A Small Box in the Heart
by
Ibtihal Salem
Translated from the Arabic
by
Caroline Seymour-Jorn
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Translator’s Note

In this novel Ibtihal Salem takes a cinematic approach toward exploring the dialectic between present consciousness and memory. This involves abrupt shifts between scenes describing Maryam’s experience, dreams and memory both from when she is growing up in Cairo and when she goes to work in Iraq. In this translation, I have chosen to mark off separate sections where these transitions occur and I have noted when there is a change of place. Although these sections are not marked or labeled in the original Arabic, I feel that they make the sometimes unfamiliar content easier for the English reader. The novel describes Maryam’s “exile” to another Arab country for work, although the city and country to which she moves are never named. Salem’s use of the Iraqi dialect and other clues make it clear that Maryam has gone to Iraq for work, and the city, portrayed in a sort of parallel with Cairo, seems to be Baghdad.

In other matters of style, I have also tried to replicate the poetic and occasionally folkloric tone of the prose. This has sometimes meant following the syntax or translating figures of speech more closely than I might otherwise in order to convey the sense that the original text was intended to draw on poetic language and traditional rhythms and images as it gently jar readers’ expectations.

This translation is dedicated to the memory of Ibtihal Salem (1949-2015). I would like to thank Ahmed Kraima and Dalia Azmy for their invaluable help with questions pertaining to Arabic and Egyptian cultural references.
Introduction: Writing a History of the Internal

*A Small Box in the Heart* explores the experience and memory of Maryam Abdel Fatah, a young woman coming of age in the tumultuous environment of Egypt in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although the historical time frame of the novel takes us back some decades before the Egyptian revolution of 2011, it speaks to many of the issues and concerns that brought about that revolt—and indeed—to some of the broader concerns underlying the “Arab Spring”. The story of Maryam’s young life details the tragic impact upon individuals of the lack of personal and political freedoms, and of an economy that provides youth with little hope for work and stable futures. Through its shifting and poetic prose, it also examines a woman’s deep-seated longing for meaningful connections with others in the same boat.

The novelist, Ibtihal Salem, began publishing in the 1970s and her oeuvre includes three collections of short stories and seven novels.1 This is the first of her novels

1 The short story collections are: *Al-Nawrus* [The Gull] (1989); *Dunyā Šaghirah* [A Small World] (1992); and *Nakhb Iktimāl al-qamr* [A Toast to the Full Moon] (1997). The novels are: *Nawāfīdh Zarqā’* [Blue Windows] (2000); and *Ṣundūq Šaghīr fī-l-qalb* [A Small Box in the Heart] (2004); *Al-Samā’ la tamtur ahibba’* [The Sky does not Rain Lovers](2008); *Yawm ʿādī Jidan* [A Very Ordinary Day] (2009); *Kaʾb wa ʿarūsah wa ḥiṣān* [A Knot, a Doll and a Horse] (2010); *Awqāt lil-ḥuzn wa-l-faraḥ* (2013); *Al-ṣabīṭy allathi adḥā shābb wasīm* [The Boy who Turned into a Handsome Young Man] (2015).
to be rendered in English translation. Salem is considered one of the 1970s generation of Egyptian women writers, a generation that includes renowned novelists Radwa Ashour and Salwa Bakr. As a group, this generation is known for their experimentation with narrative forms such as Arabesque and polyphonic narratives, and also for their play with the multiple levels and registers of the Arabic language.

In *A Small Box in the Heart*, Salem blends the language of time, song and myth to explore an individual’s feeling of alienation both while she is residing in her natal country and while she is living in war-time Iraq, where she is forced to move for work. Maryam is figured as a woman who grew up in an old and relatively diverse quarter of Cairo, before consumer and capitalist development began to change the face of the older districts. The voice of an older Maryam provides the frame for the story. As she sits in her Turkish grandmother’s flat, the mature Maryam narrates her various life experiences in the form of an internal monologue. She reflects upon her losses, but more positive memories of her childhood in the “old quarter” also revive her spirit and give her motivation to keep going. Popular culture references abound in the sections describing life in the “old quarter,” including mention of popular songs and singers. I have taken advantage of this digital form of publication to include links to explain and illustrate some of these references.

Maryam’s Turkish grandmother’s home, which is the site of Maryam’s reveries, provides her with both comfort and a haunting sense of loss. The contents of her grandmother’s wooden chest provoke memories that give the reader a sense of the identity of a woman from an era past, but these memories also develop Maryam’s own personal history and personality. Through these memories, we learn that Maryam has
experiences common to many young women of her generation. In contrast to her mother and grandmother, Maryam is able to go to college and to have a considerable amount of personal freedom and mobility. Maryam’s memories of her college days provide some of the most entertaining pages of the novel, as they tell the story of young women living on their own, negotiating the values of a relatively conservative district and having experiences with new and diverse kinds of people in the city. We also hear about Maryam’s participation in political demonstrations, and her subsequent traumatic dealings with the State Security forces. These experiences would be easy for many Egyptians to relate to after the 2011 revolution and subsequent political turmoil and repression. Maryam graduates from the University in 1974, but is unable to find satisfying work in Cairo due to the vicissitudes of the Sadat era economy and a bloated bureaucracy. She therefore goes to Iraq in search of work, while her beloved Saeed moves to America to pursue graduate studies. Despite his promises to the contrary, Saeed never returns from America and Maryam is heartbroken by the loss of her first love.

