

## An Interview with Sahar Khalifeh · *Peter Nazareth*

NZ: Were you always interested in writing fiction as a child?

SK: I was interested in expressing myself in different ways, artistic ways. I was expressing myself in writing and painting, putting my feelings into words and colors. When I was a child, my teachers at school expected me to become an artist: a writer or a painter. Ismail Shamout, a very important Palestinian painter, once said after reading my writings that I would be the Françoise Sagan of the East. He wrote me a long letter telling me what to expect and what to avoid. Since he was older and a well-known artist, he thought that a young girl like me, in a traditional society, would face difficulties and problems. I still have the letter which he wrote to me twenty years ago. I was very proud of that letter, I showed it to everyone. I showed it to my parents with tears in my eyes, crying “You see, he says that I am an artist, he says that I’ll become somebody, I am not a mere girl as you say.”

I cannot recall all that without feeling hurt and bitter. He told me what to expect. He tried to give me confidence in myself and in my abilities, but he was one, they were many. They won, I was defeated and Ismail’s expectations and beliefs were defeated too: this is what I felt for many years, for thirteen years of a lousy marriage and a fake life. All those years, I hid his letter and every now and then would read it and cry. His words were like fire, a fire completely different from the one I tolerated by leading a life I never wanted. In his long letter, he mentioned many things about the real meaning of life, how to live for a great purpose, for a beautiful aim, a human one, by which I feel I am a real human being and not a commodity. He insisted, “You’ll make it, you’ll defeat the traditional way of life which is full of lies and deceit. There is nothing more beautiful and worth living than leading a life one chooses for one’s self, and not the life others plan.”

During all those years in which I played the role of a frustrated housewife, I used to read that letter, look around and wonder, “Is this what I expected from life? To cook and wash dishes and wait for a husband who believes that I am there to make up for his mistakes? To show others that I am a good, blessed wife and a dedicated mother? Where are my abilities? Where is my purpose? Where is the Françoise Sagan of the East!” It is painful to remember all that, though I made it. It is painful because I lost the best years of my life trying to protect a life that never gave me protection. I used to feel sorry for myself then, now I feel sorry for almost every woman around me including my mother. Maybe I should not feel so sorry for the lost years since I “made it” and since I gained an awareness of woman’s condition. Without experiencing and suffering from the woman’s traditional role, I would not have the ability to feel it deeply and write about it.

You know, after I got a divorce, I ran back home and opened the letter again and laughed victoriously, “Now I’ll make it, Ismail, I’ll be what you expected me to be for thirteen years. I’ll be something—but not Françoise Sagan.”

NZ: Why not?

SK: Because she would not express the problems of life relevant to the third world people—people who suffer from exploitation, from imperialism, from colonialism, sickness, backwardness, all these sorts of things. She did not write about them, she was not aware of them.

It is amazing how we carry our dreams such a long way and such a long time! I met Ismail Shamout again after nineteen years. I stood there waiting for him to recognize me. He stared at me while I was repeating to myself, “Here is your Francoise Sagan my dear teacher. I made it, I chose my life and I am still alive.” He was going completely bald, his eyes sunken, the Palestinian suffering eyes which he usually reflects in his paintings. His eyes were deeper than any eyes he ever drew, they were him, the artist, a Palestinian artist. I said, “Do you remember the Francoise Sagan of the East? I am myself, not Francoise Sagan. I’ll be like you, a Palestinian artist, a Palestinian writer.” We embraced and laughed and hid our tears. We talked about Palestine and the Palestinian problem. I told him how I’m now aware of being antithetical to the glamorous image which we used to have about Francoise Sagan when I was a teenager.

NZ: Was she translated into Arabic?

SK: Yes, *A Certain Smile*, *Bonjour Tristesse* and so on were translated into Arabic and she was the latest fashion. She was the miracle of that period. But at that time I was confused, I didn’t know what to choose and what to be, a painter or a writer. My family’s views increased the confusion by stressing traditional beliefs about life and the role of the woman. They are middle class people; this class is known in the Arab world as being the most traditional and conservative. When I used to say that I wanted to be an artist they said: “Oh, art is unacceptable, it is connected with looseness.” An *artist* in the Arab world used to imply a belly dancer, a singer, or somebody not educated but who has caught the profession by hook or by crook. It does not imply writers. Writers in the Arab world were not known as artists until very recently.

NZ: Are writers respected more?

SK: Yes. Some were respected more even then, but they were not artists. They were very traditional and classical writers who used to write in a rigid and uninspired way, far from being artists. Not everything you write is art, you know. You have to have the mood, the creative ability, to have certain images, to know how to use the language in a romantic manner, or in an antagonizing or revolutionary manner; you have to be able to use the language in an artistic way that influences people, affects their feelings and carries them with you. Few writers in the Arab world were really artists. As for my family, being an artist was the greatest sin ever, mischievous and destructive for the family’s reputation. To be an artist—death was *easier*. This is the expression, “Death is easier for you or for us rather than to let one of our family become an artist, especially a woman.”

NZ: Is that why you moved away from being a painter?

SK: I did it for a while but you cannot continue painting without the right atmosphere.

I was a kid, eighteen years old. You have to *know* what you want and enter this atmosphere after having made the decision, “This is the atmosphere I want and here is where I belong.” You can then manipulate the atmosphere. But if you live among people who do not care at all about art, who do not care at all about intellect, you cannot continue.

NZ: Did you give it up and concentrate on fiction?

SK: No. There are intertwining aspects and levels that made me quit. I was brought up in a very frustrating manner. Like any other girl or woman of my age, the education and even the character of the schools, the traditions, the religion, the mores, EVERYTHING was to suppress the natural feelings of the girl; to tell her that she is a girl of honor, that is she should be not touched at all by any, AT ALL . . .

NZ: What do you mean “At all”?

SK: Even to touch her hand . . . she shouldn’t allow anyone to touch her with sentimental connotation. She is not allowed or otherwise people will talk about her as being flirtatious, loose, bitchy. There is a scandal about her if she was found out with somebody. The situation was very hard and harsh at that time. Since I was in the sixth elementary, I was brought up in a nunnery school.

