



PROFILE

Writing as a Form of Healing for Scholar and Writer Narjes Azimi

by Lisa Schantl



Narjes Azimi grew up in the Middle East during a time of war and violence. After earning a BA and MA in English Language and Literature, she dropped out of her PhD in the same field after two years in order to dedicate her time to writing stories for those involved in the war. In an online conversation, she told me how writing helps her think about the good things in life and how she wants to share her positive messages, especially with children, to educate them in respect and love for each other.

What we experience in our childhood stays with us for the rest of our lives. It impacts our understanding of the world, our behavior in social situations and it impacts the way we feel and think. If most of these experiences are made in environments that are anything but peaceful and enjoyable, environments that are rife with bombings and terrorist attacks, then trauma is not an exception but it becomes the rule. According to Save The Children, this has been a reality for 426 million young people who lived in conflict zones in 2019. In other words, one-fifth of the world's children faced and keep facing war and violations of their rights on a daily basis. It is an unbelievable number which keeps rising year after year.

In the last quarter of the past century, scholar and writer Narjes Azimi accounted for one of these children. She was born in 1981 in the Middle East and spent her childhood in a war zone. Now, she dedicates most of her time to writing for those who experienced growing up in war times like her and for those who are still in the midst of such precarious situations.

About War and Spreading Edifying Moral Messages

Narjes approaches the theme of war in a very subtle and almost evanescent manner. Her poems and stories are full of peace and love, focusing on the good in the world while simultaneously departing from difficult times and social hardships. "I am coming from darkness, but I don't want to spread this darkness to others," Narjes explains the reason for directing her readers' gaze on new boots for her cousin or light-hearted breakfast conversations rather than on harsh frontiers and violent interactions. Yet, she keeps reminding the readers of what is happening outside of their narrow vision. It has become her mission to tell what has remained untold: "I want all people in the world to know our stories, know what happened to us."

The precise content of her stories and poems stems from personal experiences, as in her short prose piece "Boots" published by the magazine Literary Orphans, or is rooted in the

fairytale her grandmother and grandfather told her when she was a child. Sometimes she uses characters from these stories and changes them in order to fit her contemporary writing. However, what really intrigues her about these folk tales are less the protagonists, and more the edifying moral messages. Growing up, Narjes learnt to communicate in various languages such as Azerbaijani, Turkish and Persian. But no matter the language in which a story was told, the messages were the same. “For example, in all languages all over the world there is God, there is Father or Mother Earth. Maybe the people from over there don’t know about the other people from over there, but the messages of their stories are the same,” Narjes says. Thus, when she writes her own stories, she focuses on this main part and she wants to be crystal-clear with her own message.



Narjes Azimi © Narjes Azimi

Narjes, therefore, also does not like to go too deep into actual history as she would only find more darkness and distraction from the kind of message she wants to deliver. She rather focuses on the emotions and positive thoughts she wants to convey. For example, in her self-published 60-page children’s book *Melody of Peace*, a child called Adele has a dream about a fairy identifying as the “Angel of Peace”. This magical figure sends Adele on a journey in the world of dreams to tell other children about seven virtues which can bring peace all over the world. “I think, psychologically, children in conflict zones should know about virtues. They should know about forgiveness, peace, love, taking care of each other, empathy, and sympathy,” Narjes describes her motivation. “Because, when they grow up and only know revenge and enemies, they will bring these things also along when they emigrate to other countries – and you can see where this leads to.”

The Birth of a Storyteller

Narjes discovered creative writing during her Bachelor’s education in English Language and Literature. She never found a chance to take a creative writing class; writing simply came to her. “It happened in 2012. It was in the middle of the night. I woke up and there were lots of words coming. I just had to write them,” she says. To this day, writing for her is less a profession than a healing process; it is a form of expression for her own sake and that of everybody who can take away something from her lines and sentences. “When I write a poem or a story, my consciousness is linked to all people in the world who have been in my situation. Maybe I am writing on behalf of a girl or a boy like me who also experienced

terrible things in conflict zones,” her mission becomes clear once more.

In her process of becoming such a “storyteller,” as she describes herself, Narjes has consciously decided for the English language to be her linguistic tool. “English is the only language that everybody understands in this world,” she explains her choice. “I wanted to learn this language to tell other people what happened to us. Not for empathy or sympathy – just for telling the stories.” She is aware that her grammar in English, which is her fourth language, is her weak point. Indeed, her published writing lacks commas and dots here and there, switches between tenses where it probably should not and occasionally omits a verb or a conjunction. But all these technical matters are outside of Narjes’ interest: “I just focus on the words and messages.”

For her future life as a writer, Narjes hopes to publish *Melody of Peace* in print and before long she intends to work on the second chapter of her work in progress, *Fairytale of War*. She does not know when this will be as she never forces herself to write. When it’s the right time, the words will come, she is certain. In the meantime, she keeps pursuing her academic career. She has recently completed her PhD program in Communication and Media Studies and currently works as an assistant professor at the university in Cyprus.

Narjes has also found other means besides writing to cope with her past which she keeps practicing. She is trying to get rid of her “darkness” by meditating, calming her mind and consciousness, and thinking about the good things that are happening in the world. She also listens to audio books about dreaming, spirituality and imagination, and how these can be used for writing. “I am enjoying my life and I think that I am on my right path,” she says with a smile on her face. “I hope that everybody can feel and experience that at least once in their lives.”

This article was initiated by the Center for Inter-American Studies at the University of Graz.