

A Smart Magazine for Women
Issue 2

Riposte

N°2

In this issue:
Deborah Sussman,
Chimamanda
Ngozi Adichie,
Purple Milk,
and Lizzo.

UK 10, EU 11, US 16

Do You Read Me?

*Do you read
me?*

Women in Publishing in the Middle East and North Africa

130





Essays

Words
by Lisa Reinisch

Set design
by Sarah Parker

Still life photography
by Catherine Losing

One of the best things about browsing magazine racks in cities like Beirut, Cairo, Algiers and Dubai these days is the growing variety of publications from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) taking pride of place next to the latest offerings of independent publications like *Apartamento*, *Kinfolk* and other rarefied international imprints. Beautifully designed and thoughtfully edited, a good number of these MENA titles are being published by women: Negar Azimi, senior editor of *Bidoun*; Joanna El Mir, editor at *Samir Éditeur*; Rawan Gebran and Jade George, co-founders of *The Carton*; Selma Hellal, co-founder of *Les Éditions Barzakh*; Meitha Al Mazrooei, founder of *Watad*; and Huda Smitzhuijzen-AbiFares, founder of the *Khatt Foundation for Arabic Typography*. Their subjects of interest vary (ranging from architecture and design to food and literature) but these women and their respective publications or publishing ventures all share the same objective—to serve audiences tired of stale narratives about (and from) their part of the world.

The rise in independent publishing across MENA is all the more remarkable considering how limited choices once were. Even just five years ago, visitors to MENA bookshops were faced with a relatively meagre selection of run-of-the-mill lifestyle magazines, cheaply produced religious or partisan books, mixed in with stationery and international bestsellers. Development in the sector has been stunted by censorship, low readership levels and a complete absence of regional distribution networks. Add to this the fact that the habit of buying books and magazines isn't very popular outside of religious and educational settings, or commercial entertainment and lifestyle publishing. Many a middle-class household might have multiple televisions, computers and mobile

devices, but no bookshelf. As a result, books especially have long been under-priced, leaving publishers' margins so tight that considerations such as design and paper quality are often left by the wayside.

In spite of all this, in recent years, a new breed of independent publications have flourished.

After a decade in print, *Bidoun* still holds its own as a sprawling cultural force field; utterly idiosyncratic and achingly beautiful. Where else can you read essays on the history of Beirut's avant-garde publications of the 1960s, or the Pakistani horror film industry? The original and enduring aim of *Bidoun* has been to rebuke one-dimensional portrayals and deflect what cultural theory refers to as 'the orientalist gaze'.

As senior editor Negar Azimi explains, "*Bidoun's* aesthetic has been defined as much by what gets left out as by what makes it in. All the trappings of the Middle East as fetish: veils, oil, sexy sheikhs, sex with sheikhs, Sufis, stonings, terrorism, fashion victims, Palestinians. What remains is a thoroughly post-Saidian Middle East, rarefied, stylish, and reflexively critical. We like that Middle East and we hope our audience does, too."

In the ten years that *Bidoun* has been operating, the region's cultural landscape has changed dramatically. Without wishing to over-simplify the complex individual circumstances that delivered creative spark and opportunity to the women profiled here, their work can be seen in the light of two events that utterly changed the way the MENA region sees itself—and is seen by outsiders. First, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the fallout thereof, and second, the ongoing sociopolitical upheavals of the Arab Spring. Both changed the public discourse in and about the region forever. Both triggered storm surges of interest and activity in the cultural sector, including in independent publishing.



Negor Azimi of Bidoun.



Jade George and Rawan Gebran of The Carton.

The Arab Spring's democratic protest movements have borne a new intellectual vibrancy, which has been encouraging people to express themselves—their ideas, opinions and stories—in new and unconventional ways. All over the region, spaces for creative enterprise have been expanding; some forced open by activists, others sanctioned by states eager to be seen as reform-minded.

But the cultural landscape had been in transformation since before the Arab Spring: for years the Arab Gulf states had begun pouring money into cultural development (including public libraries and publishing projects), and in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis, droves of expatriates returned to the region, many of whom became involved in publishing. Taken together, these developments breathed fresh life into independent publishing in the entire region, with Beirut and Dubai emerging as fertile breeding grounds for singular publications.

One of the shining lights in the new generation of regional publishers has been Art and Then Some,

founded by Jade George and Rawan Gebran who publish *The Carton*, a quarterly magazine about food from the Middle East. Jade explains: "A lot of people from the Middle East have a negative feeling towards their own culture. [...] So it's great to see people reading *The Carton* and developing a sense of pride."

