A NECESSARY CONVERSATION WITH RABIH ALAMEDDINE

Mohamed Salah Eddine Madiou

In a world where youth is idealized, old people become invisible and unnecessary

Rabih Alameddine is a Lebanese and American writer and painter. He was born in 1959 in Jordan to Druze parents. He grew up in Lebanon and Kuwait before moving to England then the United States where he received his higher education in engineering, and where he is currently based. He wrote *Koolaids, The Perv, The Hakawati, I, the Divine, An Unnecessary Woman,* and *The Angel of History.* Alameddine won the California Book Awards Gold Medal Fiction for *An Unnecessary Woman,* the Arab American Book Award, the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Fiction for *The Angel of History* among many others. The focus, in this interview, will be on one of his most successful novels: *An Unnecessary Woman.* The novel tells the story of a 72-year-old Lebanese woman named Aaliya who lives midst the social and political upheavals of the Lebanese Civil War. Aaliya is a translator who translates 37 books from English and French into Arabic over 50 years, but has never published any of her translations. In the novel, Aaliya speaks from the place of solitude and fear, and shares with the reader her most intimate concerns and abject torments.

Mohamed Salah Eddine Madiou: Would you like to briefly describe your journey as a writer from *Koolaids* to *The Angel of History*?

Rabih Alameddine: It has been 22 years. I am a different person. When I wrote *Koolaids,* I did not know anything about anything. And when I wrote *The Angel of History,* I did not know anything about anything either. But, you know, I am older.

MSEM: I know you have spoken on this matter before, but just for the sake of clarity, do you identify as an Arab-American, or an Arab and an American? I am asking this because I read somewhere that you are against hyphenated identities. Is this true?

RA: Yes, primarily because a hyphenated identity tends to diminish both identities. I am not Arab-American because I am not less than American. I am *an Arab* and I am *an American.* A lot of people in Lebanon will say that, well, Lebanese are not Arabs. I do...
not care! You can be whatever you want. But being an Arab does not make me less than or greater than an American, or that I have more in common with you than with somebody who is, say, from Bulgaria. It just means that I am an Arab: it is a big umbrella. I am an American: it is a big umbrella, too.

**MSEM:** The book I admire the most and that I still struggle to understand is *An Unnecessary Woman*. A philosophically profound book which, I have to say, has left me hungry for more. How were you challenged by writing this book?

**RA:** The challenge was primarily how to create tension when it is all internal. Nothing or not much really happens outside her [Aaliya’s] thinking. The challenge was to create an interiority and, at the same time, to have some sort of tension. It is how one creates an interior world that is specific to one person and that is of interest to anybody else: that was the biggest challenge.

**MSEM:** How did you settle on Aaliya being the voice of the novel? I mean why did you choose to write the story from the point of view of a 72-year-old woman? Why not a young woman of 27 for example, or a 72-year-old man?

**RA:** The important thing is the “unnecessary” part. I wanted to come up with a character that was considered unnecessary by society. A 72-year-old man might be, you know, not that necessary but he is still considered more important by society than a 72-year-old woman, especially one who is not married, has no children, and does not fit. Usually, the story determines the character. Many things led to the way the novel is. Long before *AUW*, I wanted to write about this Lebanese woman who goes to Kuwait during the Iraqi invasion, and whose husband just died. She was trying to keep her husband’s company—because you cannot own anything in Kuwait. Her husband had to have a partner to take over the company. This whole thing was set up, and then I realized that the character I was creating does not care about this and does not care about that, she does not care about the kids or the company, and I realized that the character I had in mind would not be married [laughing]. I think that is how it devolved into something completely different, into Aaliya in *AUW*.

**MSEM:** I think many people misunderstand aging today. Most associate it with a certain category of people—maybe with those who are 50 years old and more. I believe we are all aging, and there is no escape to that. I am, for instance, 26 and I cringe at the thought of having to celebrate my birthday every year because it makes
me aware that I am aging. I think we are all preoccupied with it. Can you comment on the importance of talking about aging in literature, and in \textit{AUW} specifically?

