HANAN AL-SHAYKH – WINTERNACHTEN LECTURE – 17 JANUARY 2013

Shame

Have I ever felt shame? Yes, I have, and to be honest with you I feel ashamed to mention it, at the beginning of my talk, maybe I'll tell you later.

I was born and raised in Beirut where shame, *aib* in Arabic, was and still is a contagious disease, it's almost the oxygen we breathe. When I heard it used at school it made sense somehow when a student stole a pencil sharpener from her friend, but it didn't when I heard it in our house when a relative confessed and moaned, "Yes, I sold my property in order to send my son to college" and then he took his head in his hands and wept, exclaiming "I am all shame, all shame!" A woman friend of the family kept denying for nearly two years that her husband had married another woman - "I felt ashamed to confirm the rumour" - and my aunts fumed "He is the one who should have been ashamed, not you! I wish you'd been honest with us then! We could have spat, all of us, in his face!" "We're ashamed, disgraced" mumbled the illiterate people, the cobbler in our neighbourhood who used to stick a pencil behind his ear pretending that he could read and write. My mother too, used to be ashamed of her illiteracy, she would pretend that she lost her spectacles every time she was handed an immigration form while on board a flight.

As a child, I used to be fascinated by a visitor who had grown the nails of his little fingers on both hands. Every time I asked him if the reason was to scratch his ears, he would laugh and laugh, and I laughed too at my naïve assumption when I discovered later in life that men grew their nails to prove, especially to Beiruties that they weren't farmers, hand labourers, ploughing the fields, but rather city dwellers. Being farmers and not landlords shamed them.

My maternal grandmother Um Hassan worked as a citrus fruit picker in the South of Lebanon, where she came from. She depended on wild shoots and wheat left for birds to feed herself and her two children, my mother and my uncle, aged six and eight after her estranged husband refused to pay child maintenance. I learned about my mother's childhood when I finally agreed to hold up our past to the light and write her life story. I was humbled by her frankness and courage as she talked about her deceits, petty theft, her numerous lies, her adultery, love making with her lover, all of this without any embellishment or showing any guilt or regret. But then a few days later she changed her mind and didn't want me to write about her poverty. "I am ashamed. I can't bear anyone who knows me to realise how poor I was! I nearly snapped, "What is more shameful to you, to be forced to scavenge for food in the fields or to be a social disgrace as you became when you divorced my father and left me when I was six years old and married your lover?" I didn't utter a word, I just went ahead and wrote the first chapter, about her childhood and poverty and read it to her, my mother cried full of excitement, "Go ahead, write about poverty, to be poor is not a shame, the big shame is that your grandfather had sold me age fourteen, for ten golden coins to a man who wasn't only twice my age, but he never loved films or listened to one song in his entire life!"

If I have channelled you to think that uneducated people felt shame more than others, then listen to this prominent reviewer in Lebanon.

"The importance of this book is the fact that it opens the door of telling and confession without the restrictions of shame, from the choking details of poverty and hunger."

I remember the teacher explaining to us how our Arab ancestors believed in ultimate chivalry and pride and how a sheikh, the head of his clan who fell ill but when members of his clan paid him a visit enquiring about his health, he felt mortified, ashamed to be weak and sick, so he stood up, rode his horse with vigour and then collapsed and died as soon as everyone had left.
And how the Great Arab and victorious commander howled and cried in shame "Could it be, I, Khaled bin Al-Waleed, who won more than a hundred battles, who finds himself stretched on his bed, dying like a camel?"

And we were taught that to be an Arab is to be generous as Hatem bin Tay, the poet who slaughtered his beloved horse, roasted it and fed his guests when he had nothing to offer. This incident took place in the sixth century, in the time of Jahilliah, the period of ignorance before Islam and yet a fellow student in my college went too far to show her generosity towards her friends, spending the money she had and she hadn't, she was admitted to prison when she refused to pay back the money she owed. She answered my only question to her, "Why?" "My wealthy family was no longer wealthy and I felt shame from head to toe."

