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A Muslim Woman, a Story of Sex

By **ALAN RIDING**

PARIS, June 19 - An erotic novel written under a pseudonym might normally struggle to find a mainstream publisher and a wide readership. Not so, it seems, when it is penned by a Muslim woman living in a traditional Arab society. "The Almond," a semi-autobiographical exploration of sexual freedom, has sold 50,000 copies in France since Éditions Plon brought it out here last year. And it has now appeared in eight other languages, including English.

With its explicit descriptions of lovemaking, the book has been compared to Marguerite Duras's coming-of-age novel, "The Lover," and to Catherine Millet's more recent confessional essay, "The Sexual Life of Catherine M." Yet in this case the feisty 40-something North African author who goes by the name of Nedjma appears to have been motivated by more than a desire to titillate.

Rather, she explained in a recent conversation here to coincide with Grove Press's publication of the novel in the United States this month, by portraying a woman enjoying the pleasures of the flesh, she wanted both to celebrate the body as an expression of life and to strike a blow against the centuries-old repression of Muslim women.

In fact, she said, what first set her writing was her anger at the terrorist attacks on the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, and Washington's reaction to them. "Two fundamentalisms collided," she said. "The fundamentalists committed an irreversible, shocking, outrageous act. But the reply was also monstrous, shocking, outrageous. I saw the two sides speaking only of murder and blood. No one cared about the human body."

So, through a story built around her reminiscences of a steamy love affair, she decided to address what, in the Muslim world, is often considered a forbidden topic: sex.

"I had to talk about the body," she said. "It is the last taboo, one where all the political and religious prohibitions are concentrated. It is the last battle for democracy. I didn't want to write politically, but I did look for something radical. It is a cry of protest."

Written in the first person, "The Almond" follows Badra as she grows up in a Moroccan village and gradually discovers her femininity. Yet, while she dreams of true love, she is forced to marry a much older man, suffering - and hating - in silence as he tries roughly to make her pregnant. Finally, she runs away to her Aunt Selma in nearby Tangiers, and it is there that she meets Driss, a wealthy, European-educated doctor who teaches her the mysteries of love and sex.

While their relationship changes Badra's life, however, it is far from perfect. Driss refuses to marry her and, because they are unmarried, their affair remains hidden from the world. And while Driss satisfies her sexually and she loves him passionately, he is not faithful to her. Gradually Badra steps back and goes her own way, meeting up with him again a decade later under very different circumstances.

Nedjma estimated that about 40 percent of "The Almond," her first book, is autobiographical, but she considered the rest also to be true to life. "It is a testimony written by the feminine tribe," she said. "It is based on the experience of aunts, neighbors, cousins, all women. I felt a moral duty to say: this is what women go through."

She said that even though she never expected the book to be published, she wrote it in French because it seemed less shocking to write about sex in a language that is not her mother tongue. "In any event, if I'd written in Arabic, it would never have been published," she said. "Nor will it. It's a thousand years since Muslims have written openly about sex. If you find an Arab publisher, I'll buy you a bottle of Champagne."

Even after a friend awakened Éditions Plon's interest in the manuscript, she was determined not to be identified as its author. In fact, she still refuses to give her nationality, limiting herself to saying she is from North Africa. Even during a visit to Paris, she added, her French friends did not know she was the author of "The Almond."

She did explain, though, that she took the name Nedjma in homage to the Algerian poet Kateb Yacine, who wrote a book by the same name, and because it means "star" in Arabic - and that the star is an Islamic symbol.

"It's my way of saying, 'I am from this tribe, I am not from the outside, I am part of this world and no one can kick me out,'" she said, adding that she was a practicing Muslim.

Yet it is also a world that clearly pains her, so much so that she seemed as eager to denounce the state of much of the Arab world - and the subjugation of women in it - as she was to discuss her book. "It is not the Prophet or God who is responsible for the condition of women today, but society," she said. "It is the sharia, the way laws are interpreted, the writings, the clerics who rule Islam in place of God."

The result, she said, is a suppression of free thinking that paralyzes Arab societies and perpetuates male domination of women. "Every step taken by women towards freedom is seen to undermine their authority," Nedjma said with growing passion. "It undermines this rotten world that is falling apart. The Arab world is like a sick old man, consumed by gangrene, illiteracy, poverty, dictatorships, fundamentalism."

When it comes to relations between men and women, she went on, lighting a fresh cigarette, although they unite for marriage and procreation, most women consider sex to be a burden because few men know the workings of women's bodies. "There are so many received ideas, ancestral fears and ignorance," she said. "Love is only possible when women realize they are not there to be legally raped and men understand that a woman is not a slave or an inferior being."

Even in "The Almond," where the author's own love affair is reflected in Badra's devotion to Driss, Nedjma said, Driss remains trapped by the customs of Arab men. "He loved this woman," she explained, "but he did not know how to appreciate this love outside the traditional framework of society. He was liberated sexually, but not socially."

And in her own relationship, she was asked, was she more liberated than her lover?

She hesitated before answering.

"Yes; there you are, I've said it," she finally replied. "The malaise of the Arab world is that people don't know how to love. They watch romantic soap operas on television out of frustration. They dream about love, they listen to songs, they are sentimental, but they are not tender. They appreciate beautiful love poems, but they don't have the courage of the heart."