious of your presence as a woman in the social realm, and of your identity as a rebel fond of uprooting herself from institutions? And are you also conscious of belonging to a social stratum which we are obliged to classify politically as upper middle class?

Yes, middle class.

This class enjoyed a certain "margin" in its daily life in the shadow of the regime's oppressive rule, as long as it did not declare its direct political opposition to that regime. So did your political consciousness form as an individual aspiration, independent of the social norms within your class?

Yes, it's my choice. I could have taken a different position, I was given many opportunities to - but that was my choice. And I'm not linked to a specific class, I have always made choices and uprooted myself. When I read Judith Butler's book *Giving an Account of Oneself*, in which she talks about the self's relationship with the other, I recognised what she describes in the book from the personal experiences I had had long before reading it, perhaps even from my childhood. My joy at discovering that book was immense. Books change me, and influence the way I manage the pivotal junctures of my life. I'll sum it up for you: my relationship with justice and conscience is a pivotal relationship. That does not mean that I don't make mistakes, or that I have not made them in the past: wading in life sometimes requires wading in mud.

We're still hovering around the obvious individual dimension to this experience . . .

Yes, there is an individual dimension, and there is a narcissism that is summed up in our idealistic idea of ourselves. But I believe that experience and actual life are the ultimate standard – nothing is an absolute for me, nothing begins and nothing ends in this sense. I see things within their context related to time. That's why I try to work with the evil that's woven around us and unravel it, undo the knots in the tangle. But let's be frank, it's very painful! And it usually leads one to isolation.

I am still not quite reaching a political definition of the people like you, the middle class which was not directly hurt by the regime in the day-to-day, but sided with the revolution nevertheless. This supplementary definition, adding to what you mentioned earlier about the group that is fighting under a national agenda, is essential if we are to produce a political discourse beyond the individual, and speak with the legitimacy of the struggle against tyranny, unlike certain other groups which we do not see as our allies.

It's a moral bias, a tendency towards revolution and justice. In my case it is my role as a writer and an intellectual concerned with the process of change and beauty. As for the middle class, I think that it is complicated: we can't really talk about a 'Syrian middle class'. There are a great many generalisations that are all too easily made when describing the Syrian situation. One of the things that we are waiting for is some precise research and analysis about the Syrian situation, some work that really looks at each region of Syria within its specific circumstances and

conditions. What the middle class did in Damascus was different to what the middle class did in Homs, for example, or in the area around Aleppo. What happened there cannot be compared with the area around Damascus. There are of course lots more details to this than we have time and space for here.

And is a bias, or a tendency, enough to produce politics?

No. There is a political vacuum. We as individuals took sides, but we did not have a healthy relationship with political work, nor with political parties. We were not able to form political parties. We were looking at things from a place of dependency, so we laid the responsibility for all our problems at the feet of the regime. We also currently claim that Islam is being globally persecuted but, without producing at the same time a profound critique of the structure of Islam. We are individual selves who cannot form a collective self - we are defeated in this respect. I am defeated, part of my experience is that defeat. As I said before, we must face this defeat bravely and openly, without forgetting the principles of our initial fight for the homeland under a national agenda.

The position I have taken is a moral one. I - or someone else - might not be representative of any particular category of Syrian people, I might not identify with them or with their aspirations, but in any case I am just one part of the range of means of change, I am not the entire set of implements. People like me have been unable to lead a process of change in a society whose educational system has been devastated, for example - corruption even reached into the gatherings and groups operating within the revolution. We will begin from less than zero when the



violence is over, and when the war is over. We will return and we will fight this madness that has ripped the collective self that we are trying to formulate to shreds. I repeat, we are talking about a war against the people, a war in which the bombing has not ceased for years.

In your opinion, was there a hypocrisy in what we could probably call the national democratic camp, or a fear that made it incapable of producing a unique discourse?

Not always hypocrisy – but misunderstanding, lack of trust, rivalry, increasing grudges, and the absence of a culture of collective work are all common in wartime. Plus the regime played a major role by wiping out large groups of us, and then the Islamic fundamentalists came along and killed and abducted many of us, and of course there were also those who were forced to flee. And the symbols we needed did not emerge. Anyway, I'll say it again: I'm not a political freedom fighter and I don't have a political role, I'm a writer interested in what is happening in my country. Morally I side with the people who are rising up against the Assad dictatorship and against religious and international tyranny, as well as against the shabby performance of our political parties and our opposition groups.

