

Basma Abdelaziz – A Portrait

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Introduction

I saw Basma Abdelaziz for the first time on March 15th, 2018. She was discussing her book *Huna badan* (Abdelaziz). Since that day, over a period of four months, I have read five of her books. I have also started following her Facebook page and reading her weekly newspaper column. Each one of her works added to my knowledge about a certain subject, made me think about an issue from a different point of view, or made me feel the pain of a certain group of people. I hope that by drawing this portrait of her, I may introduce her to new readers who may benefit from her writings as I did. Aside from this personal reason that may seem quite subjective, many objective reasons make me want to present her work in this portrait.

First, there are very few studies in the Arabic language about torture and the trauma suffered by its victims, and the same applies to studies about Arab victims. Second, this research (Abdelaziz *Dhākirat al-qahr*) is done by a person who had firsthand experience with torture victims when working with the Nadeem Centre in Egypt in providing help to these victims. Third, the educational background of Abdelaziz made her better qualified to understand the trauma from a medical point of view and to describe it in accurate

terms. Finally but importantly, her literary skills made her present the topic in a language that is readable by a wide audience. Why are these reasons important? Because they result in exposing the subject of torture to Arab society. This society is to a great extent ignorant about the topic; it does not have clear answers for the following questions.

Which acts are considered torture?

Who does it and why?

How did the international society fight it so far?

These and many other questions are answered by her studies. And probably what is more important is that her writings make Arab society, which unfortunately tolerates a certain degree of torture, more aware of the trauma suffered by the victims and therefore more sympathetic to these victims.

For the non-Arab reader, the writings of Abdelaziz will give a better understanding of the torture mechanisms used in this region of the world, who the perpetrators are, what their motives are, how the different civil society organizations fight back, etc. If the reader is a scholar, he or she will have more information about a region that is understudied. And perhaps this scholar will get more insights about what is universal and what is particular about torture and

1976	Born in Cairo
2000	Earned BA in Medicine and Surgery
2002	Joined the General Secretariat of Mental Health
2002	Joined the Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture
2005	Earned MS in Neuropsychiatry
2007	The book <i>Mā warā' al-ta'dhīb</i> (Beyond Torture) was published
2008	The book <i>'Ashān rabbunā yusahhil</i> (May God Make it Easy) was published
2008	The book <i>Al-walad alladhī ikhtafā</i> (The Boy Who Disappeared) was published
2008	Winner of the Sawiris Cultural Award
2008	Winner of the General Organisation for Cultural Palaces Award
2009	Winner of the Ahmed Bahaa-Eddin Award
2010	Earned Diploma in Sociology
2010	Started writing a weekly column in <i>Al-Shorouk</i> newspaper
2011	The book <i>Ighrā' al-sulṭa al-muṭlaqa</i> (Temptation of Absolute Power) was published
2013	The novel <i>Al-Tābūr</i> (The Queue) was published
2014	The book <i>Dhākirat al-qahr</i> (Memory of Subjugation) was published
2016	The book <i>Saṭwat al-naṣṣ</i> (The Power of Text) was published
2016	Melville House published an English translation of <i>The Queue</i>
2016	Named one of Foreign Policy's Leading Global Thinkers
2018	Named by The Gottlieb Duttweiler Institute as one of Arabic public opinion's top influencers
2018	The novel <i>Huna badan</i> was published

Table 1 : Biography, based on an interview with Basma Abdelaziz

the trauma that results from it. If the reader is not a scholar, simply by understanding these issues, she may play an important role as a citizen to pressure the creation of laws that fight torture and the regimes that practice it.

In this essay, I will give a short biography of Basma Abdelaziz, will then try to shed some light on her life as an activist and as a doctor who plays an important role in helping torture victims, and will end this part with a short interview done online with her. The second part of the essay talks

about her body of research and literary work in general.

How did it start?

The following is the story told by Abdelaziz about how she started working with torture victims and about her personal experiences while doing so.

After graduating from medical school, she decided to specialize in psychiatry, and wanted to work with torture victims. In 2002, she decided to join the Nadeem

Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture because it was the only NGO working in this domain, on professional bases, with a well-qualified team composed of psychiatrists and lawyers. It was an important experience for her because she met many victims, from Egypt and other countries, such as Sudanese refugees who were trying to find their way to resettlement. She saw with her own eyes the devastating effects of torture and how its victims, as patients, represent a class apart: A torture victim with severe psychological symptoms resists improvement on all types of medications and therapies, and this until his torturer is punished somehow. Only then does the victim feel redressed, and shows complete cure, even without medication.