NZ: Moslem nuns?

SK: No, Christian nuns.

NZ: Christian?

SK: Yes. Catholic. And, of course, you know the things the nuns stress—about purity, about religion, about everything. I came from a boarding school in which everything was uptight and of course like any girl of this age I needed somebody—a boy to talk to—you know, this is the meaning of life, you cannot just live by yourself or fight without having a mate, without having a woman around you. Do you think that it’s easy? It is NOT. It’s not natural. We were trained to suppress our feelings, sentiments, and sex drives and everything. If you do a sociological research, you find that the women in the Arab world are *more* in control of their nerves and their abilities than the men because since childhood they were raised in this tradition, to have this sort of control. When you find a woman who knows what she wants and she uses this control, no man can challenge her, no man can compete with her—NO man. If a woman knows what she wants. But if she does *not*, then this control will be used against her.

NZ: You turned to writing fiction at the age of eighteen . . .

SK: Yes, at that time I thought that the art which would bring me less trouble than any other was writing. To be a writer, in the Arab atmosphere, was respectable. I thought, “This is the solution, compromise, and since my concern about writing is equal to my concern about painting, why not be a writer and face fewer problems, less rejection?” Then I faced an unexpected problem. I was denied the right to study literature. I wanted to join the university, but my family’s stand about joining a university was not different from theirs toward art. “Art connotes looseness, the university connotes looseness too, a woman’s place is the house, the home.” These were

the last words in that storm. I felt crippled. I wanted to run away, to fly, to find a way to escape, but I was like a bird without wings. I had no money, no support and no allies. I was young, confused and afraid. Fear filled me from head to toe. I shouted and cried and behaved in a childish manner. The more I shouted, the more my parents were convinced that I was an abnormal, dangerous girl. They encircled me: no art, no university, no way out of home, no sign that the situation would be changed. I lost confidence in everybody, in God, in myself, in the future. I was a prisoner for a crime I did not commit. My crime was a familiar one to every girl and woman in my society. I am a girl, this was the crime. How I hated my sex! How I despised femininity and its weakness, how I tried to act like men in walking and talking and behavior! And yet, nobody was convinced that I was like men and that I deserved their rights and privileges and freedom.

With such a mood I met *him*. My family planned the meeting, and from the first look I said “okay.” He was handsome and very gentle. I needed someone who would care for me and take care of me. I was convinced that I was nothing but a woman, a failure. After one week we got engaged, after two weeks I discovered he was not the right man. I tried to break the engagement but my parents never believed what I said against him. They thought I was lying. Besides, they were afraid that I would become an artist, which was a threat. I was forced to marry him and no matter how much I cried, it didn’t matter. No matter how unhappy I was, it didn’t matter. What mattered was to keep the reputation of the family, to keep everybody satisfied with the solution taken by the family as a whole and not by *me*. So, this is the way I was married; most Arab women are married this way. Very, very few people are lucky enough to decide that they want to quit the marriage and be capable of dealing with the results. I was one of the very few who had this right because there were certain complications in the family and because my ex-husband used to be a man of certain weaknesses—that’s why I had the right to divorce. Arab women cannot divorce, not even in Syria or Algeria or in Iraq do the women have the same right to divorce the man as *he* has. They have made some modifications here and there to give the women the right to vote, to protect the women from being divorced all of a sudden, but no Arab state has given the women the right just like the man to ask for divorce or to divorce by herself like a man does.

During this marriage, which was horrible, I found refuge in books. In order to paint and to develop your skills at painting you have to have the paints and colors and canvas; you have to go to galleries and look at paintings, and to travel to meet other painters and so on, which is very expensive. And also you have to go to college if you want to be a modern artist and know all the schools of paintings. In writing, you can read and develop without even going to school.

NZ: What kind of things did you read?

SK: Everything . . . Psychology, Sociology, Politics, even Astrology, everything that fell into my hands.

NZ: Is that how you began to develop a political consciousness?

SK: No. I indulged, just like anybody else in the educated Arab world, in the existentialist movement and existential intellectualism. I was an existentialist. Even now I believe that there is no great difference between existentialism and Marxism, except that Marxism leads you to find solutions to social problems and there is no stress on individualism. But basically, Marxism does not deny existentialism.

NZ: Jean-Paul Sartre initially clashed with Marxists and about twenty years later, became a Marxist himself.

SK: Yes. But then he quit.

NZ: He quit?

SK: Yeah, he quit because he couldn't carry on. You see, being a Marxist you have to sacrifice certain things; as a privileged individual related to the privileged class, the luxury of having thoughts and not having to carry them into reality. A characteristic of the individualists, of the existentialists, is that when trying to solve problems, they go ahead and then when they face a very, very big problem, which needs a lot of effort not for the individual himself, but for a community, a communal effort, they stop and cannot continue. They make instead this spiritual leap: they either solve it by going back to religion, the supernatural, or find it absurd. They are aware that the individual, if he is a genius, can solve many problems; but as an individual he cannot solve big, big social problems, psychological problems.

NZ: Was it at that point that you were introduced to Marxism?

SK: Wait. Until the Occupation took place, I continued to be an existentialist. Then Occupation took place in 1967 and I saw many things which clarified or raised my awareness about class stratification. In 1967 we had had experiences which were very, very bad and suppressive. After Occupation took place, in the villages on the borders between Israel and Jordan there were thousands of villagers who used to live in Israel, in Palestine—who are Palestinian farmers and Palestinian land owners. They saw their farms and their properties in front of them and they couldn't have them. It was taken by the Israelis from them. Between '48 and '67, they used to go into Israel and make operations which were trifling and very minor, but the Israelis wouldn't forget this. The first thing they did after Occupation is they kicked the people out of the villages and pushed them towards the bridge—they wanted them to leave the West Bank and all Palestine altogether. If these farmers and villagers did not reach the bridge, they were carried by the Israelis in trucks or buses and thrown away in Jordan, the East Bank. They remained in the cities.