Jade and Rawan set up their company as "a happy ideas factory and independent publishing house" three years ago. *The Carton* is no conventional food magazine—it carries few recipes, and even fewer adverts. It's a declaration of love, not just for food, but for print and non-commercial creative enterprise. Food functions as a conduit for anything from cultural criticism and personal memoir to experimental photography. And even though they depend on unpaid contributors and a niche readership, Jade and Rawan are selective about who they work with. "Everything we do is very people-based. Even when it comes to choosing a distribution company, if we don't click with the people, we will find someone else. We are conservative that way," says Jade.



Selma Hellal of Les Éditions Barzakh.

Of course, in the context of the MENA region, conservatism is usually associated with graver issues than choosing a distributor for your zine. But while concerns like censorship, corruption and human rights play a central role in international media coverage and impact negatively on the lives of many, the regional publishing industry is reasonably insulated against them.

Selma Hellal, who has run the independent Algerian publishing house Les Éditions Barzakh with her husband since 2000, points out: "The world of the publishing business is 'elitist' by nature. In such an environment, which is supposedly enlightened and modernity-oriented, such problems as macho attitudes, sexual harassment, wage discrimination, commonly confronting a woman in Algerian society, are not strongly felt."

Selma and her husband, Sofiane Hadjadj, set up their business following the end of Algeria's decade-long civil war, with the aim of resuscitating local literary culture and creating a platform for local talent both old and new.

Since then, they have built a diverse catalogue, from experimental titles, such as their first release, *Matabat* by Hmida Layachi (one of the first literary reflections on the horrors of the war), to a popular 2006 reissue of *La Trilogie Algérie*, comprising the first three novels by seminal Algerian writer Mohammed Dib.

In 2010, Les Éditions Barzakh received an unexpected windfall—a €100,000 grant from the Dutch Prince Claus Foundation for Culture and Development. Elated, Selma and Sofiane immediately reinvested the money into their business.

Recent regional protest movements might not have directly affected Algeria, but for Selma, literature is an inherently radical space. In her view, a slow, almost silent revolution has been taking place for many years on the pages of books by the region's politically engaged authors. "Our activity as publishers is to make those voices heard and to provide food for dreams, thought and inspire beauty, which is indeed an act of resistance," she says.



“Bidoun's aesthetic has been defined as much by what gets left out, as by what is included.”

Negar Azimi, Senior Editor Bidoun

In times of conflict, books can also provide an escape; even if that means reading Sartre and Diderot at the tender age of 16. This was the case for Joanna El Mir, who came of age during the Lebanese Civil War and had nothing but her aunt's less than age-appropriate book collection to get her through long days and even longer nights in a Beirut air raid shelter.

This goes some way toward explaining Joanna's passion for children's literature—and her considerable patience, as her journey to becoming a publisher was more than a decade in the making.

After graduating from Lebanon's famously tough Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts in 1997, Joanna worked as an advertising art director until 2001, when she had the opportunity to join Samir Éditeur, one of Lebanon's oldest publishing houses. As one of the first in-house book design professionals in the Arab world, she brought countless emerging illustrators on board and always kept an eye on typography and paper quality. In 2006, she received the British Council's International Young Publishing Entrepreneur award and, keen to escape the war with Israel, used the prize money to enrol in publishing courses at Bloomsbury and Puffin Books in London. When she returned to Lebanon, she switched from design and pre-press into editorial and publishing. But it was not until 2009 that Joanna was finally in her dream position: publishing original works and making classic children's literature available in Arabic for the first time.

Translating Roald Dahl into Arabic proved to be somewhat of a semantic minefield, requiring both Joanna and the Dahl estate to consider a variety of linguistic and cultural sensitivities. Evil head mistresses, alcohol-guzzling parents and made-up words did not bode well for the book's reception by the Arab world's often traditionalist teachers. Some minor tweaks were necessary, but seemed a small price for introducing books like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Matilda* to Arab readers.

Fretting over the sociocultural undercurrents of translations and making up new Arabic words are familiar territory for the Lebanese designer, author and lecturer Huda Smitzhuijzen-AbiFares as well. In 2010, the founder of the Khatt Foundation for Arabic Typography set up an independent publishing house specialising in MENA design. Huda had published a number of books in English and Arabic, and during the translation process, often had to invent words for technical design terms that did not yet exist in Arabic—expressions like type design, for example, had no local equivalent.

