

Writing, Language, Music, Exile and Dialogue in Lebanese Women Writers

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Abstract

I propose to analyze the relationship Lebanese women writers have with writing, language, music, exile, bridging the gaps between the here and there and the dialogues they have created through their work. I will examine their writing as it inscribes itself within the context of their lives and how it reflects the problems of their society: search for identity, languages used, condition of women, sexuality, violence, wars and resistance, peaceful alternatives, philosophical questions of life and death, political issues of engagement, etc. The Lebanese women writers I have chosen to talk about are Andrée Chedid, Vénus Khoury-Ghata, Ezza Agha-Malak, Etel Adnan, Nadia Tuéni and myself.

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of novelists and poets with a wide audience in Lebanon as well as in many other countries around the globe. Questions of exile and belonging are very much at the core of their writing.

Andrée Chedid: exile and liberty

Born in Cairo, Egypt, of Lebanese origins, lived and died in Paris from 1946 to 2011. Andrée Chedid, writer of French expression, finds her roots in a Middle East where East and West meet, where races mix, where religions clash, where languages blend, where history is at a frightening turning point. She tells us about a language without frontiers, a communication without limitations, an understanding without walls.

Having confronted in her youth “contrasts which hurt,” on one side “her big house near the Nile, the receptions, the balls, the shiny, fairy-like and factitious world,” of Cairo's glimmering society of the thirties, on the other “the street with its islands of misery, its beggars on the sidewalks, its veiled women,” Andrée Chedid, sensitive and tormented, could not but be marked for the rest of her life by these injustices which appealed to her sense of justice.

Very humble in spite of her great success, she tells us what life is about, how the movement of creation takes us towards others, towards more light and more life. Woman, poet, novelist, playwright, essay writer of a work rich in depth, diversity and variety (she is the author of more than twelve novels, eighteen collections of poetry, three plays, essays, short stories), she shows us “this unceasing river dwelling deep inside us, this earth, this river, in the margins of the phenomenon of existence; yet in the sharpest of existence, life.”

Woman's condition in general and of her countries of origins in particular, are of great concern in Andrée Chedid's work. Her first novel *Le sommeil délivré* (Stock, 1952, reedited by Flammarion in 1976, translated as *From Sleep Unbound*) tells the story of a woman, Samya, living in Egypt, forced into an unhappy marriage, imprisoned in customs asphyxiating her slowly. She frees herself by helping a little girl Ammal realize her creative potential – she makes clay figures. Finally, she kills her husband in a dramatic and desperate gesture; unexpected and rare in a society where women have the tendency to turn the weapon against themselves. She screams so that others may see life: “If I scream, I scream a little for them. And if there is only one who understands me, it is for her that I scream, that I scream from the depth of myself, as strongly as I can.” (215)

In her poems also, Chedid describes the oppressed woman. In a beautiful poem entitled “Woman of the Long Patience,” she shows us a woman coming out of her layers, giving birth

to herself (*Fraternité de la Parole*, 12). In another one, she describes enemy sisters (possibly the Palestinian and the Israëli) reconciling themselves to give hope to their children: (p. 68).

The tragedy of the Lebanese war shakes Andrée Chedid and leads her to take a position for non-violence and peace, far from fanaticism and clans, as well as a great sympathy for those suffering and being victimized by man's violence. Two collections of poems from that period underline this preoccupation and Chedid's concern. In *Cérémonial de la violence*, (*Ceremonial to Violence*, p. 22) bodies tortured by war and suffering are described and named.

Her last three novels *La maison sans racines*, (*House without Roots*, 1985, translated as *Return to Beirut*) *L'enfant multiple*, (*The Multiple Child*, 1989) and *Le Message* (*The Message*, 2000), probably the most autobiographical of Chedid's novels because in it she describes an older couple, who has gotten back together after a long separation, (uncanny resemblance to Chedid's life), their returning to Beirut and trying to save a young woman dying on the street, and herself attempting to send a message to her lover. The story of the older couple unfolds in the story of the young couple separated by shelling. All three novels deal with the war in Lebanon. *House without Roots* shows the positive role of women in the war, their efforts to reconcile enemy clans and bring back peace. Their initiative is accompanied by revolt against the traditional roles that society would like to impose in their personal lives.