I've witnessed thousands and thousands of those refugees coming to Nablus. I saw these people suffering from hunger, thrown out from their homes and villages for about five or six days, wandering in the mountains without food and water, without anything. They came and resided in Nablus. And some of the women who volunteered to help these refugees went to the big families in the West Bank and tried to raise money and to get rations to help the hungry people. Many big families did not help. Many helped in a funny way. One of the big families—the richest in Nablus—offered four loaves of bread and four pieces of cheese. Nablus people still talk about it. But

they are not aware of it as something connected with classism. They say, oh this family, they are very stingy, very selfish.

In the Arab villages, the women have the habit of keeping gold; instead of putting their money in the bank. They keep gold on their wrists. When they immigrated, when they were pushed from their villages, came to Nablus and resided there, the merchants of gold used to come to make deals of great humiliation and meanness. They used to buy the gold at the most trifling prices; women, because they were hungry and their families were hungry, sold their gold for very small amounts of money.

NZ: Were all Palestinians? The women and the jewelers were Palestinians?

SK: Yes! Yes! That's why when we talk about the social structure, to focus on nationalism is really a mistake. Even in the society itself, when you don't have homogeneity between the classes, and when you have such a crisis—being invaded by an enemy—the privileged class makes use of the unprivileged . . . what is THIS? As if it is an indirect collaboration, indirect cooperation with the exploitative foreign power.

These merchants sold their goods. The merchants became richer and richer and these villagers became poorer and poorer. The gap between the classes gets bigger which leads to lack of national solidarity. Within three or four months after the Occupation, their shops were empty; from where would they bring goods? Jordan was closed, Egypt was closed, the Arab World was closed, even the Western World was closed, there was only Israel. Now remember this bracelet which Mahmood had taken from Saadia. He had given her five dinars for something worth twenty-five or even fifty. Afterwards he went with these fifty dinars and he bought goods from the Israelis! By whom are the Israelis supported and from where do they bring technology and all these industrial machines? Capitalism is thus connected to the real capitalism which is in the United States. So it is a wheel that goes from Saadia to Mahmood to the Israeli bourgeois to capitalism here.

When I talk about class structure as being very important, that is because you have such a nation that is scattered, that is not homogeneous because of this conflict of interests, that is loose. When there is another power that tries to invade it's like a body which has a disease. When there is a sickness, the weak body is the first to catch it because of its weakness. That is classism in a certain nation; it weakens the nation, sometimes it *destroys* it, as in Iran.

Look at what's happening in Iran. Do you think it's only religious? No. It's not only religious. Do you remember when that student after the presentation by Houshang Golshiri said that 65% of the Iranian houses are without electricity, 75% of the houses in Iran are without running water? It is class difference. It is the exploitation by the privileged of the unprivileged. The Arab World is one of the wealthiest parts of the world and yet you find poverty and sicknesses. Why? Because only very few people enjoy this richness and wealth and that's why they don't care—they care to be protected by a power which they imagine is undefeatable, the colonial power. They make this alliance between the big power which is exploitative and this smaller power

which is also exploitative. And they collaborate and cooperate against these people. I see this ruler who exploits my people and makes use of them and lets this body be weaker and weaker, and I know that through him the value of the petrol is not paid in the right way. There are certain connections and relationships that decide the rate or the value of the petrol due to these relationships which are *not* nationalist.

What is the nationalism between America and Saudi Arabia? What kind of religiousness between them? NOTHING. And why does Saudi Arabia play a decisive factor in deciding the value of petrol in the OPEC? They are afraid that if the people are strong enough and they are not supported by this big power, the people will take over and the rulers will be out. So it is better to let this big power, imperialism, support the ruler and keep him in power and pay a price at the expense of the people, rather than let the people rule themselves. The two powers, the ruling power in Saudi Arabia and America, would lose the benefits.

NZ: Was much of this what you observed after the Occupation or were you reading and analyzing these things theoretically?

SK: When I realized this class stratification problem, I began to think that it was wrong but I did not know how to solve it. People were aware that it was wrong, but how to solve it they didn't know. After I got divorced . . .

NZ: When?

SK: 1972.

NZ: What was your husband's occupation?

SK: He was a bank manager.

NZ: So you attended many parties as a bank manager's wife!

SK: Well, I was living a bourgeois life.

NZ: Uh huh . . .

SK: Of course! I can deal with it. I know how they behave. But, I got divorced, after I had published my first book.

NZ: A novel?

SK: Yes. It was actually my second novel, *We Are Not Your Slaves Anymore*. It was published in Egypt. In that novel you could feel and see the existentialist mood and the existential view on life, marriage, everything.

NZ: Was it autobiographical?

SK: No. It was not. I was saying, I got divorced. I had made the decision three years before. I said, now I have to work shrewdly and in a tricky way because I had been tricked all my life. My marriage was a trick. He tricked me. My family tricked me; they made use of my simplicity and good-heartedness. So now I had to plan things and challenge myself. I had to save money because my family, I suspected, would not help or support me after I got the divorce, because a divorce was threatening. So I began to prepare myself to be completely independent. Before that I read Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. She says something very important—that a woman's independence begins by financial independence.

NZ: Did you not have independence as a bank manager's wife?

SK: Oh no. I was never independent. I couldn't even sign a check. I did not know how to get a visa. I did not know how to travel by myself. This is the first time I traveled outside the Arab world by myself. I didn't know how to deal with money in a practical manner. I didn't know because I was not educated like this. I had been dependent all my life. For the last two years I began to make accounts, otherwise I had been all the time spending money without accounting or doing anything practical. I saved every penny after I had made this decision. I had to educate myself to be practical, to make decisions. And I began reading certain things about woman. *The Second Sex* was very important for me, but it did not give me the wider scope or the wider awareness how to be practical. Simone De Beauvoir said this is wrong, this is wrong and we have to find a solution in order to become like this. But to go from this position to that position, we have to pass through this passage. I did not know what to do with *this passage*. She did not describe it. And even if she described it for French society, she could not describe it for my own. So I had to find my way by myself. I saved every penny because I knew that money was important now—before that, I had the romantic idea that money was not important. I had to keep in mind that money was not important for itself; it was important because it is a means of liberating the human being from being exploited by other people. So I worked hard and collected every penny.