If we were to list the Syrian public figures who have sided with the revolution, you would definitely be one of them. However, your relationship with the West is more successful than most of the others – what do you think the reason for that is?

It could be said that my relationship with the activists is much better than my relationship with the Arab writers, institutions and press, that would be more accurate. In

terms of the West, I must say that I have been blessed in my life by two very important female friends, who have helped me a lot. Yasmina Jraissati, who is a literary agent working with Syrian and Arab writers and a philosophy teacher at the American University of Beirut, is my literary agent, and an old friend of mine. Rania Samara is my French translator, and is practically family to me in Paris. These two friends can take much of the credit for that successful relationship, plus of course we must not forget that the Syrian issue came into the spotlight during this time. If it wasn't for the tragedy of the Syrian people there would be much less interest in the creative output of all of us Syrians. But Yasmina and I were extremely careful not to get used and turned into marketing tools. And although the Western media did do this on a few occasions, we would always review press materials and object to them if necessary. My idea was as follows: work needs to be done to make the Syrian issue known about on a popular level, at the level of the political, cultural and civic gatherings, but without my simply turning into a political activist, and without my isolating myself for fear of getting used by the West. Because the West sees us material for entertainment and voyeurism, and frequently sees us as mentally incompetent, so they do not see a third way aside from dictatorship and religious extremism. For this reason, when I reached Paris, a novel of mine that had been published in Arabic before the revolution (*The Scent of Cinnamon*, published in English translation as *Cinnamon*) was about to come out in French. This just so happened to coincide with my media appearance here, and with me talking about the Syrian question on public platforms, when I discovered that people in France knew nothing about what was happening on the ground in Syria. I was very wary, but I was obliged to give my testimony of events, to relate what we had

witnessed. I considered that to be a way of playing a crucial role at that time. It was a painful experience, coming as it did right on the heels of my experience of leaving Syria, and combined with the huge guilt that myself and other survivors carried, and the ensuing psychological conflicts. My relationship with the West was vigilantly organised by Yasmina Jraissati, far from the dogmatic vision of the West that so many Arab intellectuals peddle. The things that we repeat about the West are actually very similar to what the Western racists repeat about us - which all revolves around their monolithic vision of the East. This justifies their contempt for the East, for migrants and for refugees. But this is what some of our intellectuals recreate, by considering us to be pawns if we establish any relationship with the West. In reality the West is not a homogenous dogmatic bloc, there are parties and civic groups and humanitarian organisations that are very distant from the centres of government and their warmongering, and there are important legal and cultural personalities who are standing with us in the Syrian cause and lend weight to our cause. But that specific notion - that we cannot be active in the West and we cannot raise our voices without becoming pawns - is contemptuous of the collective self that you are trying to get me to define. It boils down to the idea that we cannot avoid being pawns, and we cannot have agency, or minds that have not been appropriated. This derogatory view also claims that we are all Daesh, and riddled with corruption; that diligence, perseverance, thinking and intellect have no place among us; and that the only way we can be ruled is by dictatorship, otherwise religious barbarism will be the end of us. So no wonder that the racist Western right wing meets the conspiracy theorists that hold that dogmatic vision of the West, and no wonder both sides are among Assad's supporters.

My choice before the revolution was to maintain that margin that I mentioned, my niche, and not to become a pawn, since doing a lot of advocacy and 'representation' is incompatible with writing. Writing requires contemplation and reading, and the development of specific sensitivities. In short, it requires that marginal space. becoming entangled with mainstream media appearances kills writing, I'm completely aware of that. But I cannot ignore what is happening in Syria, or stop myself from raising my voice in the West. During and after the publication of my two books, *Woman in the Crossfire* and *The Crossing*, I had some very violent and hostile experiences for which the regime was not solely responsible, but opposition and cultural circles in Syria and the Arab world too. I don't want to go into the vile depths of it all here, and we have all had our share of the total violence inflicted by the great Syrian tragedy. The Syrian question gave me the impetus to translate and publish, just like it gave momentum to many other people on many levels. And I'm under absolutely no illusion as to what is happening about me: it's what happened to writers in Lebanon during the war there decades ago, as well as to Palestinian writers.

Thinking about your evaluation of the experience of the Women's Advisory Council, what is your opinion of women-only representation in political work? And what do you think about the very violent responses to it within Syrian public opinion that we can glean from social media?

