

Learning English

By Rachid El-Daif
Beirut: Al-Nahar, 1998
Reviewed by Samira Aghacy

Rachid El-Daif's latest novel *Learning English* is a brilliantly executed work of fiction, the work of a writer arrived at startling maturity. If the majority of Lebanese male writers tend to accord the woman a marginal role in their works, El-Daif's latest work focuses on a woman whose transgressive role in a patriarchal society exposes the myth of male control and domination. In an unprecedented attempt in Arabic fiction at uncovering taboos related to woman's physical power, El-Daif's subversive novel presents the narrative through the focalizing consciousness of Rachid, the narrator, who sets out to tell the story of his life and solve the enigma of his origin, the fear that he may not be his father's biological son.

The novel begins with the murder of the narrator's father who is killed and buried without the narrator being informed about it since none of the members of his family, including his mother and his uncles, bother to inform him. Coming across it by accident in the newspaper, the news of his father's death shakes Rachid and resurrects old and deeply ingrained feelings of anxiety about his dubious origin.

Having received a Doctorate from France and making his abode in Beirut, Rachid rejects outdated customs and traditions represented by his hometown Zgharta and congratulates himself on the new life he has made for himself in the city. From the start, the narrator is keen on projecting himself as part of the modernizing process and tells us that as a rational human being, he has abjured all primitive practices. He insists that he cannot bear but to be contemporary and that computers, numbers, and modern technology and telecommunication have become part and parcel of his existence. In the city, he tells us, he has managed to free himself of the restrictive provincialism and the protective framework of the small community.

Despite such assertions, the past returns to plague him and to claim what legitimately belongs to it. He admits that he is uttering such civilized words despite other feelings of anger and spite that he feels for the person who has killed his



father, his own flesh and blood. Coming from a society strongly structured on revenge, he is obviously shaken by his father's death and wonders at the power that wants to drag him backwards.

In order to ensure his legitimacy, he sets out to retrieve the path back to the father. In fact his story is founded on a profound anxiety about the meaning of masculinity. To have a woman for a mother, can be a traumatic experience for any man in a society that sanctions maternity but rejects sexuality. If he is able to accept his father's numerous affairs with women and the possibility that his father too may have had an illegitimate

daughter, he cannot tolerate his mother's single love affair with a man. He admits that his father is nothing but a murderer and a vicious and cruel man, but despite everything, he insists that he happens to be this man's son. Seeing himself as the guardian of his father's honour, he makes a point of covering up his defects and refuses to compromise his reputation particularly before his mother.

In order to reinstate the father in the position that is his birth right, Rachid has to come to terms with his mother for, after all, she is the cause of his humiliation. What he really wants to know is whether she actually had sexual intercourse with her lover shortly before her marriage to his father, and the spectre of female sexuality which is masked, hidden, and duplicitous begins to haunt him. In his compulsive attempt at finding the truth, he discovers that his mother was planning to desert her own son and run away with her lover. Shocked at this discovery he wonders if any one has ever heard of a mother who is capable of treating her child in that manner. He feels insecure in the presence of her dangerous sexuality and her transgressive behaviour. He sees a positive viciousness in her lack of interest in her own son and resents her for not even bothering to explain to her husband how she came to lose her virginity. The narrator insists on presenting his mother as the culprit and gives examples of her imprudence and indiscretion. He wonders how she managed to keep her lover's letters and some embarrassing photographs of hers in his father's own house. In fact, the tensions and doubts within him can be attributed to her presence and her unconventional behaviour that constitutes a threat that fills him with anxiety, resentment, and doubt.

His desire for knowledge and control derives from his sense that the masculine world and masculine identity are in danger. His mother is seen as fatal to his as well as his father's sense of equilibrium and strength. He feels threatened by her masculine qualities, her keen intelligence, her assertiveness and insistence on equality as well as her indifference to moral standards. Lacking the nurturing qualities that a mother should possess, his mother becomes a threat to his sense of stability and his ability to have a healthy relationship with any woman. His affair with Salwa can be construed as a purely sexual relation inextricably bound up with desires for domination and misogyny. For him, intimacy with women, threatens overdependence, possessiveness, and total absorption, or loss of self. Such feelings spring from his fear of female power manifested in his own mother's transgressive behaviour.

In his story, he likes to project his mother as the stereotypical nurturing mother, but her adultery and deceit destroys all his dreams about what a mother should be like. Unable to hide his strong attraction for and admiration of his mother, he compares her to a ravishing movie star and presents her as a vibrantly passionate woman who

excercises erotic fascination over men. Feeling threatened by such oedipal feelings, he becomes intent on portraying her as dangerous and destructive though he is unable to suppress her sexuality that lurks beneath the surface. If his ultimate aim is to erase these signs of female autonomy and otherness that threaten his identity, he sees the difficulty of achieving such an aim. Despite his attempt to undermine her role, she remains all-powerful, all-encroaching, all-castrating, and he is left with no other alternative but to focus on words, the actual story telling, in his attempt to control experience through language rather than the body.

His ambivalent feelings towards his mother drive him to see her in terms of nature as well as decay, admiration as well as revulsion. A great deal of the information that the narrator gets is through the stories that his mother relates to her bosom friend Maryam. It is her stories that keep her going and her need to speak, to tell, is matched by her need to have someone to speak to. When she is no longer able to tell the autobiography of her love and marriage to her bosom friend Maryam, she breaks down and begins to sense the vanity of her life and the emptiness of her existence. The vibrantly passionate woman degenerates into an aging old hag bitten with senility and behaving in a crude and indiscreet manner, having lost all her social grace and finesse. Despite the narrator's desire to marginalize her, the text reveals that she dominates the scene by her courage, assertiveness, defiance and insistence on holding her ground and refusing to capitulate or give in to her husband or son.

The novel ends where it began with the narrator as confused about his genealogy as ever before; however, this confusion makes him all the more determined to embrace the father and erase the mother. His relapse into barbarity, the old world of revenge and aggression, is seen in his eventual return home, his decision to leave the city and be his father's son (or convince himself of this), despite the fact that he has no solid proof. On his way back home, he sees his father's ghost hovering before the car and asserts that in his hometown, if one sees a ghost and fails to promise him instant revenge, he will be haunted by the ghost all his life.

Despite his desire to impose closure, to offer neat resolutions, more is left at the time of writing than is resolved. El- Daif presents a cyclical, many layered narrative that invites exploration rather than arrival. Compelling though the narrator's partial as well as objective investigations are, the force of this outstanding novel lies equally in its strong autobiographical elements, its subtle mixture of generic elements, the suggestive accretion of detail, dreams, stories and tales that highlight, if anything, the flagging and, perhaps, illusive power of the patriarchal order in the face of active and assertive femininity.