After telling my husband, "I will divorce you," I went back home. I told my father I was going to divorce. At that time, things were changed within the family itself. The power was not anymore within the hands of my father. Of course, financially it was, but now I was not eighteen years old. First, I didn't feel ashamed. If they tell me I am a woman, I say, so what. If they tell me honesty or honor, I say what is honesty, what is honor? I have been living all my life for this honor. I have paid the price. Now I have to live for my *own* honor which is completely different from theirs. Now I have a very small sum which is a trifle in America but in the Arab world it helped me a lot. If my father and my family said no, you are not allowed to do this, I would say, okay, I will move from the house, I can rent a house. Before that I could not rent even a stable. I could not rent a home because the money was not mine. It was either my father's or my husband's. But even though I had money, I did not know how to sign checks and deal with official things. I lost this fear of the family and of reputation because I experienced the way of life which they had drawn up and I found it a complete failure. I was so stupid to continue like this. I began to realize that *I* know and they don't know, while before, when I was eighteen, I was under the impression that they knew better than I though I was intellectually, educationally, artistically better. Still you have this glorified family, glorified father, glorified mother. They know. They have dealt with life. They are wise. Oh no! I discovered that they were not wise at all.

While working to get rid of this marriage I made a plan that I would be a writer. I made several attempts at poetry but I was not satisfied.

NZ: Were you not a good poet?

SK: It's not because I was a bad poet. It was because I needed a wider atmosphere, a



wider scope, more social and more down-to-earth . . . dealing with other people. Not only my emotions and my impressions about things, because poetry deals a lot with personal impressions: but to deal with things in an analytical and psychological and sociological form and all these scientific methods that you can base literature on. This you cannot do in poetry except on a very small scale. When it loses this beautified and aesthetic dealing with the abstract, poetry loses much of its power. When it deals with the minutest details, it becomes less effective as poetry. But the novel deals with details and the details of the details. It does not leave an idea or an opinion without being carried on or dug from the roots. You can begin from the past, from the historical aspects, from all these things, then you reach another level of the present and then you can reach to future levels. And you can deal with many levels of language. For instance, when you let an intellectual discuss, his vocabulary is different—the terms which he uses are different, the atmosphere is different. When you describe an artistic atmosphere or an artist's atmosphere, it's different from describing a slum's atmosphere; the language itself is different. So the novel has the widest scope. This is why I shifted from poetry. I wanted a big atmosphere which is challenging and deals with everything. So I began writing novels. I tried a draft; it wasn't good artistically. Then another trial and another, and the third one was published.

When I made the decision that I would be a writer, I also made the decision that I would be financially independent. So I used to work for a salary and I used to work as a writer at home. My ex-husband was the sort of person who believed that money is the best thing in life so he did not appreciate all my trials whether paintings, readings or writings. I used to steal my time for writing. I used to hide the manuscripts under my mattress, including the first novel that was published. So I was working on these two levels—as a writer and as a financially independent person—and after three years when I thought that the marriage had reached its nadir, I sent my novel to the publishing house in Egypt. It was accepted and I told my husband that I was leaving. In order to become a good writer, I had to study the schools of literature, the methods, the styles, criticism, linguistics. Otherwise I might continue or repeat the same experiments done before by other writers.

So I went home, joined the university, and became a student for four years. The first three years of university life I continued to view myself as an existentialist. And then I began thinking about writing something about the experience I had passed through at the beginning of Occupation. At that time there was a scandal in the Arab world called the Palestinian Labor in Israel—Palestinian workers going to the Israeli factories and working there. Everybody in the Arab world was pointing at those workers, condemning them and accusing them of being traitors. I knew the situation, I knew what was the cause of the work in Israel. I was a person from *inside*, not from outside. Even Palestinians who were outside did not know the facts. They too condemned and accused. But since I had the opportunity to be inside the West Bank I made the decision to write about them. I worked on collecting information for two years—this was in the second year of my university study—and I continued for two

years. At the end of my third year at the university I stopped my studies for eight months. I poured everything about Arab labor into a novel, *Cactus*. I read about workers, about the statistics and the number of the people going this way and that way and why they did so and the background and the beliefs of the workers and what was the ideology of the proletariat. So I began to read about the ideology of the proletariat—Marxism. I discovered that this was the solution, this was the solution to the whole sickness that covers the Arab world—the class stratification that makes it so unbalanced, so confused, the interests so conflicting. I collected the information and read and tried to compare our situation and our experience with that of other laborers who were forced to work with other occupiers like the French proletariat in the Nazis' factories of weapons, even manufacturing weapons which would be used against *them*. Our laborers were not manufacturing weapons, they were working only carrying things from here to there, working as a driver, working as a porter, working as an electrician, doing unskilled work in Israel. Of course, when you deal with economics and the financial aspect of life it has much to do with politics. From this I had to dig for the other political values. And it IS connected. After all that, I became a Marxist.

NZ: Did you also go and *see* the workers?

SK: Yes. I went to see them in their houses and in their refugee camps. Most of them are from the refugee camps or from the old parts of the city in which we have the slums. There is no running water. There are shared toilets, there are very, very bad conditions. After seeing all this and reading all this, I thought that existentialism would never solve the problem. As an existentialist, when you reach a certain situation, you would say the individual is the center of the universe. But when you see such a big crisis like the one we have, you can never solve it as an individual. You've *got* to have this communal awareness and this communal loyalty, otherwise you will be lost just like everybody is lost *here*.

NZ: So you look on your writing as a way of contributing to a communal solution?

