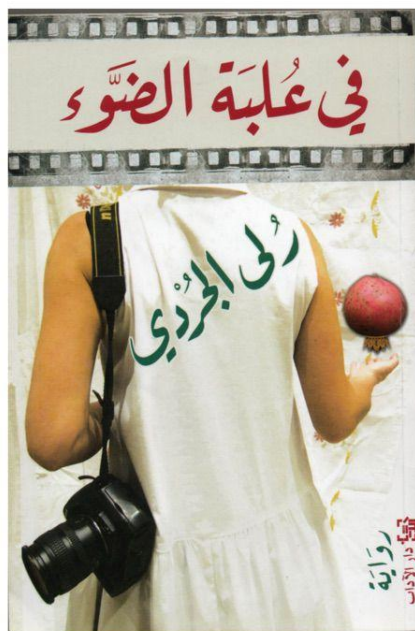


Fi 'ulbat al-dhaw' by Rula Jurdi

The conflict between violence and spirituality

Rula Jurdi's novel *Fi 'Ulbat al-dhaw** is an intricately plotted global novel that follows the lives of Lebanese immigrants to New York City. Jurdi fills an important gap in contemporary literature by focusing on members of Lebanon's Druze ethnicity, a minority group whose spiritual ideals of peace and universality have historically struggled with sectarian conflict. Nour, a film student at Columbia University, returns to Lebanon with her non-Druze husband to make a film and discovers that her brother has joined an ultra-orthodox Druze group, which is responsible for an horrific act of sexual violence that Nour witnesses against a non-Druze man who married the daughter of a Druze family.

With immense capacity for sadness, hope, and wit, the novel reveals the conflict between violence and spirituality that lurks at the heart of all cultures. The "box of light" of the book's title refers to the camera itself, as a space of darkness into which light pours to affix an image of the world onto the surface of photographic film. Throughout the novel, the camera serves as a transcendent metaphor for the interplay of light and dark in how individuals look at and understand the world. The camera links the act of witnessing the world to the process of enlightenment, which subtly encourages readers and characters alike to reconsider the way we look at the



Fi 'ulbat al-dhaw' (*Camera Obscura*)

By Rula Jurdi,

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world, and how we can create or resolve conflict in doing so. For Jurdi, to be enlightened is a certain way of looking at the cultures around us, not as forms of collectivity that we either identify with or do not identify with, but rather as so many imperfect attempts to embody the same universal spirituality. This language of light links the novel into ancient intellectual and spiritual traditions of Sufism, with its reverence for light as an edifying and redemptive force in the world.

Through diaspora, the process of enlightenment symbolized by the “box of light” is realized. Only by loosening our ideological attachments to a culture that is “ours” can we recognize the universal spirituality all cultures are built around. Unlike the western colonialist tendency to accrue land and consolidate resources to the nation, the immigrant experience models instead a process of diffusion and spreading out—of redefining oneself through the experience of new cultures. The diffusion of a regional cultures through diaspora takes shape in *Fi ‘Ulbat al-dhaw* (*Camera Obscura*) as a kind of reversal of colonialism: rather than a power struggle that subordinates one group of people to the control of another, Jurdi describes the diasporic experience as an openness to the world and to other ways of living. Through immigration and the transplantation of their Druze heritage, Nour and members of her family learn to gain a vantage point from which they can understand their native culture as a set of spiritual ideals that can be found and achieved within new cultural environments.

PEIYU YANG

* *Fi ‘Ulbat al-dhaw* literally means *In the Box of Light*. The author and translator have decided that the English title should be *Camera Obscura*.