

Drs Al-Shatti, Al-Khateeb, Al-Nakib discuss pertinent issues surrounding censorship

'Censorship has negative effect on literature'

By Cintra Fernandes
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In "The Red Line: Censorship and Literature," the second seminar in the Department of English Language and Literature's Cultural Program 2016-17 at Kuwait University, a panel made up of Dr Aishah Al-Shatti, Dr Ebtehal Al-Khateeb and Dr Mai Al-Nakib discussed pertinent issues surrounding the censorship of literature and its effects on students and societies.

Dr Aishah Al-Shatti received her PhD from Glasgow University in Scotland, focusing on the appropriation of the gothic in the work of romantic era women writers. Her current research continues to center around the gothic. In her talk, she focussed on the reasons literature and art get censored. She began by defining censorship as the suppression of a form of expression that is either exercised during the writing process by the author or after publication by the censor. Censorship takes many forms; it can include an outright ban, a suppression of the circulation of the literary work, and even persecution of the author.

Censorship of a literary work is usually enforced on the grounds that it appears to offend religious sentiments or to corrupt morals, or that it is considered seditious and a threat to public peace. But Dr Al-Shatti identified the real motive for censorship of any work as being fear: a fear of difference and change as perceived by the censoring authority, and the fear of persecution and repressed elements on the part of the author.

Censorship has a negative effect on literature. It is a highly subjective reading that leaves no room for multiple meanings but attaches a fixed meaning to a text through its official reading, and can even shape what is identified as literature. She warned

that for societies at large, censorship of literature and art can create fissures by silencing minority groups instead of preventing division. Censorship can promote obscurity by elimination instead of giving a clear picture of life. Instead of preserving good morals, as is often argued, censorship can uproot values of tolerance, acceptance, and diversity, replacing them with intolerance, narrow-mindedness, and ignorance.

Encourages

In discussing whether censorship is ever completely successful, she pointed out that it encourages underground networks for the production and circulation of banned books. Some writers opt to infiltrate the system by joining censor boards while others resort to the production of seemingly safe texts that are cleverly and subtly encoded with taboo themes and elements.

Dr Ebtehal Al-Khateeb discussed the effects that the censorship of literature has on the world. She received her PhD from Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, examining violence and the female body on stage, and her current research focuses on Arab drama and its connection to political atmosphere. She is also known for her political activism and columns in local newspapers that deal with issues of human rights, freedom of thought and expression, among other timely concerns.

She pointed out that censorship creates a hypocritical society that comforts its citizens with a false sense of protection and a liberation from responsibility: "Censorship bequeaths a deceitful aura of security, mother government and father law are watching us, taking care of our morals and values, protecting our children so we do not have to do it ourselves, we do not have to make choices for them nor for ourselves, and that is certainly soothing, for



Left to right: Dr Aishah Al-Shatti, Dr Ebtehal Al-Khateeb and Dr Mai Al-Nakib

choice has always been a source of discomfort and an instigator of responsibility."

She warned that it is naïve to think about censorship from a personal short-term perspective and argued that our opinion should be built instead on a very personal, long-term perspective. "We should be extremely selfish when we evaluate the issue of censorship, to the extent that this censorship will most definitely come to haunt us once we allow it as a general concept. It is our selfishness in its purist form that should resist censorship and aim to abolish any and every form of it," she stated.

She indicated that censorship was hierarchal in nature, a power system that promotes intolerance of difference and places the whole commu-

nity under scrutiny and turns adults into children in need of monitoring, pitting one against the other in defence of their own red lines.

Dr Mai Al-Nakib stressed that the university should be a place without red lines in any society and a place where the notion of the censorship of literary, artistic, or cultural production must be utterly rejected. "In a world where the value of thoughts and ideas not automatically linked to the marketplace are under serious threat, the university should be the bulwark against ignorance," she stated.

Dr Al-Nakib received her PhD from Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, specializing in postcolonial studies, modernism, and literary theory. Her current re-

search focuses on cultural politics in the Middle East. In her discussion of the topic, she urged that the circulation of different thoughts and ideas should be privileged and protected by the autonomous space of the university, as these differences, disagreements, and experiments produce the knowledge that contributes to the progressive development of society.

Experience

She also highlighted that for many young students, university is the first place they encounter ideas, perspectives, and forms of knowledge counter to their own, and she stressed that they should be given the opportunity to experience these new ideas. As she put it, "Being exposed to a wide variety of opinions, beliefs, ideas,

attitudes, knowledges, and points of view — through literature or other subjects, through teachers or fellow students — allows students to gauge whether their own might not be as inevitable as they might have thought. It teaches them to become critical and comparative thinkers. To be thrust into a volatile sea of different voices and views can be disorienting and confusing to a stable sense of identity and being. On the other hand, it can also be exhilarating and freeing, opening up a world of potential previously unimaginable. Isn't this what youth should be about?"

She strongly urged that a red line in the name of customs and traditions or religion and belief has no place in the university: "The university is (or should be) a protected space — a space for thought and experiment autonomous from the wider public sphere. It is a place to be exposed to everything in the universe, a place to make critical arguments and to change one's mind if other points of view seem more compelling than our own."

She further stated that if a work of literature is banned in a given country, that country's university is the place where that ban should be broken in the name of understanding and suggested that even hate speech might have a place in the university. "We may not hear what we want to hear in the classroom or read what we would like to read in books — we may not like it — but the university is where we learn how to effectively articulate our dissent and concern. Thus it prepares us to thrive in a world of difference, to learn how to respond to that difference ethically and responsibly rather than violently or with hatred, as is so often the case today," she explained.

The panel discussion was concluded with a lively Q&A session with the audience.

Kuwait Red Crescent Society sends relief aid, food supplies to Libya

KUWAIT CITY, April 11, (KUNA): Ten tons of Kuwaiti relief aid and food supplies were sent to Libya to help ease the dire humanitarian situation in the fellow Arab country, the Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) said Tuesday.

KRCS Chairman of the Board, Dr Hilal Al-Sayer told KUNA that the current batch was part of a relief aid campaign aiming at delivering 40 tons of relief aid material via planes to the Libyan people who are suffering from internal strife and violence

in their country.

The Kuwaiti embassy in Cairo will handle the delivery of the material to those who are affected in Libya, said Dr. Al-Sayer.

He added that the KRCS will continue its mission to help all those

who are in need of aid worldwide, affirming that this was part of the society's humanitarian mission.

President Mahmoud Abbas praised Tuesday Kuwait's role in supporting the Palestinian cause, saying that the GCC country was

always on the frontier of backing up this important Arab issue.

Speaking at a meeting with Kuwaiti Ambassador to Bahrain Sheikh Azzam Mubarak Al-Sabah, the Palestinian President hailed His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ah-

mad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's initiative to host an International Conference for Palestinian Children, which will be held in Kuwait next month. For his part, Sheikh Azzam reiterated Kuwait's firm stance in supporting the Palestinian cause.

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