SK: Of course. Now it's not only art in the beautiful sense; it is art in the *human* sense, that deals with humanity, with the basic needs of humanity. It is not closed in the way imperialism shows Marxism. In the Soviet Union they don't let you express this way, they don't let you do that. It ISN'T like that. Marxism is a very large, dynamic and dialectical ideology. It does not deny the individual but says that the individual, in order to solve the problem, should be a part of the chain of humanity. The individual can never deal with himself alone because even his psychological problems did not come to him from himself alone. It came through others, from others, and affected by others. His sociological stratification, his illnesses, sicknesses, everything, are due to the circumstances he is living through. The individual can NEVER decide his life alone; his childhood, which is the most important period of his life, is decided by the circumstances in which he lived.

NZ: Did you find a correspondence between the theoretical Marxism you read and your actual interviews with people? Or did you find a time lag or a lag of consciousness?

SK: Actually, I became a Marxist after I got in touch with people. As I told you before, my experiences in life were limited. Coming from a bourgeois class, leading the life of a housewife, being involved in my own individualistic problems and dreams, being affected by the existentialist thought, the field of my interests was limited. The more I had the chance to know more about other people and about other atmospheres, the more I understood the movement of my society and other societies. The more I got in contact with others, the more I was aware of my ignorance about others. The more I felt ignorant, the more I felt the need to study, to experiment and try to find my stand towards each problem. After I got in contact with the working class—and this was after I made a decision to write about their experience in the Israeli industry—I realized that I didn't know about these people, who are my national brothers. The more I interviewed them, the more I felt the need to know more about their economic conditions, health conditions, social conditions. All these conditions are related and intertwined with other factions and other classes.

Many questions were raised. Certain questions were answered through the numerous interviews which I did. Many questions remained without answers. I had to search for answers. I had to go back to read more about the social structures, whether in my country or in other countries. I faced many conflicting ideas and opinions and theories. I had to return to reality and make comparisons. I passed a period of confusion, then gradually things became clearer and easier to understand. The existential questions were worrying me: where is the truth, what is real and what is not, how do I know that this is reality? At the beginning I thought "There is no reality since everything is relative." Then I understood that there was a reality, but this reality was affected by the different factors that influence it; time, historical background, culture, childhood, education, social structure, religions and philosophies and so on. So, reality is real, but it is changing, not static, it is dynamic, not still.

Going back to your question about whether I found a correspondence between the theoretical Marxism and the lag of consciousness among people: I tell you frankly that this lag of consciousness confused me more. When I used to compare their conflicting feelings and sayings, I used to feel angry and sorry. I thought, "They are either deceiving me and themselves or I am not intelligent enough to understand." Then I came to realize that it was a lack or a lag of consciousness that made them so inconsistent, it's a lack of knowledge and awareness that made them behave and think in such a contradictory manner. For example: they are blasphemous and religious at the same time. They have traditional beliefs of honor and lose confidence in this sort of honor at the same time; deeply nationalistic and deeply aware of how nationalism is defeated by the sicknesses of the nation.

NZ: Isn't there a contradiction between your ideological understanding of the situation and your desire as a novelist to present the picture accurately? You present the characters as they are, in your novels, with all the contradictions, conflicts, lack of understanding, but when you make statements you have a very clear idea yourself of what must be done.

SK: You cannot let the characters behave according to your own ideology or your own way of dealing with things. You have to present them in the state in which they live. Then gradually you present them with many experiences and through these experiences their awareness is raised. The solution will be just like what I said before—what I believe. I don't shift them from complete unawareness to complete awareness. This would be false. No reader can be convinced by this. But you have to draw it in a line that reaches almost reality, its proper reality, so that when the reader reads it he finds "Oh, yes, this is Khadra, this is Saadia. I have met her many times. Maybe she is named Fatima, Khadije, and Saadia Nawal; she might be Amal, she might be so and so but these are characters in life and I believe them." So the reader begins to have confidence in me because I am drawing reality as it is. And then when the character faces a problem, the question which is raised is not in the mind of the character only because this problem is coming from life itself; so the reader finds that he is involved too because the words, the implications of the writing, deal with problems he is facing himself or faced by the people he knows and sees. He begins to question, what is Saadia doing, how is she going to react to this situation—to be passive, to be negative, to be led by somebody or to take the initiative, or what? Then the reader becomes expectant. You can build on this. So you build up another experience, another experience, another experience. And by all these experiences the character learns how to deal with life—how to deal with such problems, how to deal with a minor problem and when he faces a bigger problem from the minor problem he has learned a lesson by which he can make a bigger decision.

NZ: In Chapter 19 of *The Sunflower*, which I have read in translation, there is a scene in a prison under Occupation. The prisoners, the jailers, the soldiers are Israeli. We have this long confrontation between Saadia and Khadra, Saadia being a respectable mother, Khadra a kind of . . .

SK: Prostitute.

NZ: There is a long, very interesting emotional and humorous confrontation—a conflict of two different women and two different ways of life—where Khadra challenges almost all the values that Saadia has lived by. It's only near the end that Saadia begins to have some rapport with her and to understand her a little. The chapter ends there. I wondered how this would fit into the larger framework.

SK: Saadia represents the masses. Saadia represents the majority of the people who are religious, who are very good-hearted, who do not know how to deal with life shrewdly, who are passive, who expect that things will be saved through a miracle and through relying on certain powers beyond their reach. Khadra is only an experience for Saadia. Saadia will pass through many experiences which will shape her and face her with many problems and critical situations in which she finds that almost all the traditional ways of solving things have failed. She begins to realize that the passive way of solving things is inadequate, and through the experiments and the experiences she has passed through she learns how to be decisive and how to take certain measures and how to deal with practical solutions and how to measure and weigh things for her benefit.

That's how I can take the character from down to up. This is how I can present in a literary form my beliefs in solving our problems.

NZ: And what about Khadra's function here? She seems to challenge the idea that things will work out because God will solve them. She has a hard life and she challenges the values of society. You have a lot of admiration for her guts and determination and willingness to fight back, and her tragedy. At the same time her solution is an individualist solution.