Andrée Chedid lived far from Lebanon, but distance gave her a perspective she might not have had had she stayed. She was able to express realities about the war that must be said: women were the ones to have started peace marches at different moments of the conflict, and they did it from both the East and the West sides representing both sides of the conflict.

The novel is also interesting from a stylistic point of view. Three stories take place in different times and spaces. It is the peace march which unifies them, bringing two young women from enemy communities in the centre of the torn up city. A cinematographic precision gives us a vivid image of three women's life-stories, how they tried to live differently in a stifling traditional context, in a war, which brings out the best and the worst in human beings. Andrée Chedid's message of love and her vision of hope burst out through her lyricism, her humour and her desire for life, reconciliation and peace amidst the tragedy and the despair of war.

In her poems, her plays and her novels, Andrée Chedid expresses the problems of the region of the world where she was born and which preoccupies her. But these conflicts reflect more global questions, a universal vision and love for humanity wherever she/he may be

found. She knows how to put her finger on the wounds to soothe and heal. She gives us a breath of hope, a window open on a horizon of light, if only we were willing to listen and accept to live differently through actions aimed at transforming the personal and the political. But Andrée Chedid does not preach, far from it. Her characters are complex and deep; her vision of the world is subtle. In a language handled with perfection, she gives us an image of the beautiful and the ugly, of the sublime and of the low. It is a long itinerary of patience, endurance, faith, vision and love, which she traces through words, sentences, pages and books rich and so important.

Vénus Khoury-Ghata: sarcasm and critical rage

Vénus Khoury-Ghata, a Lebanese woman writer, poet, and novelist (winner of many important French poetry prizes: the Apollinaire, the Mallarmé, etc.), also lives in Paris. She tells us that she feels split between Arabic and French. Her use of the two languages is not an easy endeavour, she often uses Arabic words in French which creates intriguing images and metaphors in her poetry. In two of her novels *La Maîtresse du notable* (*The Notary Mistress*, 1992) and *Une Maison au Bord des Larmes* (*A House on the Verge of Tears*, 1998), she brings out the Lebanese tragedy and traditional dysfunctional Lebanese family ties forward in a surprising way, filled with unusual and unexpected images, parody, but also tenderness, poetry, despair, anguish, admonition, warning, concern and a relentless love/hate for a country, a society she still feels attached to. She unveils its hypocrisy and pitfalls with severity and humour, hoping perhaps to bring it to some awareness and reform. These two novels are terrifying in their revelation of what may lie at the centre of the Lebanese conflict: greed, depravation, lust, drugs, boasting, lying, perfidy, fanaticism, and most of all, badly lived sexuality. Even though the women are victims of men's political and sexual domination, they share their part in bringing about Lebanese society's downfall. Constantly "in heat," sexually aroused, they try to manipulate the men to get their needs met. They participate in the degradation of moral values.

The central character of *La Maîtresse du notable* is Flora, a blond Polish woman, who has just given birth to a third child by a Christian husband, and who leaves husband, children, new born baby boy, to cross the demarcation line dividing the city in two, to meet her Moslem lover and live with him in a building facing the one she has just left with its sniper and militias. This treason brings out a renewal of tensions, vengeance, and killings between the two sectors. It leads to Flora's eldest son sinking deeper into depression, drug addiction, homosexuality, and exile in the hope of finding fame, and finally his return to Lebanon, madness and death by assassination.

The story of this young man is repeated in *Une Maison au Bord des Larmes*, as well as in many of Khoury-Ghata's novels, and we know from interviews and conversations with her that it is her own brother she describes. The novel goes into the cruelty of a father so authoritarian that the whole family becomes dysfunctional and goes crazy, just like the war raging outside. As for the daughter in *La Maîtresse du notable*, she becomes a sexual prey for the sniper. It is a theme already developed in many Lebanese novels on the war. In this one, however, she is not killed by him, and the whole street turns against him and kills him. Khouri's sarcasm and irony comes out sharply in her description of the sniper and the end she gives him: "They let him do it as long as he was killing their enemies, but declared him dangerous when he started attacking them. In the same bag, Christians and Moslems, old and young, poor and rich, and above all women" (215) Her living mostly in France now has given her a distance allowing her to put her finger on what ails Lebanese society, to denounce its pitfalls, and to say it forcefully.

