

# A *handsome and fragile woman*

with fine facial contours, the daughter of a wealthy family, Fadwa Touqan turned 76 years old last year. (...) "Yes, I am a rebel, but I rebel quietly and peacefully," she told me in Jerusalem last week. "Because of my nature and temperament I do not argue or fight. If I use negative language to express resistance, I do so in a measured way. I usually get what I want." (...) Her mother, she writes, "was the first woman of her generation in Nablus to remove her veil in public. From that moment on I began imbibing the spirit of freedom, because time had already gathered to itself the old, conservative generation of the family. I was filled with joy observing my mother's vitality grow as she liberated herself from the shackles of tradition." Years ago, there would have been nothing surprising in reading such a phrase. Today, in the light of the upsurge of Moslem fundamentalism, such a statement is daring. "I wrote it with the feeling in my heart that even today Arab society is prepared to accept my frankness." (...)

Touqan does not oppose religion. "Deep within me there is faith. But it differs from that of others. Religions are the creations of human beings... I believe in a divine force which we Arabs call *Allah*. Otherwise, how can we understand the universe in which we live and which is so well organised? No

doubt there is some great engineer responsible for that."

"Sometimes," she added, "when I see the chaos around me, I ask: God who created us and who witnesses our suffering — how can He observe our suffering and bear it? We are His children, His creations. Then I am angry. In my heart I reproach God."

Two days before our meeting, fanatics in Turkey had set fire to a hotel, causing the deaths of dozens of people, among them writers and poets. The pretext was Salman Rushdie's book.

Fadwa Touqan was shocked. "It was absolutely terrible, *haram*, forbidden by religion," she said. "The entire affair concerning Rushdie's book has been blown out of all proportion by the Iranian authorities, especially when they pronounced the death sentence. In the translated portions of the book, I found improper statements about religion and about the Prophet Muhammad, which are obviously intolerable in the eyes of the Islamic world." (...) In her opinion, "even in Palestine there is danger of violence, which may break out with great ferocity if the political process leads to a settlement." When asked whether she fears the fanatical Moslem groups, she replies: "I sense the danger. I'm afraid to say everything I feel about them. Among them there are those who are deterred by nothing and who violate the most sacred tenets of Islam — love, mercy and forgiveness. Islam contains no hatred." She does not oppose the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in Arabic, even in Jerusalem or in Nablus: "There is no danger of this book influencing Moslems. Everyone has the right to publish and the right to criticise."

Touqan believes that "Satan's hand" is behind the fundamentalist surge and violence, and in her view Satan is the US and the CIA: "After removing communism, their former greatest enemy, they raised up the fanatical flag of Islam in order to destroy some regimes in the Arab states and to consolidate their grip on them. In that manner the USA hopes to guarantee its global hegemony as the sole superpower and that is what it terms a New World Order."

The poetess from Nablus does not believe that democracy is a suitable solution: "In Jordan democratisation has made the Moslem Brotherhood a very important and powerful force in

parliament. We must be careful in exercising democracy. Democracy succeeds in stable states. But not in the Arab world which has been oppressed for so long — for hundreds of years under the Ottoman empire, and then under other foreign regimes." She feels no identification with any Arab regime. (...)

Touqan opposes the widespread use of violence in Arab society, including that employed in the Territories against persons suspected of collaboration with Israel. "It has happened that a person was killed on suspicion of having collaborated with Israel, and later it was found to be a lie." In regard to violence against women, she is emphatic: "It is an unforgivable sin. Everyone knows that this is my firm position."

Touqan considers herself an individualist, enjoying isolation, quiet, loneliness. In her writing, women occupy a central place. "My readers know that I always support women, that I am against oppression. Women should have freedom and the right to live a full human life. It is a woman's right to study, to work for herself and to be a public and political activist, if she so wishes."

I asked her if the freedom she demands for Arab women includes freedom in their relations with men: "Freedom in that area must be restricted," she replied. "A woman must maintain her good reputation and the code of morality specific to her."