“We had big arguments trying to find a suitable term. In the end, we agreed on something, but then we

became quite nervous about putting it on the cover. But if the terminology becomes used often enough, it will become the new standard.”

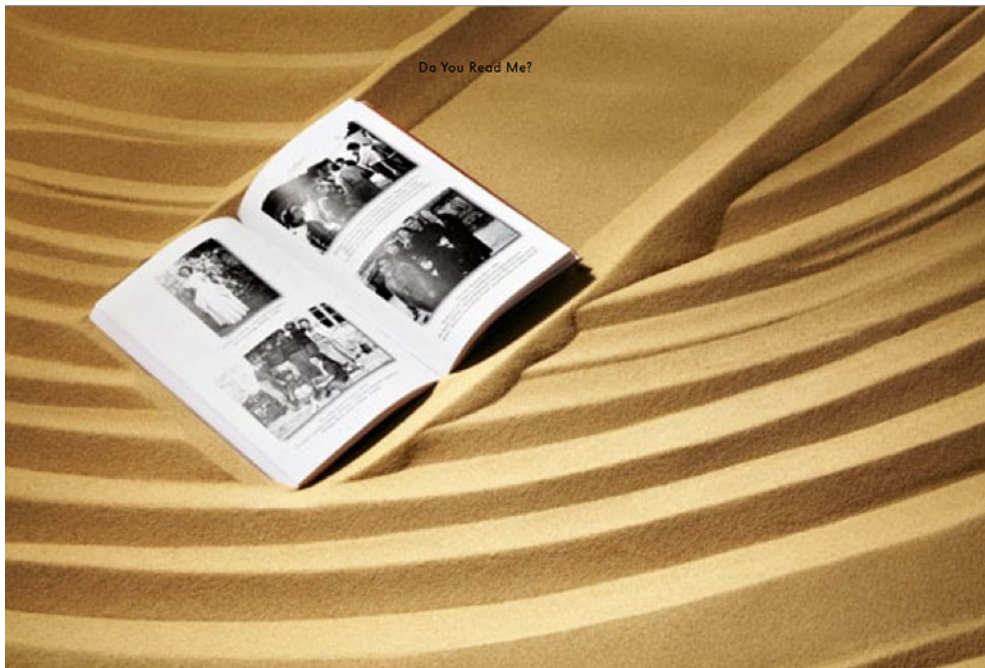
Huda is now working with specialised translators to compile an Arabic glossary for the design community, which she hopes to publish in 2015.

“I think it is very important to develop a discourse about your own culture, in your own language,” she explains. “The problem with education in the Middle East is that it is always about Western perspectives, because there has never been proper publishing or documentation on design within the region. There is no history of design.” Not yet, at least. Khatt Books was established specifically to encourage critical writing about design in the region, and has published four bilingual books so far. A new series called *Design Profiles*, highlighting the work of seminal regional designers, launches this year. Starting with the Egyptian designer and illustrator Hilmi El-Tuni and the Lebanese type designer and architect Nasri Khattar, Huda hopes to publish three to four monographs a year.

In a region where historical archives and official documents are often non-existent, inaccessible or unreliable, creating a written record can be, in itself, an important driver for many publishers. This is certainly true for *Watad* magazine, a UAE-based title that chronicles life in the region through the prism of architecture. Founded in 2012 by Meitha Al Mazrooqi, *Watad* has an experimental and, perhaps counter intuitively, a somewhat nostalgic feel. Many of its features centre on old or abandoned structures, forgotten places and temporary solutions, which may have disappeared by the time the magazine rolls off the press. Like many of the new wave of magazines coming out of the region, *Watad* is not geared towards making money (at least not yet), but towards bringing together like-minded people and giving them the opportunity to share their ideas. *Watad*'s contributing writers and photographers are unpaid, but provided with ample space to develop unusual narratives and visuals.

“At this stage, even if it is just a form of archiving the existing architecture, the existing landscape, it's enough for us. Even if it is not impacting further, because no one has been archiving the urban fabric and buildings. No one!” exclaims Meitha, a trained architect. Meitha graduated university in 2010, at the height of Dubai's financial crisis, when the only job available would have been as a draftsman for one of the big local developers.

“I honestly didn't want to contribute to that,” she explains, almost apologetically. “And I was lucky enough



“We know where the boundaries lie. Are we willing to push them? No, honestly we don't...We are too young, as a publication, and we don't want our efforts to die”

Meitha Al Mazrooei of Watad Magazine

Essays



Joanna El Mir of Samir Éditeur.