We feel shame because we're racists, because our racism is reflected in our literature. Al Mutanabbi, one of our great poets in the tenth century, who researched and wrote about the philosophy of life and yet he produced this poem: "Don't buy your slave unless you buy a stick first. For slaves are nothing but a wicked race." Whenever we think of this poem or read it in a book we race to detach ourselves from this disgraceful stigma by giving a counter attack saying "Islam abolished slavery, the prophet chose Bilal, a black slave from Ethiopia to be his Muezzin, the caller of prayer, even when Bilal couldn't pronounce the letter 'sheen' correctly. And the prophet

bestowed the name Abd, which means in Arabic 'slave' on people and urged them to call their children by it. It became so popular; think of the name of the famous Egyptian president Jamal Abd-al Nasser, Jamal the slave of al-Nasser.

Once in a Geography class I asked the teacher this question: "Was the country Sudan which translates 'black' named after its black people?" I remember how the teacher laughed and said "I have no answer to your question, to be honest with you! Maybe you have a point here" then she added, "It is a big shame to name a country after the colour of one's skin!" And isn't it shameful that Beirut is a racist city, Beirut the cosmopolitan which was chosen by Unesco and named the capital of the book in 2009. The city which attracted people from all around the world for its clubbing scene, restaurants and its Mediterranean beaches. But I'm afraid to tell you that the beaches have one condition in order to dip into its water: you have to be white! Yes, white. Black are not allowed to rub shoulders with white bathers, although the law in principle doesn't allow this frightful discrimination.

Maybe I am one of those who don't usually feel shame. The first time my brother's friend told me "You should be ashamed of yourself" I felt proud and happy, I was fifteen years old and had managed to publish an article on boredom in the student page of a leading Lebanese newspaper. He was horrified when he read this particular line in my essay; "As I sprinkle drops of perfume between my breasts." The days and the years have passed and my brother's friend became an editor for a literary supplement in Kuwait, one day he sent me a letter when I published a volume of short stories; saying "How shameful, be assured from now on that I'll never read any word you write. Ps. For your information I threw your book in the garbage!"

What angered him was the following paragraph in one of the stories; "I even heard them, the men in my family once showing off by competing as to the number and loudness of their farts." It happened that when I saw my brother's friend, the editor, crossing the road on one of my visits to Beirut I found myself questioning why his rude words were like drops of rain on a rain coat and I assumed the reason was that I knew very well what I was doing, and who I really was. And now, half a century later I fully understood his behaviour. I had offended his manhood, his pride.

In my novel 'Women of Sand and Myrhh' the Arab character who had a sexual relationship with an American woman, seeing that she was trying to reach her climax, he flipped, he called her she devil and exclaimed, "God created you to bear children and to give pleasure to a man and that's all." This belief explains why feelings of shame boil up in men and they commit these so-called honour killings. In other words they failed as guards of those factories which produce men, by killing adulterous or raped or non-virgin women they've preserved the production power of fertility entirely, to their lineage. The fallen girls and women, in their opinions, have tarnished their families with a big, irremovable stain and it will never even fade unless the shame is strangled.

Shame, *Aar, aib*, I heard it, saw in the eyes of angry Muslim men, it permeated from the black veils of women. I feel that the word shame is a monster eating what women had achieved around the turn of the century until now. It affects legal rights, politics, culture, sexual relationship and the right to choose a woman's destiny, the right to choose to be veiled or not, though the veil never has been a choice for many women.

Silence is the biggest shame, also bowing to tyranny, selling your vote, torturing others, considering citizens and subjects no more than flies, shame for the absence of free speech and free press and debates. I would like here to quote Dr Khaled Shouwaykate, director of the Helping Democracy in the Arab world who said, "Shame in the Arabic countries is concentrated on the lower part of our body instead of the upper part, where our diseased brain nestles."

Shame when we ban books, when we disown one of the most important books of our heritage 'One thousand and one nights' the 'Arabian nights' as it is known in the West. We censor it, ban it, call it an archaic folk tale, stories and nothing more! When I adapted stories from it for the theatre I was thrilled to see Arabs in the audience, especially because the play was in Arabic, English and French simultaneously, but to my mortification and disappointment their reaction was embarrassingly negative, "Why Alf Layla Wa Layla, 'One thousand and one nights', instead of contemporary literature?" As if we concur with the West that our culture is antiquated, still revolves around sultans, harems, slaves. An Arab man told me "Our opportunity to feel proud as an Arab in the West is lost! I feel only shame." And my answer was: "Shame that you missed the points of these stories which were rooted in reality. If they are refusing to die after hundreds of years is because of their beauty, complexity, imagination as they speak of all aspects of life, and do not forget", I went on adding salt to his wounded soul! "That they had great appetite for love and sexual desire, all of this without any restrictions or inhibitions."