There are profound psychological roots to the violent responses, parts of which lie in religion, others with the Assad dictatorship. At the same time, part of the responsibility lies with our democratic friends. I had experienced that before the revolution, and also through

other female friends' experiences. My problem with the Women's Advisory Council is with the message that it gives, not with the personalities of the representative or with the fact that they are exclusively women. The rhetoric of the Council does not do justice to the real victims. But to criticise the Council in terms of gender, or from a patriarchal premise, is unacceptable. There has been a discourse denigrating women on the basis of their gender in public opinion about female political participation since the beginning of the revolution, and this has not been limited to the Islamic sphere - it has been rife in democratic opposition circles too. This was not only perpetuated by men but by women also, as patriarchal society in our communities is not determined by gender but by the centres of power. Feminism is not hostile to men, as it is belittled and ridiculed for being, but is a fight against a hegemonic mindset, and it is an act of political liberation in which individuals in a society are given their rights equally and lawfully, men and women, without distinction.

Many female activists and prisoners confided in me that they had refrained from speaking out so as to avoid my ordeal. When I was interviewing them, and encouraging them to write about their personal experiences, many of them repeated the same phrase to me: 'You know what happened to you? We wouldn't be able to bear it!' I believe that the personal stories of female activists will in the future be a part of the Syrian memory that is buried alive, because this violence against women has succeeded in curbing their voices. Obviously the hardliners see us as something completely shameful and scandalous. But even the secular democrats often - although not always - see in a woman a source of shame that is somehow disguised. To identify with our problems, us women, has not been seen as identifying

with the cause of human rights: it was usually condemned by sect, religion, clan or family. Few democrats escaped this duplicity. The collective self that you are searching for is made up of latent tribal and sectarian components as well. For the woman to be present and impressive in our patriarchal public sphere she must correspond to the herd models and schemas that have been drawn up in advance: the woman either as selfless, idealist, charitable and benevolent wife, like a shadow, or as courageous heroine, mannish – having cancelled out her sexual identity and her feminine individuality in order to identify with the strong ones.

We need to redefine the concepts. The concepts have become farcical and hollow during the Baath era. For example, secularism in the Baathist state is not secularism. Within this same farcical context that drains words of their meaning, we find women being mocked, and the idea of their having a voice being ridiculed – this is something that is deeply established in our being.

Finally, I will ask you a literary question. In the revolutionary milieu the term ‘civil war’ is rejected on the grounds that it discursively manipulates an uprising, a revolution, that may have transformed in multiple ways but did start out as a legitimate and just revolution. Reality reveals that there are two tragic stories for history to tell: the story of the regime’s victims from among the opposition, and the story of those victims who were regime soldiers. At least on the quantitative level, the victims on the regime side cannot be overlooked. So will you be able, one day, to write a novel that narrates both tragedies together?

That’s my dream! But it would be difficult for me to do at

present. As I see it, the soldiers who die for the regime are the regime's victims. Let's put the issue of the Assad regime's responsibility for where we are to one side for now, as it's something we have talked about a lot. Let's look at how to undo this darkness. There are specimens that can be taken as examples: I believe that a fighter in the Nusra Front and a fighter in the regime army are instruments of evil, but they are also victims of evil. That is something that many people would rather not hear, because they believe that this makes the victims and the killers equal. We have identified the killer, and what he is responsible for. Well, OK, so now let's think about how to undo the rolling tangle of evil. We can look at it another way: we can analyse the real-life situation of a fighter in the Nusra Front and a fighter in the Syrian regime army. Through studying, researching and surveying the life of each of these two figures in modern Syrian history, we really can talk about them both together as pawns and victims of the great manufacturers of evil as represented by the Assad regime and its allies, and the international regime. Those who call themselves friends of the Syrian people are also part of this international regime, i.e. the representatives of this global post-neoliberal age we live in. The fighters are drowning in blood and hatred and constant killing, and are turning into the hallmark of evil that is escalating regionally and internationally. Meanwhile, the traditional factories of evil - i.e. the Assad regime - are being repolished internationally. If the choice is between the most extreme, direct and bloody evil, and a concealed evil, then the polished lid of concealed evil is perceived as the cleanest, and so it continues. I don't think I am capable right now of writing a novel about this fiercely violent tragedy. I am currently trying to begin pursuing graduate studies on this subject as I want to delve deeply into it,

research it in a serious and academic way. Narrating it as a story is another matter, one that will surely take me longer.