



Poetry far from home; Edmonton's Iman Mersal is the best Arabic-language poet you've never heard of

Edmonton Journal
Sat Jul 7 2012
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"The feeling you get when you are writing a poem is different to any other feeling," Iman Mersal says. "You feel your being is in the making or some-thing. You are very involved in everything around you and yet you are completely alienated. It's a mood. I can feel it in advance."

Mersal is one of Edmonton's best-kept literary secrets. The renowned Egyptian poet has lived here since 1999, when her husband, an ethnomusicologist, got a post-doctoral position at the University of Alberta. Now, Mersal teaches Arabic at the U of A while raising two boys and travelling the world to read at prestigious poetry events.

At the end of June, she represented Egypt at London's Poetry Parnassus, billed as the biggest poetry gathering ever with writers from the 200-plus nations participating in the 2012 Summer Olympics.

"We had lots of nominations of Egyptian poets, so to be the poet selected from that country is a great honour," Parnassus programmer Martin Colt-horpe says. (Griffin Prize winner Karen Solie represented Canada.)

Mersal has published four books of poetry in Arabic. Her work has appeared in the prestigious Paris Review and been translated into French, German, Spanish, Dutch, Italian and Hebrew, as well as English.

"She is definitely one of the best Arab poets of her generation," says Walid El Khachab, an Arabic professor at York University. "She's one of the most original, one of the most quoted, one of the most spoken about."

The language barrier is no doubt one of the reasons Mersal, 45, tends to fly under the radar in Edmonton. She only writes and reads poetry in her native Arabic.

Genre, too, plays a role. Poetry is seen by many as esoteric, inaccessible, even when you do speak the language printed on the page.

In 2008, an English translation of selected poems was published under the title *These Are Not Oranges, My Love*. It begs to be read, as it offers a window into the mind of a smart, funny and modest person who stands in the shadows of Edmonton's arts scene.

"What you learn here is not different from what you learned there," Mersal writes in *Why Did She Come?* "You read to absent reality / You hide your shyness behind foul language. / Camouflage your weakness by lengthening your fingernails."

"When you think of the most prominent female Canadian novelist, you think of Margaret Atwood," El Khachab says. "When I ask myself the same question about Arabic poetry, I automatically think of Iman."

A tortoiseshell cat named Cleopatra - Cleo, for short - greets me with a lion's stretch on the front lawn of a split-level house on the south side. Mersal describes her neighbourhood - middle-income, safe - as "boring." It's that wit that endears her to fans.

The writer's living room is dim, cosy, cluttered with mementoes of elsewhere: fabrics, rugs, handicrafts, old photos. Even the furniture looks well-travelled. Curled up on the sofa smoking, Mersal hums with energy and life, a contradiction to the themes that permeate her writing: death, absence, alienation. Perhaps it is her delicious sense of humour that keeps her young. Perhaps it is her flair for Egyptian cuisine, which friends rave about, which keeps her away from Egyptian eateries in town.

"If you know the food, seriously, you can't eat out," she says, setting out a plate of homemade *mahshy*, stuffed grape leaves. "These are burned ones, which we prefer in Egypt but I don't think Canadians will like." They taste exceptional.

Mersal was born Nov. 30, 1966, in the village of Mit Adlan, in northern Egypt. She began writing stories at an early age as a way of remembering her mother, who died at 27, when Iman was seven. "She was sick for a few days," she recalls. "I heard so many explanations of her death, but how can I know? Actually, I don't want to know."

Her father raised her and two younger siblings, buying them books and taking them to the cinema, a 25-minute drive away. Few parents did this sort of thing in rural areas of Egypt in the 1970s, she says. "We were his investment."

In *News of Your Death*, part of *The Clot*, a multi-part poem dedicated to her father, she writes, "I will receive your death / as the last wrong you commit against me / I will not feel relief as I had thought / and I will firmly believe / that you have denied me the chance / to diagnose the tumors / that have grown between us."

Mersal published her first poem when she was 16. She studied Arabic literature at university, first in Mansoura, then Cairo, all the while publishing poetry in the country's leading literary journals. Her first book, a collection of free-verse poetry published in 1990, showed the beauty of the Arabic language. But it was her second book, a collection of prose poems published in 1995, that caught people's attention, for the good and the bad. *A Dark Alley Suitable for Dance Lessons* epitomized the experimental style and intimate focus of young Egyptian writers.

"During these years there were lots of questions about who we are, doubts about ideology," Mersal recalls, listing off key events in the Middle East at that time: the Gulf War, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "The great poetry didn't represent us, our life in Cairo. We felt like outsiders in the city."

Mersal is part of what's known in the Arabic world as the Nineties generation, a groundbreaking movement of young men and women "writing about themselves, about personal experiences, about details instead of about big social or political issues," says El Khachab. These young writers focused on the minutiae of life, challenging Arabic poetry's established form and subject matter, distancing themselves from the greats of the genre like Syria's Adonis and Palestine's Mahmoud Darwish.

Critics condemned this new style of writing as apolitical, but El Khachab says that's not the case. "It's just not political in the conventional sense. Their political attitude was to be anti-establishment, anti-preconceived discourses."