After working at the Al-Nadeem Center for more than 10 years, she left at the end of 2012 to engage in her postgraduate studies (sociology at Poitiers University-France). She became more involved in campaigning against torture during this time. She believes that a victim who feels shattered, broken, and humiliated, regains his/her feeling of dignity when he/she sees that people start defending him/her and start standing against torture. This constitutes an essential part of the therapeutic process for a victim.

Her activities included visiting victims wherever they are and protesting in front of a custody or police station where a detainee is being tortured. Of course this did not happen without a price to pay. She was denied the post of a staff member in the Faculty of Medicine at Ain Shams University because the national state security office interfered and refused to let her get this post.

Online interview

To better understand Abdelaziz's views on torture, I have conducted a short online interview with her. Here are my questions and her answers.

What made you focus on the topic of torture and the trauma that ensues?

When I was a student in the medical school, I saw a booklet, with the cover carrying the picture of a totally burnt man. The man was a farmer, accused of stealing a goat as I remember. But he denied all charges, so he was subjected to extreme torture in custody. They threatened to burn him, and this is what they did literally. The officer set fire to his body while he was asleep. Ninety percent of his whole body area was burnt. This booklet was published by two NGOs. El-Nadeem Centre was one of them. After overcoming the

trauma of watching the man's horrible pictures, and knowing that despite the intense trials done by doctors of Al-Nadeem to save his life, he died, I decided to work in this field. I also decided to campaign against torture and to help its victims as much as I can.

You have worked directly with Egyptian and Sudanese torture victims and have studied, as part of your research, torture in many other countries. Did you find any particularity in the Egyptian case?

Torture methods are nearly similar all over the world but some differences may exist based on the nature of the country. For example, Sudanese who had experienced torture reported being suspended from trees while having their hands and legs tied, with honey covering their bodies. They were left in this position for hours, sometimes days, to allow mosquitos and other types of insects to nourish on their blood.

Sexual harassment, which may precede rape, is considered to be one of the most effective torture methods in Egypt for both men and women. The stigma of being raped in the society would push anyone to make any confession he is asked to—even for things that he has never

committed. And this is just to avoid this lifelong stigma.

The way the Egyptian society recognizes torture is very far from what we have been taught from the international definitions. A slap on the face, an obscene word, or a serious threat of harming loved ones would never be looked at by anyone as torture. Actually it is torture. The culture of our society, however, accepts a certain degree of violence, and approves it to be daily practiced.

Many torture victims are deeply terrified in such a way that they would never talk about their experience. Honestly speaking, they may have the right to stay silent, because no one is able to guarantee their safety. Sometimes even they face second detention and undergo a second phase of torture to prevent them from making an official complaint.

Recovery depends much on the surrounding environment, whether supportive or not, whether blaming the victim or not. It also depends on the degree of protection and sympathy that the society and family are offering. That is to say, medications only are never enough.

“It is very difficult to treat torture victims and it would be great to make the society aware of the horrors of torture.” Do you agree with this statement? If you do—even partially—what methods would you suggest to raise this awareness in the Egyptian society?

Treatment of torture victims is not that difficult. However, it is never complete without the full understanding and support of the society. So, raising awareness about torture burden, explaining to people that “torture” is not a kind of legal punishment, and explaining that everyone deserves a fair humanistic treatment would help much in reaching the state of healing and cure.

I guess that endorsement by public figures would help much especially since our society is not a reading one, so famous people talking against torture would have a good impact. To a lesser extent, short documentaries and movies revealing how this practice would affect the victim and the whole community may be much more helpful than other tools and methods in raising awareness. This is not to say that writings, research, and studies are of no use. They are, but on a different level of action. When we come to the step of fixing and modifying the way the perpetrators

work, we would definitely need the academic view to help us.

The writings

Abdelaziz is a doctor, activist, researcher, writer, and artist. Each of these qualities has enriched the others and benefited from them. I believe that a big part of the truthfulness in the two novels that I read from her, *Huna badan* and *Al-Ṭābūr*, is a result of her research work (Abdelaziz). Also, being a visual artist made her very careful to make each of her books look aesthetically beautiful, starting from the cover to the internal drawings accompanying the text. In this section, I will give a short preview of the books that I have read from her. *Dhākirat al-qahr* will be put in its own section as it is the book that talks about torture (Abdelaziz).

Al-Tabūr

Al-Ṭābūr is a smart and witty novel. It creates a rich world and efficiently captures most of the elements that characterize a country ruled by a deposit regime. In addition—and this is what it makes it feel so real—it shows how the people have accepted the illogical and meaningless rules and adapted their lives to them (Abdelaziz).

I have found that Abdelaziz was courageous—and this where the activist shows her face—to produce this novel with its clear insinuation. I believe that people like her who are not afraid to express their opinions and who are talented in putting these opinions in a form that is easy for other people to comprehend and to identify with will help in increasing public awareness and understanding of political and social issues—probably much more than a speech given by a politician.