**RA:** First, if you were here, I would slap you [laughing]. The whole idea of aging and why I wrote about it is because I feel that I am aging. I am younger than her [Aailya], I run 10 to 15 kilometers a week, but, you know, getting out of bed is difficult and having interviews is difficult; trying constantly to motivate myself and find something to move me is also a biggie. When I was younger, I would write a book because “it is fun and everything.” In a world where youth is idealized, old people become invisible and unnecessary. As a gay man, I am non-existent right now. Most men would not even look at me. Even men my age look at younger men.

**MSEM:** Well, I am looking at you! [laughing]

**RA [laughing]:** Thank you, thank you, thank you. What I am trying to say is that aging people are invisible. And, you know, we do not have books about old people. Not much. Out of a hundred books that come out, maybe one would be about an older person. And what I find uninteresting is, unfortunately, younger writers writing about younger people. No offense, but your concerns are, for me, relatively minor compared to the big concerns of the universe. I have always said that when you are younger, you must write about sex, and when older you must write about death. These are two big subjects.

**MSEM:** I noticed when reading \textit{AUW} that the theme of “abjection” pervades the novel, and thus decided to write an article about it. In my article, I argue that we are all subject to the feeling of abjection which is in a way a universal and routine feeling. We are subject to it daily, and this every time we face “something” “abject” or that we consider “abject.” However, I explained that certain external factors amplify this feeling; they make it stronger and make the “subject” exceedingly obsess over it to the point of mania. My question is: what is it, according to you, that makes Aaliya obsessively concerned about abjection in \textit{AUW}?

**RA:** I think whatever her concerns are she is obsessive about them. She is not necessarily pathologically so. Whatever she thinks about she obsesses about. She does not obsess, however, about her place in the world, she does not obsess about her family or friends. She obsesses about her \textit{life} and \textit{having her life have meaning}: has she lived a good life? Has she wasted her life? These are the concerns. But I am not sure if abject is her major concern.
MSEM: I thought about abjection when reading the novel because I was really feeling that there were a lot of things annoying the protagonist to the point of wanting to vomit. She always speaks about nausea and even quotes Sartre in this regard.

RA: The trouble I am having here is what “abject” is.

MSEM: That is the question, indeed.

RA: For me, “abject” is an adjective. But you seem to have read something that defines “abject” as a noun that means disgust or something terrible or a feeling of abasement, which is not exactly how I know the work.

MSEM: In *The Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva uses “abject” as a noun indeed—although she happens to use it as an adjective as well. Kristeva considers “abject” a demonic force. It is, according to her, whatever causes the feeling of disgust and repugnance inside the human being. It is that internal, powerful feeling that makes the “subject” want to vomit. Put in a rather philosophical way, “abject,” or what she calls “not I,” is a threat to the subject’s identity, or the “I”. Kristeva explains that “abject” is a complex phenomenon because it takes abode in that ‘place’ and ‘non-place’ where there is no meaning. Put simply, “abject,” for her, is unnamable, and the feeling it provokes similarly so. This innate, even universal feeling is, as I argued in my article, strengthened by external factors. Do you think that aging, the Lebanese Civil War, and its threatening entourage, as external factors, play a role in provoking Aaliya’s feeling of abjection?

RA: Sure, but she is also grumpy to start with. I mean if she were in the United States—here we always joke about an old man standing in front of his house and he’s there like “get off my lawn!”—she would be seen as a grumpy person. Again, there is this whole sort of tension in the novel: is she the way she is because of the situation or because of herself and her choices? And, of course, it is both: she has created that life of hers, but society has also forced her to live that life. So, it is a combination of both. Of course, the Civil War had that effect on her. She lived in war-torn Lebanon with garbage everywhere that made the environment more abject than it already was. The difference between her and most of the Lebanese is that they are not conscious of their surroundings. If you talk to Lebanese, they will tell you, “Ow, Lebanon is the most beautiful country in the world!”—and we are so sophisticated which is not untrue. What Aaliya sees is both sides: the beautiful and the horrible. And the whole scene
of going to Sabra and looking for Ahmad reminded her that Beirut is, in many ways, a ghetto. Also, she is unmarried, divorced, etc. which affects her way of being. But at the same time, she chose that, which throughout the novel becomes obvious. The women with her in the building, she could have been friends with them for a long, long time, but she chose not to. The thing about Aaliya is that, even though she is outside the culture, is a black sheep, and is ostracized, she is in essence very, very Lebanese, and specifically very Beiruti.