In Part Two of the novel, we learn about Maryam’s adventures in Baghdad where she finds editorial work in a newspaper, but is devastated to discover that writers and journalists in Iraq face the same restrictions on freedom of expression as they do in Egypt. In Baghdad she meets Arabs from around the region who have also had to leave their countries due to economic issues or political persecution. She begins to fall in love with Aziz, a Palestinian and member of an underground democratic Palestinian political organization, who has lived the tragic life of a political refugee ever since his family fled Palestine in 1948. The novel’s master scene takes place in Aziz’s flat, otherwise known as “the airport” because of the multi-national group of Arabs that regularly meets there to
socialize and commiserate. In this scene, Maryam’s older self as narrator provides a sweeping view of the individual experience of alienation and desperation across the post-colonial Arab world. Here, as elsewhere in the novel, Salem incorporates parts of Arab poems and songs that help to convey the various experiences of the Egyptian, Tunisian, Syrian, Palestinian and Iraqi youth. The group sing songs based on poems by Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish, and the Egyptian poet Salah Jahin. While the songs help to express the young people’s sense of loss and alienation, they also suggest a rich Arabic cultural heritage and express a tenacity and fortitude that the young people take pride in and enjoy sharing with one another.

* A Small Box in the Heart * deals with the alienated experience of those forced to leave home, but even more significantly, with the plight of the individual who no longer feels that she can find a place in her own society. According to Salem, the suffering of the citizen who feels alienated in her own country is worse than that of the exile who longs for home, perhaps because the exile may still hold onto the possibility of return to a place of familiarity and belonging. Although the themes of alienation and exile are hardly unique in Egyptian literature, or Arabic literature more generally, Salem brings them special poignancy with skillful use of shifting temporalities, the language of folklore, stream of consciousness technique, dream narrative and song. Salem’s narrative calls to mind a Woolfian technique, albeit perhaps with a more economical prose style, as she explores the dialectic between present consciousness and memory. This exploration generates an intimate portrait of a woman who feels that society’s trends towards consumerism, over-development, and religious fundamentalism, along with corruption at many levels of society, have somehow left her behind.
Because the novel works within the space of memory, it is characterized by multiple temporalities. These multiple and shifting temporalities work to disorient the reader, thus inviting him or her to experience some level of the emotional distress of the narrator. But the emphasis on the memories of people and places past also helps to develop the sense of loss which drives the narrative, loss of a past in which local people worked together for the community, of long-term relationships that are forced to an abrupt end, and at moments, loss of passion for life itself in the face of overwhelming obstacles to living a personally fulfilling life.

Ultimately this is a novel about longing; the longing for human connections across gender, generations and national boundaries. It explores longing for some aspects of the Egyptian past, but the author does not wax romantic about ‘traditional’ Egyptian culture. Certainly, Maryam’s childhood neighborhood is portrayed in positive terms as one of the old quarters in which people of different ethnicities and faiths—Muslim, Christian and Jewish—all shared a communal life, and recognized and even participated in each other’s religious traditions. According to Salem, this type of community used to exist in Egypt, and it represents a sort of tolerance that has become much less common.\(^2\) However, any longing for the past expressed in the novel is itself fractured, recognizing the traumas of colonial experience and an oppressive police state, and the limitations, pressures and burdens that Egyptian society has always placed upon girls and women.

While the novel focuses on Maryam’s experiences of loss and longing, the shifting narrative upon which the novel is structured allows for multiple interpretations of these experiences. The memory and mourning that characterize the narrative are

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\(^2\) Author interview, Cairo, May 10, 1992.
polysemous. They certainly suggest a profound sadness, but Maryam’s memories of her strong and defiant younger self stubbornly assert the possible impact of the active and creative individual. The consciousness that informs the narrative is melancholic, but at the same time it remains persistent and questioning.

At the close of the novel, Maryam leaves the home of her friend Kawthar, a woman who has adopted a fundamentalist approach to religion and life, and to whom Maryam can no longer relate. Salem subtly alludes to Kawthar’s transformation in several places throughout the text, as this young woman begins to cover her luxurious chestnut-colored hair first with a scarf, and then later with an all-encompassing robe and *niqab*, and whose once playful personality has become staid and cool. Salem also represents Kawthar as adopting the pious language of the ultra-religious, laden with formality and invocations to God and the Prophet. As she walks away from the alienating encounter with Kawthar and toward the Nile, Maryam’s spirits are buoyed when she hears strains of Bayram al-Tunsi’s ode to the Nile floating through the air: “Neither we nor you have an equal in sweetness…” Salem’s invocation of al-Tunsi’s love song and tribute to the Nile, suggests that despite her experiences of economic hardship, political oppression and personal loss, Maryam still feels great affection for her country and harbors hope for its future. The novel leaves open the question of where this positive emotion will ultimately take Maryam.