Ezza Agha-Malak: hope against war

Ezza Agha-Malak, a Lebanese Francophone woman writer, poet, essayist, director of University research in linguistics and literature, is the author of more than ten novels and nine collections of short stories and poems. In most of her work, she denounces the condition of women she sees trapped in a patriarchal and macho society; her work, analyzed in many University studies,¹ gives us an insight into the ills of Lebanese society, especially in its treatment of women. Pursuing her writing career and cultural life in both France and Lebanon, Agha-Malak divides her time between the North of Lebanon and the South of France where she has resided for the last two years due to the Corona pandemic, which prevented her from returning to Lebanon, much as she hoped for this.

In her novel *Bagdad, Deaths that Ring Higher than Others*, Agha-Malak has perfected her commitment to the search for truth and justice in a style that is strong with images often unbearable and striking; it is a plea for justice and the denunciation of torturers in various wars of the Middle East, a region of the world that haunts her. Agha-Malak tells us that the main character of her novel was neither invented nor imagined: Jade does indeed exist; he presently resides in a psychiatric asylum where the destructive madness of human destruction has led him. His life, half a century long, was a succession of escapes pushed by wars and its

¹ Two collective works are dedicated to her writing: *Regards sur l'œuvre narrative et poétique de Ezza Agha Malak* (twenty-two studies) and *Ezza Agha Malak: Regards Croisés francophones sur son œuvre*, directed by Gilles SICARD (twenty-four studies).

horrors. From Haifa in Palestine, to Sabra and Shatila in Beirut, Tripoli in the North of Lebanon, and finally Bagdad in Irak, he goes through all the wars, he, a man of peace, searching for justice, love and harmony. He will find some relief and appeasement to his pain and woes thanks to the love shared with an American woman, a journalist like him; a woman he met in Lebanon while on duty as a reporter.

Agha-Malak paints a dramatic and terrible picture of this region of the world torn by unsolvable conflicts brought about through the creation of the State of Israel the discovery of oil targeted by the greed of Western nations ready to do anything to obtain it in the name of democracy. Deaths that ring higher than others are nothing else than deaths no longer counted, ignored because they belong to the other camp, those forgotten by the human race. The deaths from the Tsunami tragedy for example described as a huge catastrophe and reported by all the media get much exposure while the death of Iraqis, folly of deaths that same day gets only a few lines covering mainly American deaths on Iraqi land (220). Agha-Malak knows how to put her finger on the flagrant injustices of our century which never stops bleeding. She shows us how from Haïfa to Beirut, from Tripoli to Bagdad, the will to destroy is what makes the events move forward. It is the same Barbary which leaves behind only anarchy and disorder: “What would be left of Iraq? Of its identity that had just been erased? Of its patrimony destroyed, burnt, vandalised... And why?” (144) Agha-Malak presents us a spectacle of hatred, blood, savagery, hypocrisy of the great powers, most of all those of the United States of America that came to occupy the land for its oil, trying to mould the Middle East in its image, American Empire spreading its tentacles to the world. Everywhere from Beirut to Tripoli, and other cities of Lebanon, Palestine, in Haifa, Yafa and Deir Yassine and now Bagdad ... Of which satanic, infernal matter this monster unjustly called a human being was made of, man this war monger?” (30)

She notices how terrorism is created by the West, the suicide attempts from Kirkouk to Bagdad, Bagdad to Tikrit, Falloujah to Nassiriyah are the product of the American occupation of Iraq; like Fanon analyzed in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the oppressed fight among each others instead of against their oppressor because they are desperate and find no other outlet to their frustration.