SK: Yes because she is not aware. She began her life by crawling and falling. When you pass over a stone, you trip. Yet her awareness of her life as a sad life is not accompanied by the solution . . . well, she doesn't know the solution. She knows that this is wrong but how to solve it she does not know.

NZ: What she knows is how to survive.

SK: Yes. She knows how to survive, but like an animal, without planning, just spontaneous and this will not bring a final solution—just fighting without planning, without maneuvering, without tactics, without strategy—this will never lead to a final solution.

NZ: Did you base both these characters on specific people? Or did you see and then distill out of the commonness?

SK: I saw and I tried to condense and to select.

NZ: They are typical by being exceptional . . .

SK: Yes, they are typical but exceptional. But they have their identity. They have their individual elements and features otherwise they just become numbers in a sociological work. You have the literary forms, you have to appeal to the emotions of the reader also. It's not to present a rigid character that is lifeless. Then you will lose the emotions of the reader.

NZ: Am I right that your painting has influenced your writing because all the extracts I have seen in translation present very clear pictures before my eyes.

SK: Yes, I think so. Many people think so too. I visualize things. One of the critics says that the things which I describe are visualized—you can see them as if they are in a film. I think painting helped a lot.

NZ: Do you receive a response to your work and how this is affecting people? Do they write to you?

SK: Yes, many.

NZ: Do many women write to you?

SK: Well, the traditional women, first are not interested in reading, second if they read, they will read something which has deteriorated concepts, that is only about romantic things—about love affairs and things like this. And if these women read *my* writings, a woman writing something which challenges everything they have ever thought about as being fixed, as the most respectable, they feel threatened.

Who are those who read? It is also a class matter. Those who read are from a class which had the opportunity to be educated, the middle class. The middle class woman, if she is not educated in the university or does not have a revolutionary opinion or view about life, will get married to a professional and lead an easy life, a financially

stable or comfortable life. Anything that might threaten this life will shake her and make her feel afraid because she does not want to feel shaky. She wants to remain in this protected situation. The workers do not read. The aristocrats or very high society do not read, barring exceptions.

Now, when we talk about the exceptions, we have them among the workers and in the middle class. The exceptions who have begun the Palestinian revolution are now in their forties and fifties. Now we are betting on the new generation, the students and the girls and boys in the universities, the students who are a very big portion of the Arab nation because the Arab nation is a young nation. We are betting on a huge portion of the nation. And this portion reads what I write. I receive letters from girls, from young women, who are not women in the traditional sense.

NZ: Have you tried reading and dramatizing some chapters before large audiences?

SK: Yes.

NZ: What has been the reaction?

SK: It is good. They like it.

NZ: Do the audiences cut across class?

SK: Before I read I make a lecture, a small lecture, in which I try to surround myself by an electric fence.

NZ: Because people might misunderstand your fiction?

SK: Yes. I am one of the first, even among the men writers, to use a lot of words which are supposed to be dirty like “shit” and “bitch.”

NZ: Why do you use them?

SK: Well, when you deal with characters coming from the slums, what would they talk about—silk, jewels? This is the way they express their lives. And why do we think about the word “shit” as being a dirty word? What shall I say then? What is the academic word for “shit”? What is it? Once, in a lecture, one of the traditional people told me “Why do you use the word ‘shit’ instead of ‘feces’? Feces is a nicer word, a more scientific and academic and polite word. Instead of saying ‘shit’ say ‘feces.’ ” I said, “What is the difference?” He said, “This word is more polite.” I said what is the difference? I mean in reality, what is shit and what is feces? It was very funny in that lecture.

NZ: Did you describe it?

SK: I said this thing is a shit and this thing is a shit. So all of them are shits so why destroy the literary atmosphere in order to give you the word which you like and not give Khadra the same opportunity of using her language, of choosing her vocabulary? If we ask Khadra what do you like to say “shit” or “feces” she would say, of course “shit” because she says all the day “shit,” “shit.”

NZ: To a point where it loses meaning to her and becomes just a word?

SK: Yes, just a word. Sometimes she uses it in a very big, boasting way and it sounds very dirty and it carries to your mind the image of real shit. But sometimes she says, “Look, everything is like shit.” Then it becomes like “Everything is like tar.” Everything is black like a sewer. Everything is shit.

NZ: These words sometimes offend literary or scholarly taste.

SK: Not all of them. There are revolutionary critics who say that literature is not monopolized by a certain class. All through the ages they have been used to the idea that only the privileged class, those who care about the classical politeness, those who are educated, those who are well-off, can buy books and can write books. But where is the other class which is under-privileged and who did not have these class mores, norms, traditions, way of language and way of expression? Where is it?

NZ: Well, what about the idea that literature, in your own words, should show life as it *should be* and not just as it is?

SK: To transcend reality into another reality?

NZ: Yeah.

SK: It is the conclusion of the work, the end result of focusing on certain atmospheres and certain ideas and engaging the reader in an atmosphere which he cannot turn away from easily. For instance, if he begins reading, I want him to complete the reading. You know the game of literature—you put sugar in order to attract, and then when you want to stab in the right place you stab. But with this sugar you are continuing to attract the attention of the reader. If you continue stabbing and stabbing from beginning to end, he will throw this book and say “the hell with it.”

NZ: Do Israelis read your work?

SK: Yes!

NZ: What is their response?

SK: You have to pass a certain period after publication so that you hear from many people and talk to many people. The people whom I met were very, very much affected by it. I met one who works in a kibbutz, you know the kibbutz?

NZ: Yeah.

SK: I met one who was an intellectual in the Hebrew University. I met a very simple Israeli woman who works in a bookshop. I met an old woman who is about fifty-five. They were very sympathetic to it. The woman of 55 was affected terribly—she CRIED when she was reading. The other woman who works in the bookshop said, “This is the first time I feel that Israel is inflicting pain upon a nation that we did not realize had its own sufferings and pains.” She told me that she cried.