Shame knows no boundaries or countries; it exists everywhere, in Brazil or the U.S., in India or in China, in Europe or Japan or Africa. The only difference between our shame and their shame is that ours is reluctant to surface; to open itself to dialogue and to changes and evolve.

Feeling ashamed permeated our lives in an unspoken way too, whether it derives from our personal lives or from the fact that we Arabs fell so steeply from a moment

of historic glory to being almost stagnant.

I remember when I visited Al-Hambra in Granada, Andalusia, how I was overwhelmed by the sophistication of our ancestors. I wrote an essay entitled 'In the court of the lions I sat down and wept, thank you Elizabeth Smart', no, I didn't weep because the Arabs were no longer in charge of Granada but because we Arabs today have no connection with the Arabs of Andalusia, with those who, having borrowed the pens and chisels of angels, carved and embellished Islamic architecture to such melodious perfection... Why is it that we didn't complete our cultural journey, and how is it that we have ended up today in the very worst of times? What is it that made our predecessors pore over their desks, writing down and recording the marvels of mathematics and science and searching out the skies with the stars and constellations in order to discover their secrets, and, driven by the love of knowledge, to study medicine and to devise medicaments even from the stomach of bees and this was Iraq in the 8th century. And when later I asked a religious sheikh those questions, he scratched his beard with assured confidence; "It doesn't matter, this world is for them, hereafter is for us." I refuse to comment on what I felt other than contempt for such a defeated answer. We Arabs try to take off, we do sometimes, though alas not as fast as we should, and as we wish, our awareness hides itself because we're frustrated, our speeches dispatch here and there, we're half citizens, half souls and why? Because of our tyrannical governments who exploited us and still are, because of despotism, authoritarianism, because there is no respect for women, there are no real human rights for anyone.

But I would like to end my talk on a hopeful note. William Faulkner wrote: "Read, read, read everything!" And if he had known what the future hides for us he would have added: "Write, write everything!"

Yes, write and write what tyrants would want you to erase! Write and write regardless if fundamentalists assure you that you have guaranteed a place in hell! Write more to make the enemy of freedom gasp for one breath!

And now the time has come to tell you the first and the last time I felt shame! I was maybe eight or ten years old, on my way home returning from school, when I couldn't control my bladder. A woman saw me as I froze, she said: "Shame on you! What do you think you're doing young girl?" I looked at the sky and answered; "Can't you see it is raining!" "Yes, sure it is raining on your head only."

About the author

Hanan al-Shaykh (Beirut, Lebanon, 1945) is one of the most acclaimed writers in the contemporary Arab World. She is the author of seven novels, including The Story of Zahra, Women of Sand & Myrrh, Beirut Blues, Only in London, a collection of stories: I Sweep the Sun off Rooftops, and her much praised memoir of her mother's life The Locust and the Bird. She has written two plays, Dark Afternoon Tea and Paper Husband. Most recently she published One Thousand and One Nights, an adaptation and re-imagining of some of the stories from the legendary Alf Layla Wa Layla - the Arabian Nights, commissioned by the director Tim Supple for the theatre, and performed in Toronto and Edinburgh in 2011. Her work has been translated into twenty-eight languages. Hanan al-Shaykh lives in London.

About the Winternachten lecture

Since 2007 Writers Unlimited Winternachten Festival The Hague opens with a lecture. With it the festival provides a platform for a prominent foreign author speaking out on current developments in literature and society. Writers Unlimited particularly aims at giving room to writers from outside the western world. Indian writer Pankaj Mishra opened the series with The Globalization of Literature. In 2008 Turkish writer Elif Shafak sketched an image of The Writer as Commuter. In 2009 Nurudin Farah (Somalia) spoke about A Sense of Belonging - A Contemporary Story of Migration. In 2010 (Universal) Declaration of Interconnectedness or (Universal) Suggestions for Tolerance was the title of the Winternachten lecture by Antjie Krog (South Africa). The role of the writer in a globalising world was the subject of the lecture by Tim Parks: The Nobel Individual. In 2012 Helon Habila's lecture and his point of view contributed to the discourse on the role of the writer, which was started in 2007 by Pankaj Mishra. Hanan al-Shaykh links up with the theme in her lecture.