The image of Jade and Sarah in the stripped hospital, at the bedside of their wounded child, is an example of courage and of life. Jade has suffered prison, torture, humiliation and the brutal death of his parents and friends, the falling apart of his world. Sarah is revolted against the madness of men and nations and does not know what she can say anymore, how to announce to the world, through her writing, a horizon of truth and of light. But they are both

there, still alive, hoping to save their child; the symbolism brought about by this image gives us hope after all. Sarah is a strong liberated woman who gives us a great lesson of courage. This couple is in love against all the odds of their life – and love based on respect, admiration and tenderness is the best remedy to the war and the murderous madness of men. It is an example to follow for any society to be transformed and regenerated. Sarah calls for this hope with all the pores of her skin: “Hope! Hope Jade! It is important. To survive ! To exist! » (p. 235) We can see how Sarah is conscious that in order to transform the world one must transform human relations starting with love relationships. This is where the strength of Ezza Agha-Malak’s writing lies.

Etel Adnan: resistance and violence

Etel Adnan, is a Lebanese-American educator, novelist, poet and visual artist. She was born in 1925 in Beirut to a Muslim Syrian father and a Christian Greek mother; she worked for the French Information Bureau when she was sixteen and attended the Ecole Supérieure des Lettres and taught at the Ahliya School for Girls; she then studied philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris and at the University of California at Berkeley, and Harvard University. She taught philosophy of art at the Dominican College of San Rafael, California and presented courses, classes and lectures at over forty universities and colleges throughout the United States. She retired from a permanent teaching position in the late 1970s to devote herself to her art and writing.

Adnan creates oils, ceramics, tapestries, and has had a number of solo exhibitions in the United States, Europe and Lebanon. She has written more than ten books of poetry and fiction, including *Sitt Marie-Rose* (1978), her first novel, which has been translated into six languages. It was written during the siege of the Palestinian camp of Tel el Zaatar in the summer of 1976. Her most important message is one of love and peace. This message best speaks to the chaos and destruction brought by war. Adnan denounces the love of the clan, which is the kind of love practiced by Arabs she says. For her, real love is not tribal, jealous, possessive, and exclusive, but rather reaches out to others. Love even goes so far as Sitt Marie Rose’s loving her executioners and forgiving them: “I want to make my peace with everyone. Even with my captors, I want to make my peace. I can no longer sustain this hatred. It’s what brought us to this apocalypse” (86). The ability to transform reality into metaphor is a key aspect of Adnan’s creativity. Yet her talent and lyrical fluency do not cease with poetry and fiction. Adnan has also crafted masterful essays. In “To Write in a Foreign Language” (1996), she discusses the history of her personal involvement with various languages and how they

have affected her own poetry and prose. Adnan writes about her past resentment of expressing herself in French because of associations with political conflict and apartheid. She explains how important language is in every art form, whether it be writing or painting, but, ultimately, she views painting as more neutral. Adnan divides her time between Lebanon, Paris, and California.

The analysis of *Sitt Marie Rose* shows a woman who takes her destiny in her own hands, stands alone and courageously for what she believes and is not afraid to tell men what is wrong with their values, even when she knows they will kill her for defying them. She is truly visionary, has espoused all the causes of the oppressed, not only intellectually, but most of all actively professionally and in her personal life. She has understood what an active non-violent struggle means and goes even one step further in consenting to die for her beliefs. In that sense, she is a victim, but an expiatory victim. Her sacrifice will allow others to live.

It is significant that Etel Adnan chooses a woman to incarnate values that may change society and overturn the war. The woman she describes did exist; she lived for the oppressed and gave her life hoping her sacrifice might show the fighters their foolishness. The woman portrayed by Adnan lives her ideals also at the personal level. Marie-Rose leaves a husband who was oppressing her. She now lives with one who respects her, loves her and encourages her in her struggle and values. The narrator makes it a point to tell us that sexual relationships are at the core of political problems. It reinforces the notion that when relationships between men and women are conceived in terms of power games, conquest, violence, domination, possession women and objectification, one cannot hope to have a society and a country which will not reflect those same pitfalls at the political level.