The discussion and arguments amazed Mersal. She was writing to make sense of the world, not to get noticed. "In my own view, I was invisible. I didn't want to be famous or rich."

Many Nineties generation writers were accused of disrespecting the Arabic language - not using proper grammar or spelling, confusing colloquial and standard language. Not Mersal. "She was writing something very faithful to the new trend in Arabic writing, but her Arabic was excellent."

Her writing made waves because it was mature and challenged the traditional esthetics of poetry, El Khachab says. It talked subtly about private, intimate matters, like sexuality, a taboo for female writers at the time. It was original and funny. "The intensity of the humour and cynicism was definitely new in poetry," he says.

In *Respecting Marx*, she draws a connection between communism and women's underwear. "Respecting Marx / is the only thing all those who loved me shared / and I have allowed them all, in varying degrees, / to claw at the cotton dolls / hidden in my body."

Mersal is outspoken, El Khachab says, but she's not a self-appointed prophet. She shares her views without giving the impression that she is preaching or teaching. "That's what makes her interesting, effective, incredible," he says. "Her attitude is not about claiming for herself the right to represent others."

The Marx poem still amuses Bert Almon. The Edmonton-based poet has become friends with Mersal over the years.

"I like her absolute literary integrity, her seriousness and her independence of mind," Almon says. Mersal's work "manages to be personal without being excessively confessional - The word integrity keeps coming to my mind."

Mersal is petite, birdlike, deceptively delicate. Her skin is the colour of Mediterranean sand, her eyes are like the Nile: enormous, frightening, powerful. She adorns herself with silver, including a stud in her nose no bigger than a peppercorn, and wears the face of her watch on the inside of her left wrist, as if to keep time close.

A chain smoker, she took up the habit in her 20s after a cherished friend from Cairo moved away to Europe and left her cigarettes behind.

"I became certain that smoking is a necessity," she writes in *It Seems I Inherit the Dead*. "I began to have a private drawer / and a secret man / who used to be her lover."

Mersal knows the habit is deadly and can't bear to look at the graphic images on Canadian cigarette packaging. She keeps her cigarettes in a silver case engraved with her name - a gift from a friend. Because she is fascinating, sardonic, I find myself tolerating the fumes, making adjustments because I want to hang out. "Let's go out to smoke," she suggests, and I follow.

Mersal has had to make adjustments, too. She started a new life in North America after falling in love with Michael Frishkopf, whom she met in Cairo. They married in Egypt, then moved to Frishkopf's native Boston.

"I was thinking, I will try it somewhere else and if it doesn't work, I'll come back," Mersal says. Soon, she was pregnant, a newcomer to Edmonton. "And that's it," she says. "The end. Or the beginning."

It has taken her time to get used to this corner of the world, with its love of the outdoors. Reading, drinking wine: these are Mersal's winter sports. The move has inspired her to write about dislocation, mental illness, changing notions of home.

In *Why Did She Come?*, Mersal writes about the immigrant experience. "Accents do not die, but foreigners are excellent gravediggers. / They post the names of their dead relatives on their fridges / so not to call them by mistake. / They pay a quarter of their wages to telephone companies / to make sure they live in a place that can be identified by its distance from childhood. / Why can't they forget?"

She is not the nostalgic sort. "There is no crying over the ruins. It's as if life here and there is meant to be watched from afar," she says.

The name Iman means "belief, faith." Mersal was raised in a Muslim household and wore a veil briefly in high school but is non-practising now. "When someone I love dies, I wish I were religious," she says, "but it just doesn't work with me."

Yet she is still connected to her roots. She spends her summers in Cairo, where she maintains an apartment. She tells Arabic stories to her boys, Mourad, 12, and Joseph, 10, cooks for them to ease the guilt of being away from them so often. She is deeply informed about the political turmoil in her homeland. When the Arab Spring of 2011 ended Hosni Mubarak's 30-year dictatorial regime, she adopted Cleo to celebrate.

"When I came back, I was full of hope, like, wow!" She rolls her eyes in the back of her head, flutters her eyelids.

The unrest has continued in Egypt. After much election controversy, the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Mursi was declared the new president in June. This summer in Cairo, Mersal will be able to keep close tabs on the situation. "You can't be there and not be involved."

Her head is firmly planted on her shoulders, her view of the world razor-sharp, but Mersal does permit herself a folkloric indulgence, perhaps to keep her mother's memory alive. She saves clippings from her hair and those of her boys in a box in her basement. Some Egyptian women, including her mother, would collect all the strands of their hair, even tuck them into the cracks of a house to ward off evil.

She laughs at herself practising this ritual, but "you act the way the village women act. You have nothing to do with them, but you have everything to do with them."

She captures it in the poem *They Tear Down My Family Home*. "Did she pull her hair from the tines of her comb, afraid of black magic / or fire, or the neighbors' mischief? / My mother's hair slithers out, a gift, a punishment. / What binds us now?"

The poem had been brewing in Mersal's mind for years, but she couldn't get it out until she moved to Edmonton. "This is the happiness of being away from home, from somewhere. Home is not home. Hair is not hair. This confusion can bring poetry out."