NZ: I have Israeli friends, Tova and Joseph Raz who helped me with my writing. They were in Uganda. She and her husband asked us to go with them to the performance of the Egyptian Reda Troupe in Kampala. When it ended she said, “This is the first time I have seen Egyptians as people instead of as enemies.” Do you see literature as serving this kind of function?

SK: Yes, yes. All the studies done upon the Arabs and the Orient were done by people who had the traditional way of dealing with the Orient—as the Ugly Arab or Turk. There is a very interesting book by Edward Saaid, a Palestinian scholar, about the West and how they deal with the mentality of the Orient as being that of some retarded people, hopeless, dirty liars and so on. This is the way the West has taken the idea of us as if we were born like this—which is racist. There is the racist implication behind this.

NZ: Which is a colonial . . .

SK: Yes. It is colonial.

NZ: But why are you interested in Israelis reading your work and being persuaded? Aren't they the enemy?

SK: When you say "the liberation of women," you cannot liberate the woman before liberating the man. So both of them should be liberated in order to have the liberated woman. This is the way also with nations. You cannot liberate the Arabs without liberating the Israelis; you cannot liberate the Israelis without liberating the Americans. It is a chain. You cannot liberate one part and ignore the other if you want the final solution. Now if you want a partial solution you would say, "I want to liberate the Arabs nationally" and you work on this; but it's not this sort of liberation we want. It's the liberation from all the aspects of exploitation which has befallen man. So the economic factor, the sociological aspect, the class system, the ruling power, the other powers from outside, imperialism, colonialism—they are so interrelated that you cannot solve one part of the problem and say this is the solution. NEVER.

If you come from these basic beliefs—that all human beings should have the same opportunity of having an enjoyable life, a real life, a human life, and you believe that class should not be a barrier between the people and nationalism should not be a barrier and you believe that the Arab should have the same opportunities just like the Israeli and the Israeli the same opportunity as the Arab, you believe in the equality of the human race in general. If you want to deny this belief in the Israeli then you are not trying to find a *human* solution. You are trying to find the kind of solution which has been done before by the Israelis themselves. Then you will be repeating the same crimes, the same tragedies which the Israelis have affected us with.

NZ: In chapter 27 of *Cactus*, there is a scene when an Israeli officer comes to buy some fruit with his wife and daughter. Suddenly someone leaps out and stabs him and he dies. There is a woman here who is the main character, I suppose, who was hostile to Israelis but after this happens, she feels some sympathy for the woman and for the daughter who fainted.

SK: Yes, because when she realizes the human aspect of the whole scene, her awareness is raised. And then she begins to feel that this Israeli is a mother, this Israeli is a daughter, this Israeli is a father. When they are faced with problems of death and sickness, she begins to realize that these human beings are like us.

NZ: The chapter ends when a man comes out to try and help the dead Israeli and somebody shouts at him "Army jeeps! Leave the pig! Don't you see his stars?" Then in the last paragraph, "Adil tore the stars off the dead man's shoulders, flinging them to the ground. He picked up the body and walked into the empty street. The woman and her daughter followed him silently." Although it's literal, it seems like a metaphor.

SK: It is metaphorical. Um Saber is the character whose awareness was raised, that these human beings are like us, but she cannot put it in the final framework and apply it. This must be done by somebody else, an intellectual or one whose awareness is raised



to the extent that he knows the solution. The solution is not only to fight. It is also to know what is your enemy. Your enemy is not humanity or the human being. The enemy is interests. The enemy is exploitation and exploitation is symbolized and represented by the military suit and the military star. Once you take this star and throw it to the ground it means that you are taking out from him the exploitative aspect and the exploitative instrument and then he becomes like YOU, just a human being who suffers like you suffer, who has the capacity for pain, and love and hatred and everything. He becomes just a human being, no more an instrument of exploitation.

NZ: Can I take you to where Khadra makes a statement that all her life she has been beaten by her parents, then her husband . . .

SK: . . . her father . . .

NZ: Yes and the Jews, and she says of all these it's better to be beaten by the Jews because there is some honor in it.

SK: Yes because for her as a person coming from the unprivileged class she has been beaten or symbolically beaten by those she used to serve. Now she says it is more respectable to be beaten by the Jews rather than to be beaten by people of your own nation. This is what she wants to say but she does not say it in the same words. She expresses her anger on the class which has treated her badly; in other words, it's excusable for the Israelis to beat her because they are enemies. But for those who are supposed to be brothers, it is inexcusable. So this works on two levels—the class level and the national level.

NZ: Your fiction seems to suggest that all these are parts of the problem.

SK: Yes, they are all intertwined.

NZ: So the liberation of women as presented in your work—Arab women in this case—is completely bound up with these other, larger things. You couldn't have just the liberation of a lone, individual character.

SK: You cannot. You can NEVER reach a full liberation by liberating a part and leaving the other parts, because in the end, these parts which you have not touched by the revolution or which were not liberated will keep fighting this other part which is healthy. This circle of continual struggle and continuous fighting will continue until all the parts are liberated. Besides, in this particular stage in our history, in which we need everyone's effort and energy so that we can fulfill the demands of the modern time, to leave the woman—half of the society—untouched by the gleam of revolution is a loss, a crime.

NZ: Can I return you to the use of language? You write in Arabic, yet you use many Hebrew phrases and expressions.

SK: Yes. This works on two levels. First, putting the reader in the real atmosphere and the situation of the character. Second, these languages are so similar.

NZ: Are you suggesting by using Arabic and Hebrew that the people are closer than they realize they are?

SK: Not only that, it is also to refute the idea that the Arabs are anti-Semitic. We are Semitic ourselves, our race is Semitic, our language is Semitic. How would one be

anti-Semitic when he himself is Semitic? Zionism made use of the guilty conscience of the West towards the Jews. Also it made use of the West's ignorance. How many people know here that we are Semites? How many among the Israelis themselves who are coming from a western background and culture know this fact: that we are Semites? So, by using the Hebrew language and by allowing the reader to sense the similarity between the two languages, I raise this question about the origin of both languages and the race of both nations. So it is true what you have said, that the two people are closer than they realize they are. Actually, people in general, all people, are closer to each other than they realize they are.