Nadia Tuéni: the Earth dreamer

Nadia Tuéni, a Lebanese poet and author of numerous volumes of poetry, was born in Baakline, Lebanon in 1935 to a Lebanese Druze father, Mohamed Ali Hamade, a diplomat and writer, and a French mother. Tuéni grew up bilingual. She was the wife of Ghassan Tuéni, the publisher of *Annahar*, a major Lebanese paper, and one of her sons was the journalist and politician Gebran Tuéni, assassinated in 2005. Her other son, Makram, was 21 when he died in a car accident in Paris in 1987. Nadia Tuéni died in Beirut in 1983 after battling ovarian cancer for several years.

Tuéni was educated in French schools in Lebanon and Greece. She attended *Ecole des Soeurs de Besançon*, then *La Mission Laïque Française*. She received her secondary education at the Lycée Français in Athens, Greece where her father was ambassador of Lebanon. She received a law degree from the Université Saint-Joseph in Beirut. She was

awarded several prizes during her lifetime, including the Prix de l'Académie Française, the Order of La Pléiade, and the Prix Said Akl.

I have always been interested in how this woman poet talked about the connection between her body, cancer, and its connection with war and the devastation of Lebanon. I refer to it in my own book on cancer where I quoted many passages to illustrate those themes: “I belong to a country that commits suicide every day, while it is being assassinated. As a matter of fact, I belong to a country that died several times. Why should I not die too of this gnawing, ugly, slow, and vicious death, of this Lebanese death?” (xxxv)

Nadia Tuéni was not only influenced by the French language of Lautréamont, Rimbaud and the surrealist poets, but also by the Arabic language of *avant-garde* poets such as Adonis. There is even, in her poetry, influences from the English language, as Lebanon is trilingual, and Nadia Tuéni lived in New York for several years when her husband Ghassan Tuéni was Lebanese representative at the United Nations. All these influences mark her poetry and make it a remarkable blend, a reflection of the Lebanese multicultural identity.

Poems for a History is a book which has no real political involvement, in the true sense of the term, Nadia Tuéni told me during an interview I had with her in the 1970s in Paris. “It's a book of poetry before all else and its political involvement is accidental.” Then came *The Earth Dreamer* (Paris: Seghers, 1976) which is the story of a great love, a passion between a man, a man or woman as yet unborn, and his or her earth. As for *June and the Miscreants* (Paris: Seghers, 1968), it is a book about the war, the epic of the war. It is the drama of her country, of a region, seen through four characters, four women who are very different and yet so similar, living and tearing themselves apart against the same background of rocks, sea and cliffs that is first of all Lebanon, and also the entire Middle East. *June and the Miscreants* is a prose poem, a long prose poem divided into chapters, and it also has actual chants, which are elegies, between the chapters. Thus the whole work is a long elegiac poem. Nadia Tuéni tells me she had “the impression that she was having a premonition of what was to occur”; she didn't really know, and perhaps that was accidental too, but it was rather unsettling to her to discover its reality later.

Tuéni believed that a woman was much more in tune with the earth than a man. “A woman is closer to the earth, she is much closer to nature. She is less abstract than a man. She is a much more concrete being. In fact, she is a being who, physically, is much more under the influence of the cycle of creation, to express it in another way. She experiences things viscerally, and is a reflection of many transformations, evolutionary or revolutionary, occurring around her.” (interview with Evelyne Accad, summer of 1975) She chose four

women who, for her, represent the four great cultural traditions of the Middle East: the Christian (since the Middle East is the cradle of Christianity), the Muslim, the Jewish and the Druze. Through these four women she was expressing not only the things that differentiate beings living on earth but also those which could bring them together, mending them: definitively the love of the same earth. “There is an extraordinary thing in the Middle East, a relationship of passion between man and the earth. That's why our wars are so bloody and atrocious and why sentiments are so exacerbated. I think that through women, through a *woman*, one can express this reality, this equation of earth/human being, tradition/human being, etc., etc.” (interview)

Nadia Tuéni told me how unhappy she was not to write in Arabic. Often her phrasing in French was primarily influenced by the Arabic language and its rhythms, something normal since she lived in the Orient. French was also conditioned by its own translation into Arabic: if a line pleased her in translation, she retained that version of it, and if in Arabic it disturbed her, she tried to adapt it so that would conform perfectly to what she was trying to achieve equally in both languages. “It's rather bizarre” she noticed.

