

Constructing Dreams from Nightmares

By Sally Bland

This is a love story with an edge to it, a novel that is daring in style and content, a riveting exploration of the place where politics, culture and psychology intersect, where a history of wars collides with everyday life.

Irene and Khalid seem just right for each other. Both are lost amidst the beauty of the Southern California coast. Coming from the East to attend university, Irene is fleeing a life without meaning, a family who doesn't meet her needs, but the move hasn't resolved her deep-down problems.

"Once upon a time she was sitting on a beach trying to construct dreams from nightmares, trying to create a self from scratch." (p. 194) Those were her "lost days." Sometimes she felt she was dead or "tossed about on everybody else's wind." (p. 62)

Khalid's flight was different, enforced by war and occupation. Arbitrarily deported from Jerusalem to Jordan as a teenager, he goes to Lebanon, until the 1982 Israeli invasion forces him farther a field and he finally lands in California. Khalid is a student too, as well as a budding painter and poet. Warm, funny and congenial, he easily makes friends, but he is not without scars inflicted on him by memories of the death and destruction he has witnessed.

"Khalid's mind was like a tightly wound fist, smashing its way through the universe." (p. 101) So it was not enough for Irene to be critical of US policy and involved in solidarity with oppressed peoples. The silliest everyday quarrel could send Khalid off on a tangent, making him see Irene as part and parcel of the system that has caused so much injustice in the Middle East and elsewhere. Irene, for her part, retreats into stubbornness rather than trying to understand what lies behind Khalid's outbursts. Tension builds between the couple parallel to the world situation which is careening towards the 1991 Gulf War.

"The Woman I Left Behind" is not only about the trials, tribulations and joys of trying to bridge between different cultures and experiences. It is even more about the need for sensitive people to create a whole new world—a dream, if you will—from the nightmare that is reality in many

locations, including in America.

There is now an expansive body of literature about transnational identity and the immigrant experience, but, strangely enough, few books about cross-cultural couples where one of the partners is Arab, though many such couples and marriages exist in reality. This makes Jensen's book unique, as does her approach. For her, it is not only a question of adjusting to a new culture or straddling two different worlds, but of finding a way to live in this imperfect world full of injustice.

The structure and style of the novel are also unique. Besides being laced with snatches of very expressive poetry, the prose narrative itself is lyrical and filled with incisive images. The poetic features of the book are counter-posed with hard-hitting exposure of harsh reality. As the narrative shifts between the respective memories of Irene and Khalid, and from Palestine to Beirut to Southern California, each shift is marked by a change in style that corresponds to the setting. In this way, Jensen conveys the nuances of her characters' inner worlds and the definitive happenings in the real world with equal dexterity.

Even the author's note that prefaces the book is unique. To protect themselves, novelists usually write that any resemblance between their characters and real people is coincidental. Jensen, however, meets reality head on, saying: "The Woman I Left Behind" is a work of fiction with imagined characters, situations, and events. Their resemblance to real people and events is, however, not a coincidence. It is important to note that the chapters set in Palestine and Beirut, while fictional, are historically accurate; similar incidents and stories are well documented."

Without ever departing from literary form and becoming didactic, the book recounts quite a lot about the Palestinian cause. It is the first novel published by Jensen, who has taught in California, France and the Middle East, and been involved in human rights work for many years. Reading "The Woman I Left Behind" makes one wish to meet her, for she surely has many more stories to tell.