Temptation of Absolute Power

The book contains very good and comprehensive research work on the abuse of power by the police institution, its reasons, and its implications. It also ends with very interesting conclusions. Even though it was written before 2011, it is a very good read for anyone who wants to study why the January 25th Revolution happened in the first place. It even ends with a prophecy: “Would these incidents lead to something similar to what happened in 1977?” This is what actually happened in the 2011 revolution (Abdelaziz, *Temptation of Absolute Power*: 127).

Abdelaziz observes in the book that unfortunately the great majority of Egyptians believe that a criminal does not have the right to be treated humanely. This creates

an environment that tolerates torture, as explained in *Dhākirat al-qahr*. Abdelaziz does a very good job in explaining how a police agent, who has this abuse of power behavior, is made. And based on the knowledge acquired from her research, she portrays in the novel *Huna badan* some of these techniques and how they are applied to the newly recruited security agents (Abdelaziz).

I must say that what I admire most in this book is that the activist who has experienced police atrocities firsthand (I mean by seeing and hearing from their victims) did not compromise the integrity of the researcher who was still able to produce an unbiased scientific study.

Saṭwat al-naṣṣ

In this book, Abdelaziz applies critical discourse analysis techniques to analyze the discourse made by Al-Azhar, arguably the most influential religious institution in the Sunni Muslim world, during the power struggle in Egypt in the second half of 2013 (*Saṭwat al-naṣṣ*). I believe that readers would be more interested in following the analysis arguments and would understand more the analysis techniques because they are applied to important incidents that happened in very recent history. The book does a great job in analyzing the

text, enumerating the different techniques used by Al-Azhar, and deducing what was the intention of using them.

Huna badan

In the imaginary world of this novel, Abdelaziz is able to present different models of different characters who took part in the Egyptian Revolution and the events that followed it. Even though she represents the events in a neutral way—or maybe because of this—I felt sympathy for most of the characters of the novel, even those who were on opposing sides. As I said, these characters are not necessarily on the same side, and many of them do not share my values or my political opinions, but because they are presented as humans, I felt this sympathy. Through the reading of the book, one starts to understand the circumstances that made such a person a killer, what made another person want to risk his life, what made a third person take this side instead of the other opposing side, and so on (*Huna badan*).

This book is the most recent of Abdelaziz's work. I feel that it has benefited the most from the writer's experience in the different domains. All of the novel's elements are well written and accurate: the manipulation of bodies and minds by the ruler, the influence of religious discourse on the

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masses, and the diversity of the individuals in the novel and their motivations, beliefs, and behaviors.

Dhākirat al-qahr

The book is written in a language that is simple yet accurate. This makes it a good read for a specialist as well as a non-specialist. It covers many of the topics related to torture:

- What is torture? What is its purpose? What are the techniques used? How does it differ from legal punishments? What is its history and what is the context in which it was practiced?
- What is stress? Causes of stress? Torture as a shocking event. Adaptation to stress and to torture.
- Shock as a direct cause for psychological disorders. Torture as a cause of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
- A very detailed field study on torture victims that includes PTSD symptoms, treatment, situation in prisons, political versus non-political prisoners, torture syndrome, and testimonials.
- The torture perpetrators: who benefits from torture? How are the actual perpetrators convinced/pushed to do this? What are the techniques used? What is the role of the non-participating public?

- The role of medical professionals in helping the torture victims and unfortunately, in some cases, in helping the perpetrators.

The book also asks a number of interesting questions:

- Are dogmatic regimes more inclined to commit torture?
- Are some people by nature willing to participate in torture? Or would any population be influenced by a propaganda that incites fear of an apocalyptic alternative and would participate in—or at least not object to—torture to avoid such an alternative?
- Can torture victims fight back? And can they be cured?

I find that the book contains material that is very useful for researchers of this topic, people working in the domain of helping torture victims, or the victims themselves. I even find it a good self-help book. For example, the part that explains how torture victims adapt/fight back is very useful and inspiring at the same time. Probably the methods they use do not always succeed for torture victims, but they could be more successful in less severe situations in normal life for non-torture-victims (Abdelaziz *Dhākirat al-qahr*).

A final note, as Abdelaziz rightly wrote in the book, is that Egyptian society in its majority accepts torture. This is why I think that this book and other similar studies are very important in making people know how bad torture is and in helping victims not to feel ashamed, excluded, or less than others because of what happened to them.

Conclusion

I believe that Basma Abdelaziz's non-fiction writings give the reader a very good understanding of many of the political and social issues like abuse of power, torture, and religion's role in the Arab region and especially in Egypt. Her novels that probably make her ideas reach a much wider audience complement this research work.

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