A poem called “Man” on page nine of *Earth Dreamer* expresses these ambiguities:

Between two trees, a man parallel to his blood
 thoughts like scant summer grasses, and
 the sky flees oh how I love the rapid signature of the lightning.
 Everything begins at noon when, on the red horizon the scarlet fear
 because, my country around me is a painter's notion.
 A child chews on the wind.
 Love, the space where one breathes in the icon odor of life.

For someone from the Middle East, “peace of the shepherd” is a very important feeling and notion.

The last poem, the one that ends *Earth Dreamer*:

In the name of what monarch do you speak,
 You, who say that the sword
 is more important than the rose?
 For you enter into madness,
 Crushing down with all your weight upon the Promised Land.

Evelyne Accad: search for (w)humanism

I have always felt a junior to the authors presented here, in part because of my timidity perhaps, but my social background also – small middle class – my religious denomination also, very minor in Lebanon – protestant, and probably also my age – ten or more years younger than most of them. The authors talked about here were not for me models in the proper sense of the term; I did not try to adopt the classicism of Andrée Chedid, nor the rage of Vénus Khoury-Ghata, nor the cut-and-chiselled of Etel Adnan, nor the evanescence and sophistication of Nadia Tuéni, nor the defiance of Ezza Agha-Malak (closer to my generation than the others); but their writing encouraged me to write, an encouragement coming from Lebanese living in exile, expressing themselves on Lebanon, a subject that haunts me, while the feminism that leads most of my writing takes me back closer to someone like Simone de Beauvoir or Nawal el Saadawi.

When did I start to write and why should I search in my memory for that moment? To trace the beginning of the writing experience in my life can help me understand how and why it evolved the way it did in consciousness and in practice, and what meaning it acquired with time. It is like going into oneself and digging, digging, searching for that bursting point hidden far away into one's mind and soul, the breaking of all knots and barriers, the crumbling of walls, windows opening wide, letting loose one's imagination, finding unending freedom, swimming and swimming in a blue Mediterranean sea, sometimes flat and smooth like shining oil, other times with rolling waves, the fury of discovering winds, or running and running towards a horizon filled with expectations and dreams.

At the age of four – my mother told me, but I also have memory glimpses of these moments – excited and wanting to communicate and entertain, I would face audiences, invent stories and songs I loved to tell, sing and act for family and friends. Daring and not shy at the time, what could have happened between now and then to make me withdraw into a corner and only tell the blank page what I used to perform with such audacity? Is this where the writing starting point is located for me?

When did I really start to write – i.e, when did I sit down methodically, regularly, and consciously with pages to fill out and the desire to mark my time and environment, the knowledge I had important and pressing issues to communicate? When did I “aim at eternity” with my writing, to use Annie Dillard's words? (65) Adolescent, I lost the spontaneity, freshness, vivaciousness, and enthusiasm I had in my childhood. School – especially and unfortunately the French system, and perhaps even more so in the ex-colonies – often kills a

child's creativity, and society takes care to bury it. Nevertheless, I remember my high-school creative writing classes – a French Protestant high school in Beirut. They were my favourite courses. The subject to be treated having been announced, a feeling of tremendous excitement, nervousness, joy, and anxiety would seize me. I would let my pen travel on paper with the freedom my thoughts led me to, but also with a certain discipline and the need to convey messages my readings had impressed me with and asked me to memorize and to convey. The images, events, stories, proverbs, and philosophies I would relate then took me to far away regions I coloured with my dreams and desires to seduce, communicate, and reach original creative thoughts capable of changing the world's perceptions and notions of reality.

In these moments of intense writing and concentrating, I rediscovered the magic moments of my childhood when I would invent stories and songs. I submerged myself into a world of fantasy where I let my imagination wander loose and free, in search of the conducting thread, the elements I suspected might lead me to life's essentials. I also loved playing with words and ideas. I would carry a small pocketbook in which I would write phrases and thoughts discovered through my readings, or made up through research or discussions with my sister (who read more than I did and kept a secret journal), sentences and ideas I had found beautiful and interesting. I would introduce them in my essays to make them appear more scholarly and impress my teachers.

