Book Review

When Literature Heals: Nasra Al Adawi’s Brave Faces

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Unlike many writers who define literary creativity as a mere outlet for détente and self-indulgence, or perhaps as an escape from the self and its unbearable limitations and frustrations, Nasra Al Adawi, an emerging poet from the Sultanate of Oman, can be confidently ranked among those engaged writers who use their literary talent as a vehicle for altruistic expression and as an effective inspirational conduit for reaching out to those who need literature for its healing and “debrutalizing” power. She conceives of the act of writing as a complementary therapy, by no means as a substitute for mainstream medical treatment—a healing force that should not be ignored in dealing particularly with cancer patients.

Al Adawi’s Brave Faces: The Daring Stand Against Cancer is a welcome addition to a literature that transcends generic fixity and the clichés of academic exigency, embracing universal values which cancer patients share irrespective of their geographical, ideological, cultural, and linguistic differences. In addition to its remarkable and commanding poetic sensibility, Al Adawi’s work proves that writing is a unifying agent, a rare accomplishment in a fast-disintegrating world that pays little attention to spiritual values. Despite the adversity and agony of suffering, the poet proves that writing is capable of bringing her subjects together, thus empowering them against sickness and a life fraught with angst and despair.

Brave Faces is a collection of poems about survival and hope, underpinned by prose statements from medical experts, political figures and cancer patients, thus reinforcing the work’s central thesis that the essence of life is both physical and spiritual. The idea of the collection is inspired by two equally significant components: the mother’s “womb and breast milk” and the faith, courage, and hope which are inextricably linked to womanhood. In achieving her aims in the book, Al Adawi is helped by the fact that she is a woman writing about other women, and also by keenness and her familiarity with the terrain she is exploring, i.e. the uncanny disease she is endeavoring to understand. In fact, the women she converses with in the hospitals do not merely appear as patients but rather as close friends with whom she shares values that language per se fails to articulate convincingly. The gender factor, notwithstanding its sensitivity and ideological dimensions in the overall context of writing, does really matter here as Al Adawi explores the relationship between femininity and pain. One should also note the cohesive and smooth interplay of gender and language in the poems at the level of diction and the metaphorical associations of words. For instance, in the poem “Bosom Buddies” Rebecca Musi, a South African breast cancer survivor, resorts to apostrophe feat to depict how the sufferer comes to terms with the disease, eventually becoming more resilient:

Breast cancer
you have caused me to
fight and flight
Breast cancer
you clouded my vision
with your venom
Breast cancer
you have turned me
from hero to zero
Breast cancer
you took away my courage
and gave me confusion

But now no more, no more
The Bosom Buddies
Chuchumakgala
stopped and picked me up

Bosom Buddies understands
a silent cry

of a woman in distress
and cries with her
Bosom Buddies knows
how to use her smile and charm
with a frightened
husband or child
Bosom Buddies
has been through thick and thin
and walked back again
the same route with a friend
who needs her

Now I have a vision
Now I am a hero
Now I am courageous
Now I am not afraid
I have conquered
Now I am a victor

In this poem, the speaker opts for a confrontational,
defiant style and tone to prove her resilience and
bravery in dealing with her fate. While admitting
the devastating physical erosion caused by the
disease, she does not allow herself to succumb
to it. She has a “vision,” a powerful stimulus that
makes courage and perseverance possible. Unlike ordinary people, the speaker/patient sees
in physical pain a challenge that should be
overcome through valor and self-assertion.

Though the subject matter depicted in Brave
Faces might appear grim, given the agonizing
and stigmatizing reality of cancer and its social
and cultural implications, especially in developing
countries, Al Adawi’s poetry demythologizes the
disease, particularly the stereotypical beliefs
associated with it among patients and society
at large. In many respects, the poems help
to reinstate the patients’ sense of humanity by
recognizing their valor and stoicism and, as
a token of philanthropy and compassion, by
offering them “ribbons of strength”—literally and
metaphorically. Visiting patients in a Tanzanian
hospital, the poet felt humbled and delighted
on account of their positive response to the pink
ribbons she offered them. Running out of gifts,
she had initially thought the pink ribbons would
be inappropriate, only to discover the delight and
gratitude of the patients who appreciated caring
faces.

Brave Faces is written in Swahili as well as in English,
which helps the poet communicate with readers
from East Africa and beyond, making sure her
readers/subjects who are not proficient in the
English language are not excluded. The Swahili
version of Nyuso Jasiri: Msimamo Shupavu Dhidi
Ya Saratani reinforces spontaneity as a merit in
poetic composition. It can also be considered
an empowerment tool and a tribute to the very
women—many of whom have not mastered
English—whose testimonies form the crux of the
book. Inspiring and illuminating, these testimonies
provide Al Adawi with an impetus to learn more
about cancer. In writing the book, she sought the
advice of medical experts in the field of oncology
in order first to understand the rudiments of the
disease and then to corroborate her impressions
and those of the brave women who inspired
her and whose predicament she witnessed in
Tanzania. Moreover, she acknowledges the input
of the patients themselves in the making of the
collection, finding in their testimonies both grace
and admiration. “Brave Faces,” she writes, “is
nothing less than the collective work of many
hands; and as you turn the pages of this book,
know that each page represents a fingerprint of
those helping hands offered so lovingly.”

Immersing oneself in poetics and aesthetics
should not make us oblivious of plain factuality.
Al Adawi’s journey to Tanzania is both a quest
for the “potion” and a desire to come to grips
with the mysterious world of disease – a desire
inspired by her family experience, particularly
the loss of her father to cancer: “Going back to
Tanzania opened some of the old doors of agony
stemming from the time of my father’s death. All
this still plagues me.” The journey seems also like
a homecoming for Al Adawi who is deeply rooted
in Tanzania and who is lauded for having kept the
country of origin “within [her] mind.” So, basically,
the physical journey served as a platform for the
metaphorical one, i.e. the journey within. In fact,
one of the poems in the collection, entitled “The Journeys,” reflects the poet’s desire to embrace the inner self, to unleash its repressed whims and constraints, and eventually to conquer the world from within—that which makes the smile possible and empowers the poet to “face life.” It is interesting to note that the journey motif becomes the collection’s main raison d’être. Besides reflecting the travails and painful memories associated with the undertaking, such words as “route,” “path,” and “direction” betray that sense of inexorable determination and longing of the traveler to dig and explore, to break through and demystify. After all, it is the indefatigable persistence of the poet-explorer that stimulates the patient’s stoical resistance and the yearning for life and hope.