**MSEM:** As I mentioned earlier, we always stumble when we experience the phenomenon of “abject” and the feeling it provokes. And when trying to describe or name these, language loses its descriptive abilities. In consequence, a “void” (or rupture) occurs and we try desperately to fill it, but to no avail. But Aaliya challenges this condition. And her ability to switch codes as a translator, whenever she wants to, helps her very much in this regard. For example, she uses the Arabic emotionally loaded expression of “Tfeh!” as a better, more powerful way to express and describe her feeling of abjection. This is an expression and spitting-gesture widely used in the Arab world to express a vehement feeling of abjection. Do you think resorting to other languages—Arabic in this case—and other gestures—say, from other cultures—can be useful a way to describe or name “abject” and its feeling, although approximately?

**RA:** Sure. I think knowing multiple languages is a great help in terms of describing what cannot be described in other languages. Some things can be described in Arabic but cannot be in English, and some things can be described in English but cannot be in Arabic, or French.

**MSEM:** On another register, and regarding the other characters of the story, I felt that all of them have some allegorical potential. For example, Hannah I considered being Beirut or Lebanon shortly before or maybe on the verge of the Civil War, a rupture I think her suicide symbolizes. Another example is Elizabeth Taylor who may be an allegory for beautiful Beirut or Lebanon well before the Civil War started. Did you think of these characters from the point of view of “national allegory” when you first fashioned them?

**RA:** No. If you think much about allegories and metaphors during the production stage of the work, the work becomes didactic. But it is important to say that I am in a certain space when I am writing, and in that space, what is obsessing me is, you know: “this is a Lebanese woman, who lives in this place, she does this and that
etc.” And everything that follows falls on that. I do not think of them as an allegory for such and such at the beginning. But, in the end, you notice that they are, and I might tweak something more. But again, in the beginning, I am just trying to create a story that works. That’s the most important thing.

**MSEM:** Do you consider literature and art an escape of sorts? And, we are getting a bit philosophic here, do you think escape is possible at all?

**RA:** Well, again, we have to define what “escape” is. For the most part, literature is escapist, and I struggle against that. It is why my novels tend to be structured differently from most other novels. Even the most straightforward one which is *Auw* is not structured the way a novel generally is. Most literature is escapist, and most art is: we think we are somewhere, but for the most part, I want to say, it is a waste of time [laughing]. Kafka’s line that a book should be “an axe that breaks the frozen sea within us” is amazing and stuff, but it never works that way. The reason I keep writing is that I hope that, for a small percentage of people, the book might be transformative. I have always said: for some people, it can be escapist, but for few people, it can be transformative. Music can be transformative for few people. Beyoncé, for example, might be the sappiest of the sappiest, but most people are actually transformed by her. I do not consider that necessarily art. Literature, and particularly great literature, transforms and will not allow the reader to escape, but most readers *will* escape. It is *how many that are moved and transformed* that is the most important.

**MSEM:** It goes without saying that if Aaliya lived in this COVID-19 era, she would not find it difficult to “stay home” given her unwavering love for solitude. How do you think Aaliya would behave during this pandemic?

**RA:** I honestly do not know. I mean when I started *Auw*, I thought being lonely was easy—because I, too, do not leave the house. I spend most of my time reading and writing and stuff like that. But the truth of the matter is I suffered. I realized that I am much of a recluse—not as much as Aaliya is though. I needed some form of social interaction. I am not sure for her, but she probably needs less. But we all need a modicum of social interaction. So, yeah, I think she would handle the stay-home more than most people.

**MSEM:** Do you think she would light ten candles for Walter Benjamin, this time, instead of two? [laughing]
RA [laughing]: Oh, sure. She probably has more candles now. There is little electricity these days in Beirut [after the port explosion in Beirut in 2020]; and she would need more candles!

MSEM: One last question: can we hope to see another An Unnecessary Woman? A sequel maybe?

RA: Never!