Writing was then as present for me as it is today. It was an experience of total immersion into my inner world. I would go into my feelings and moods to try and express the authentic understanding of my existence. I use these Sartrean words because, already, I was moved and influenced by existentialist philosophy, though not yet by feminism which I only read later. At that time, existentialism to me meant authenticity, being as truthful to oneself as one could be, each human being's experience being unique and important. It meant that: "Every subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence; he achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out toward other liberties." (de Beauvoir xxviii).

Writing meant telling the world about the uniqueness of my experience, of being born woman, Arab, from a Swiss mother and an Egypto-Lebanese father, with a strict Protestant religious upbringing, in Beirut, at that time the most cosmopolitan city in the Middle East. The identity expressed here did not come out with as much clarity then, due in part to the education I was receiving in the Beirut French school where we were told that our ancestors were "les Gaulois" (the inhabitants of ancient France). As incredible as this may seem, or repetitious for some people, it is an experience I actually lived. It is only when I crossed the

ocean, went to study in the United States, started reading the literature, politics, and history of that part of the world, when I read about oppression, racism, and colonialism, and more painfully, when the war broke out in Lebanon, that I began to perceive it acutely and with intensity.

“Plain writing is by no means easy writing. The *mot juste* is an intellectual achievement.” (Dillard 116) Choosing the most appropriate word for me has not been an easy task since I write in different languages (French, English, and Arabic) and in different genres according to whether I write a thesis, an article, an academic analysis, a novel, a short story, a letter, a poem, or a song. I have often wondered, and been asked, if one could seriously use different forms and different languages; if it would not be better to seriously work on one, trying to perfect it. Is there not a fundamental difference between reflective-writing, analytic writing of a thesis and creative-imaginary-writing of a novel for example? Does practicing one hinder the other? Does using several languages lead to confusion, a tower of Babel?

Like the origin of my writing, these questions take me back to the significance of my past, my roots. Unlike many North African writers, such as Driss Chraïbi, Albert Memmi, Abdel-Kebir Khatibi, and Marguerite Taos-Amrouche, who describe how divided they feel about being a mixture of cultures; how torn and unhappy it causes them to be – they use expressions such as “bâtard historique” (historical bastard), “aliénation culturelle” (cultural alienation), and “être entre deux chaises” (to be between two chairs, not really sitting) (see the analysis of this theme in Isaac Yétiv, *Le thème de l'aliénation dans le roman maghrébin d'expression française*) – I prefer Andrée Chedid's vision of the positive aspects hybridization, affirming cosmopolitanism and the enrichment, tolerance, and openness it brings. Khatibi describes bilingualism as: “Impregnable love. At each moment, the foreign language can – unlimited powers – retire within itself, beyond any translation. I am, he would say, between two languages: the more I reach the middle, the farther I move away from it” (10). To such irreconcilable torment, I prefer Chedid's “wish to graft all her various roots and sensitivities. Hybrid, why not? She liked these crossings, meetings, these composite looks which don't block the future nor brush aside other worlds.” (*La maison sans racines* 79). These values are what Lebanon used to represent and what Kalya (the central character of this novel) had come to seek: “Tenderness for this exiguous land that one could cross in one day; this land so tenacious and fragile. For the memory of impetus, hospitality, harmony of voices” (81). This is a picture of Lebanon that Chedid paints in an essay before the war: “Land where opposed voices, confronting each other, do their best to remain harmonious. Centuries have marked it with unalterable signs, yet nothing fixed, set, flatly eternal weighs you down here.

Very ancient land of wonders, never ceasing to give birth to itself” (*Liban* 6). Chedid's understanding and description of Lebanon, the importance she attributes to pluralism, and the meaning she gives to roots are very much at the core of how I feel towards my past, towards writing, and towards having to do so in different languages and genres. I once told Andrée Chedid it upset me to sometimes use “anglicisms” (words which sound French but are English) when writing in French. She amazingly remarked: “Mais c'est très bien. Tu aères la langue!” (“But it's good. You bring fresh air to the language!”)

