

Why This Journal?

Sabry Hafez

Al-Kalimah, The Word, is a monthly cultural review concerned with contemporary Arabic literature and culture, and primarily published electronically, though it may also appear in print form. It is aimed at the new Arabic reading public versed in the internet. There are now five million users of the internet in the Arab world. It provides this growing public with what has hitherto been confined to serious print media - a literary journal. With the rising cost of print media and the dwindling income of younger readers, readers have increasingly turned to the internet. Newspapers and weeklies were the first in the Arabic language to utilize the new virtual space. Serious cultural and literary reviews were unable to afford the double cost of print and electronic media, and hence did not appear electronically. *Al-Kalimah* reverses this trend in opting from the beginning for electronic publication. At the same time it is putting a PDF version on its site for those who wish to print it.

Al-Kalimah is a journal for all those who write and read Arabic from Iraq to Morocco and from Syria to the Sudan. In the recent past, there were Arabic literary journals, such as *Al-Adab* in Beirut, *Al-Majallah* in Cairo, *Al-Ma'rifah* in Damascus, and *al-Aqlam* in Baghdad, in which writers from these diverse countries met and read one another. With the increasing enforcement of geographical, censorship, religious and ethnic borders these journals died or were suffocated. It was necessary that a new literary journal which aims to embrace Arabic creativity and critical discourse should be totally free from the shackles of Arab censorship and the close eye of the establishment. *Al-Kalimah's* use of cyberspace is aimed at transcending these different borders, subverting censoring strategies, and bringing together Arab writers and intellectuals, and their readers in the wider Arab world.

It emerges from a deeply felt need on the literary scene for an independent forum for rational and critical debate at a time when the space for rational and free debate in the Arab world is shrinking. The veil which is descending on the faces of women as a visible manifestation of increasing fundamentalism has also descended on the minds of many men. The inevitable results of this are rising intolerance, lack of free expression and debate, erosion of rational and secular thinking, and growing forms of direct and indirect censorship. This makes the need for a free and rational space more acute than ever, a space where dialogue and free debate is the norm not the exception, and where good

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argument is valued over violence, co-option and the silencing of opponents.

Al-Kalimah's main aim is to provide this space and fulfill the needs of independent Arab writers and intellectuals to meet one another in a rational space, free from all forms of censorship and from all artificially enforced borders. The bulk of cultural media in the Arab world, which is mostly in print form, is launched, financed and controlled by the establishment. Independent intellectuals who wish, in Edward Said's words, to speak truth to power, need their own forum, free of all the constraints of serving a corrupt, and often illegitimate, establishment. *Al-Kalimah* aims to provide them with such a forum to enable them to save The Word from the demeaning effect of co-opting jargon, and restore to the intellectual his traditional role in Arabic culture as the guardian of the word and not the guard-dog of the establishment.

Al-Kalimah is, therefore, a journal for free, rational and independent discourse, both cultural and literary. Its main concern is Arabic culture in the wider sense of the word, and specifically creative texts and artistic works. This is mainly because, in Arabic culture, they have managed to escape the corrupting influence of co-opting jargon, and to preserve the dignity and integrity of the word. It is necessary to have a free space for these works to engage with each other, as well as with the reader, in a serious critical debate, and to create a different current of secular thought and ideas conducive to reason and open-mindedness. In such a space, the Arab mind will be able to flourish and celebrate its achievements, shed light on its new ventures, encourage its innovative and experimental drives, and refute fundamentalist norms of action and thought. Electronic publication provides *Al-Kalimah* with the possibility of initiating a dialogue with its readers from the beginning by providing a space for readers' comments at the end of each published text, something that no Arabic official media on the internet allows.

This is the rationale behind the launch of *Al-Kalimah* in Arabic, but since the tradition of Arabic rational culture has been one of openness to other cultures *Al-Kalimah* also aims to reach out to those cultures. Since nearly 50% of internet use is in English, it aims to become totally bilingual, Arabic-English, by the beginning of 2008. It will devote its first year to consolidating its position in Arabic to become the rallying point for critical and independent discourse, and then launch its fully bilingual version from a position of strength. In the meantime it will put on its site English translations of selected items from the full Arabic

version. However, it will make its full table of contents available in English so the English reader will have a clearer understanding of its scope and orientation.

Arabic literary culture, and particularly its modern literature, has been both secular and dialogical, and it has always been engaged with other cultures, particularly Western ones. No serious Arabic cultural journal - from the time of *Rawdat al-Madaris* launched by Rifa'a al-Tahtawi in 1870 to the present - appeared without some translation of essays, critical, or creative texts, and *Al-Kalimah* will put the original English or French texts which are translated into its Arabic version on its English site. Where possible we shall provide English translations of some of the Arabic texts we publish. The aim is that within the first year we shall be able to build up our readership, and the necessary support, to enable us to launch the fully bilingual version. In the meantime, *Al-Kalimah* welcomes contributions in English, either in the form of creative or critical works related to Arabic culture, and/or comments for the future, to be sent to:- Al_Kalimah@Yahoo.co.uk