NZ: Do you read Israeli writers?

SK: I try to.

NZ: I think they also deal with similar situations. I've read some Israeli writers who have dealt with Occupation from the other perspective. There is one, *The White City*, by Amos Oz, where the soldiers arrive and meet these people. One of them begins to realize when the man asks questions that these were the people who were dispossessed. The story, from the Israeli perspective, ends up being sympathetic to the other side. It seems like Israeli literature is also dealing with the same problems.

SK: Not all. Most of them find it excusable, just like the woman who was interviewed in that TV show two months ago, remember? She said, "The harm which we had done the Arabs was not done with bad intention. It's like the man who fell from the 7th floor and by chance landed on another man who was passing in the street and broke his neck. So it was a coincidence. It was by chance. It was not by bad intention." These are excuses, to say that what happened is irreversible. It is very bad. Everything is reversible. If you are aware that you are committing mistakes and committing harm and horror, you are aware of the situation, then you can find a solution. But to say with good intentions we did harm and we are sorry, so what? You are sorry? I don't need your apology in talk. I need it in action.

NZ: So you come back to the question of an informed political consciousness?

SK: You can say a congressman is politically aware. He is aware of the interests of America but not aware of the interests of the Middle East. He should have this universal or international awareness that deals with classes, with nations, with human beings as equal human beings.

NZ: Do you think of yourself as a Third World writer?

SK: Of course.

NZ: But while your writing is not nationalist in one sense, it's very national in the sense of being tied to a specific area at a specific moment in time.

SK: That's right. It is national in the sense that it stresses the identity of the Palestinian, his cultural features, his language, his yearnings and sufferings. On the other hand, this identity does not deny the fact that there are other identities which we realize and recognize. This is one point. The other is that I try to emphasize the fact that the Palestinian identity is not closed in on itself. The Palestinian nation is a part of the Arab nation, the Arab nation is a part of humanity. Every nation has its own features,

its culture, its own historical experiences, but then, all streams pour into the same ocean, and that is humanity. But let me ask you a question. Don't you realize that the writers of the Third World are becoming the most revolutionary in the world?

NZ: Would you care to explain that?

SK: Yes. People like this have experienced exploitation and oppression. These were not solved by the emergence of particular nations in the Third World by themselves. I mean, a nation in the Third World cannot find a solution by becoming connected to America and being made use of in some way or other like Taiwan. The solution which a particular nation has found for itself is not a real solution. So in the Third World those intellectuals who are now aware of the complications of the international atmosphere know that they cannot solve the problem with a half solution. They have to take it with a wider scope. Look at South Africa. How could South Africa have a real solution without other powers larger than South Africa being taken into account? So this awareness of the world as a global village, as interrelated, is more conceivable by the Third World writers. They are not, for instance, like the Americans who for geographical, economical and political reasons, do not have this understanding and recognition. So, the themes which the writer of the Third World presents have this sense of internationality, of anti-exploitation, of anti-racism—themes that aim to awaken the human conscience and consciousness.

NZ: You have met a lot of writers from the Third World and from the First World and Eastern European countries in the International Writing Program. What has been the effect of meeting such writers?

SK: A tremendous effect. I was really impressed by some of the writers who have this international view and of the wide scope of their intellect. I was amazed by some of the writers coming from the Eastern part of Europe which is supposed to be socialist—among them I found none socialist at all! Even *anti*-socialist!! I wonder whether there is a mistake in the system in their countries that they are not allowed enough freedom to see what the other system is like. I think if they give them more freedom to see America and to be involved in its problems, they would realize that socialism is the REAL solution for humanity. But since they are now experiencing too much suppression of free expression and non-free ways of dealing with their thoughts and their art, they think that capitalism is the refuge which permits a large amount of freedom. But so what if you can discuss but cannot apply?—if you say “This is wrong” and you don't have the power to change what is wrong. This gap between the socialist countries and the capitalist countries, the continuous effort of the socialist systems to encircle their writers and intellectuals with prohibitions, will not allow them to see the dark side of capitalism. This really made me wonder about what's going on in Eastern Europe.

NZ: Have you found any of the writing techniques of the writers in the Program interesting and different from the ones you have used?

SK: Oh no. My study was English Literature which involves the most modern techniques from Virginia Woolf to James Joyce to Brecht, you know all those people who made such innovations in style and structure.

NZ: With exceptions like Conrad, who was Polish, and Joyce, who was Irish, English writers have tended to deal with a narrow, self-contained world, a world that is paid for by imperialist exploitation which they don't understand because it is not to their advantage to do so. Third World writers, have to deal with everything—history, geography, politics and therefore the writing techniques they invent have got to be different.

SK: But I'll tell you something. I read an article once by a critic who said that great writers like Dostoevski, Tolstoy—*big*, big writers—did not care about innovating new techniques and styles. What they really cared about was to catch the soul and the essence of humanity, you see? So they are not really worried about these new techniques. They make use of what the other writers have done up to that point but this will not be the most important concern for them.

NZ: So you think that content is more important than form?

SK: They are both important but one should not lose too much time on form.

NZ: But then if you have revolutionary ideas, don't you have to search for revolutionary forms?

SK: Yes, along the way. If this style or that technique will bring me faster and more effectively to the reader, I use it, along the way, but I do not lose too much time to try this way and that way and this way and that way. Then it's endless. You can never create something which is completely new, something really final, because there will always be new techniques, new traditions and new ways of expression—it is in accordance with the age, the revolution, whether industrial or social. There will be always new techniques and new styles. So to think that you will achieve the best technique ever is really funny and misguided. It is dangerous. I think, along the way, if you find a technique and a style that would give your work real balance and importance and influence, you use it. But don't lose too much time on it.

NZ: Thank you, Sahar.

SK: OH, but the language does not help. I would love to talk in Arabic!!!

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