



Book Review

## When Literature Heals: Nasra Al Adawi's Brave Faces

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Nasra Al Adawi, *Brave Faces: The Daring Stand Against Cancer*. Muscat: Oman Printers, 2007.

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.