Meitha Al Mazrooei of Watad.

that I didn't have to.” With the help of family, friends and funding from the Emirates Foundation, Meitha instead set about creating the first issue of Watad.

“You definitely build a community. A lot of people appreciate independent publishing because they trust the voice behind it or they trust that it is not an advertising angle, they know it is a project of value.”

Watad is the product of a new generation of creative professionals from the Gulf countries: expensively educated members of a fast-changing society that is, often to their own astonishment, still ruled by old-fashioned moral and legal codes. Meitha is acutely aware of local censorship, explaining “We know where the boundaries lie. Are we willing to push them, to see how far we can go? No, honestly, we don't. At this point, we are too young, as a publication, and we don't want our efforts to die.”

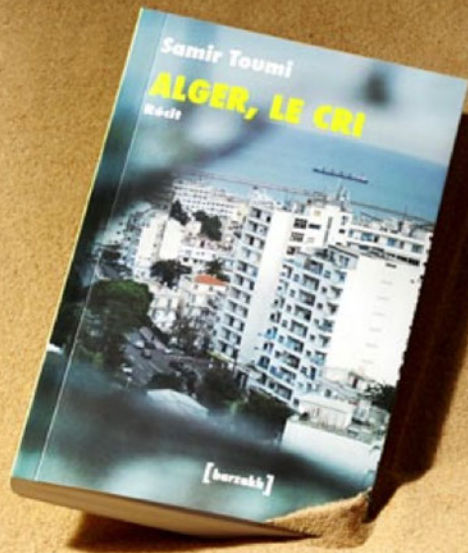
Freedom of expression and censorship remain sore topics across MENA, but many of the recent independent publishing ventures have managed to fly under the

radar simply because their subject matter is not taken seriously. Jade and Rawan experienced this with a recent issue of The Carton: “People take food very lightly, so it is a good cover. We had an entire issue on alcohol and brewing and distilling, but nobody told us anything. If a more overtly political magazine would try to do that, they would be battling with censorship for months.”

Even Selma, as an Algerian publisher who often deals with political authors, is not overly concerned: “In our country publishing, especially literature, is judged so unimportant, so insignificant, that we do not represent a real danger in the eyes of the regime; unlike television and radio, which are subject to ruthless censorship.”

There is also a kind of collective weariness of being asked about one's experience 'as a woman'. Joanna El Mir smiles wryly and sighs, “You know, I don't wake up in the morning and think 'I am a woman, what am I going to do now?' No, I wake up and I go to work.”

When asked whether female publishers face any kind of disadvantage, Huda goes all tongue-in-cheek:



“Our activity as publishers, which is to make voices heard and to provide food for dreams, thought and inspire beauty, is indeed an act of resistance.”

Selma Hellal, Les Editions Barzakh.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANNE HELENE



Huda Smitzhuijzen-Abifares founder of the Khatt Foundation for Arabic Typography.

“I think it might even be the other way around. [...] We are at that stage where it is much cooler to be a woman than a man!”

Negar’s response, meanwhile, can only be described as ‘fetish fatigue’. “The trope of women and the Middle East is aggrandised by the media, as if one is witnessing a miracle with every powerful woman leading a company, a magazine, or a ministry. It’s just not an issue to us... There are powerful inspirational women all around us in the region.”

These reactions say a lot, not just about these women, but of the women at the helm of burgeoning independent publishing ventures from Algiers to Abu Dhabi, and Marrakech to Manama. They have made, and continue to make, publishing in this part of the world an exciting place to be right now. Their work is already inspiring the next generation of independent

publishers, writers, photographers and artists, who will determine what the region’s magazine racks and bookshops will look like in the future.

Granted, this niche publishing industry tends to be insular; protected, as it is, from social inequalities and reaching only relatively small audiences. But printed materials, once in circulation, have a funny way of taking on a life of their own. They are passed on, re-sold, donated, collected and archived. They trickle down and turn up in unexpected places. They can have unanticipated effects on those whose hands they pass through. One way or another, the books and magazines published by the women we spoke to have become part of the region’s written record and serving as nourishment for a collective imagination hungry for alternative narratives. [END]

Lisa Reinisch is a journalist based in Abu Dhabi. She edits visual journalism projects for Al Bayan and is preparing the release of two new books on media history and public art in the United Arab Emirates.