I said that men do not usually restrict themselves their relations with women. She responded: "Men assume that freedom by force, something that a woman cannot do. Even a woman's son often denies her that freedom in our society, especially in the area of freedom in sexual relations. But in my view, women should not have freedom in the area of sexual relations. The essence of woman is not limited to her femininity, even if that is an important part of her life. A woman can marry and then exercise her femininity. A married woman should not exercise sexual freedom. Some women exercise their right to a sexual life before marriage, but they do it secretly. Men are not afraid of doing that. Our society is like that."

"How are your own relations with men?" I asked. "Excellent, respectful, they exist, on a cultural, a friendly basis." "Including love?" "Of course, I have also experienced love." "Why did you not marry?" "Poetry was my life's goal. When I look at the world

around me, I tend to consider marriage as something far from me. I was always very afraid of men. I feared that a man would confine me. Clearly, had I married, I could not have dedicated myself to poetry. Because of the oppression that was the fate of my mother and my sisters, and of all my women friends, whose married lives were lives of slavery, I was wary of men and I avoided being the captive of one. I didn't need to be the servant of a man, to make him coffee or breakfastst. Why should I? Never."

"Do you like children?" "I love children very much. I have always been surrounded by children." "Did you want children of your own?" "No." (...)

Fadwa Touqan said that she had not had any contacts with Jews prior to 1948: "I knew the Jews, my enemies, only through the radio and the papers. Only after the occupation of 1967, did I establish relations with some of them and change my attitude." At her own initiative, she described an episode which apparently broke the ice in her relations with the Jews. "A short while after the occupation I received a letter from the late Dr. Yitzhak Shamosh, who asked to visit me. I did not reply since I did not want to meet the Jews who had occupied my homeland. However, one day a man appeared on my doorstep, and introduced himself as Yitzhak Shamosh. Of course, I invited him into my home. When he inquired about his letter, I didn't hide the fact that I had received it, and I explained why I had avoided replying to him. When he told me that he hadn't come to discuss politics with me but literature, I told him that a true artist cannot separate politics from literature. But the conversation flowed, and suddenly I discovered that I had forgotten that he was a Jew. That is how the relationship between us started. Today the basis of my relationship with Jews is humanistic. When I speak with a Jew I tend to forget that he belongs to the state responsible for our disaster. Why should I attribute to my Jewish friends the responsibility for the injustice done by the state? If one must denounce and condemn then one should condemn the leaders and the establishment, but not the individual person. (...)"

Speaking about the Intifada, Touqan says: "I was overcome with joy when it broke out. Before that we were in a deep crisis. We faced a dead end. It seemed as if we had become resigned to

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Fadwa Touqan,  
Poetess of Nablus

our fate, as if we had surrendered to the occupation. On the eve of the outbreak of the Intifada, a new Israeli governor visited my home and asked my opinion concerning the calm in the territories. I told him: 'I reject that calm and I oppose it. If anyone tells you that they are pleased with it, don't believe him, he is a liar. It's the calm before the storm.' And when the storm broke I was happy. From then on, we could hold our heads up high."

[...] [In July 1993], Touqan said that she had been initially supportive of the political process and the Madrid Conference, but had changed her mind: "What have we achieved so far in talks that have been going on for almost two years? Nothing. What did we gain from the latest American document? Nothing. The choices facing the Palestinian negotiators today are: either real progress in the talks, or abandoning them." She then adds: "That is the feeling of the great majority of the Palestinians in the Territories." She does not fear the crisis that will break out as a result of ending the negotiations, nor does she fear war: "Who will begin the war? Even if the autonomy is realised, it will cause an internal war among us, a civil war between those who support the solution and those who oppose it. I fear the future."

Fadwa Touqan lives alone in Nablus. Her day is fairly routine: "I hate being served by anyone and therefore I manage my own household and do my own shopping. Most of the time I read and write. I'm happy." With time she cured herself of small weaknesses. "For reasons of health, I stopped smoking, I stopped indulging myself with chocolates and gave up my excessive love of rice pudding. I am satisfied with fruit."

She doesn't want to ever become a burden to others. To make her point she quoted from an ancient poet: "God, do not let me live until the time when I become a burden to someone, take me before I say to anyone, 'Hold me up so that I can stand on my own feet.'"

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