For me, interpreting the world means both learning from the past and expressing new ideas, creating new worlds. All the forms of expression I use help me explore (w) human experience. I use the prefix (w) because the woman in man, and in man's world, has too often been left out of the analysis, descriptions and expressions of the human experience. This letter (w) and what it symbolizes is probably at the core of much of my writing. Interpreting the world has meant understanding its pain, suffering, and oppression, digging into my soul, experiences and observations for the crucial, essential elements of my condition as an Arab woman, feeling an urgency in transmitting the picture I witnessed and see with as much precision as I can, in all of its complexity. I am overwhelmed with the desire to communicate. Communicating to me comes from commitment as I feel responsibility to myself and to the world. I often feel like Cherrie Moraga: “that my back will break from the pressure I feel to speak for others” (v). I try to bring light into my past, into my part of the world with all its tragedy and its beauty, hoping to help reach a more universal vision.

Writing also helped me heal the wounds. It reconciled me with my past. When expressing what upset me, I exorcised the anger, the pain, the suffering, and could move on. I started composing songs in 1975 when the war broke out in Lebanon. My grief was so overwhelming I could not sleep nor lead a normal existence, thinking about what my loved ones and the country I cherished were going through. Songs – music and words – came out of my body like a long plaintive shriek. They helped relieve the pain, anger, frustrations and communicate my feelings to others. When I witnessed how some of the audiences, especially in Lebanon, cried when I sang, I was overcome with the realization I could really move them. And the question came: what if it moved them so much they decided to change the wrongs in Lebanese society? What if it made them see the need for love, tenderness, and the transformation in relationships based on violence and destruction? In these instants, I relived the magic moments of my childhood when, facing audiences with invented songs and stories, I sensed the impact I could have on the listeners and the secret belief I might move mountains and make people happy or sad.

L'Excisée is a search in style, writing where the Biblical and the Koranic mix, leaving space for song and poetry, a voice in search of itself, in the stifling of a millennial condition – a voice which becomes shriek when the circle closes in too brutally; a voice which dares confidence in front of a young woman who did not have “her body sliced like her sister's...a beautiful young woman of tomorrow, the young woman who will nourish all hopes” (85).

And this is how writing in exile can open new horizons, new paths not yet trodden. It helps bear exile. And by a return process, exile, the shock created by the confrontation of different cultures, the suffering of separation, and the desire for return feed the breath of writing. The vision of new forms, new ideas, new rhythms takes place thanks to these rubbings, tearing, sufferings calling for fusion, harmony, understanding, and love of life and of others beyond the frontiers.

Conclusion

The six women I have chosen to talk about here all write their lives within a context that has tried to stifle them and prevent them from doing so. However, they did not let their society crush their creativity and courageously moved elsewhere when they found oppression encircling them too closely. All six talk about identity and language in the context of war, violence and oppression. For Chédid, pluralism and diversity mixed with the desire for life, love and reconciliation are at the core of what moves her writing. For Khoury-Ghata, irony and lyricism help her overcome a certain schizophrenia found in Lebanese fragmented society. The strong, convincing expression of Etel Adnan shows the problems of a world falling apart and the reforms that could help the Arab world come out of its lethargy. The delicate profound sensitive poetic expression of Nadia Tuéni has prophetic overtones. The frankness and daring of Ezza Agha-Malak put her finger on the horrors of our part of the world. As for myself, I search for the different yet harmonious voices that form a symphony. All six writers write their own lives to help heal the wounds of their existence of those around them. Writing in exile, the six authors are nevertheless marked by the relationship they have with their native land and the tragedy confronting it. They all talk of identity and of language in the context of war and oppression. Exile gives them first of all a critical outlook on their society and on what they consider to be the causes of the ills. It is by expressing their voices of exiled women inside and outside of their native land that they are able to “deconstruct language, religion, place and birth” and offer new ways of writing.

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