

# The Importance of Music in my Writing and ‘Engagement’

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I started composing songs in 1975 when the war broke out in Lebanon. My grief was so overwhelming I could not sleep or 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. Recently I discovered that mixing songs with my presentation was a powerful tool to better express what I want to say and that I can better capture an audience by using my music.

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 in 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? Psychologists tell us that it is a decisive age where every action and reaction is determined for the rest of one’s life. Every experience lived at that age is supposed to have marked one’s future choices and reactions. Am I filled with the same feelings of amazement and marvel at the possibility of seducing audiences when I write now as when I performed as a child? What led my imagination then and what moves it now?

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, the important and pressing issues to communicate? When did I “aim at eternity” with my writing, to use Annie Dillard’s (1982, p. 65) words? 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 of burying it. Nevertheless, I remember my high-school creative writing classes – a French Protestant high-school in Beirut. They were my favorite 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 colored 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 concentration, I rediscovered the magic moments of my childhood when I would invent stories

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and songs! I submerged myself into a world of fantasy where I let my imagination wander loose and free, in search of the 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), and 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.

Writing meant telling the world about the uniqueness of my experience, of being born woman, Arab,

from a Swiss mother and an Egyptian-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 my former experience acutely and with intensity.

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 practising 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 have described 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), “être entre deux chaises” (to be between two chairs, not really sitting), uneasiness – I prefer Andrée Chedid's vision of the positive aspects of hybridization, of affirming cosmopolitanism, and the enrichment, tolerance, and openness it brings.

Khatibi (1983) describes bilingualism as: “Impregnable love. At each moment, the foreign language can – unlimited power – 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" (pp. 48-49). To such irreconcilable torment, I prefer Chedid's (1985) "wish to graft all her [Kalya's] various roots and sensitivities. Hybrid, why not? She [Kalya] liked these crossings, meetings, these composite looks which don't block the future nor brush aside other worlds" (pp. 79-81). 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" (Chedid, 1974, p. 6). 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." 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 witness and see with as much precision as I can, in all of its complexity. I am overwhelmed with the desire to communicate. Communicating, for me, comes from commitment, as I feel responsibility towards myself and the world. I often feel like

Cherrie Moraga (1983): "that my back will break from the pressure I feel to speak for others" (p. 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. 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 of 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.

Another event triggered in me great emotions, which marked the development of my writing, a point of fixation or crystallization which would determine the focus and aims of my writing. When I read about excision and infibulation, the cruel practice of sexual mutilations millions of women suffer from all over the world – most specifically in some countries in Africa and in the Gulf – I was very shaken. At the time I was preparing a doctoral thesis at the University of Indiana. It was the first time I had heard about it. I was already aware of many practices of oppression afflicting women, since it was some of them that had motivated me to leave my country of birth, but excision was the height of anything I could have imagined. I was sick for several weeks, my thesis took a different turn, and the title of my first novel, *L'Excisée*, was already determined.

I decided to include in my thesis, which was about the role of women in the literature of the Mashrek and the Maghreb, a first chapter exposing and developing the sexual and social problems women faced in that part of the world, from a sociological and anthropological point of view. This chapter gave me lots of problems with some of the members of my committee (one Arab male in particular) on the grounds it had nothing to

do with literature. This criticism hid the fear of a subject too emotionally charged and too polemical. But I was determined to keep it, and encouraged by my thesis director, I finished and defended it. Since then, the subject has been written about and discussed at great length inside and outside academia, in the West as well as in the East.

It was 1975, declared International Women's Year by the United Nations, which mobilized feminists around the globe on this issue, and stirred much controversy, debate, and resentment on the part of some African women who saw European and American interference as reductionist and ethnocentric, representing them in racist, misogynist, backward, inhuman terms, thus reinforcing the stereotypes.

I remember being myself torn apart in this conflict at one meeting of the African Literature Association in Madison, Wisconsin, during those years. I had presented a paper where I used the term mutilation and was immediately attacked by one of my African male colleagues for not using the word tradition. The plenary session was split in a heavy debate bringing in the whole audience, which got divided along race rather than gender lines. I was very depressed to see the African women siding with the African men. But in the evening, I discovered the reasons behind this apparent division. I had sung one of my compositions on genital mutilation and the pain it causes in women. Some of the African women present there had tears in their eyes and came to thank me after the performance. They told me the reason they had sided with their men in the morning was because they had to be loyal to them. In front of the West, loyalty was more important than truth, but I was right in denouncing the practice.

With time, I have become more aware of the issue of loyalty versus truth, and how it causes women to be split when they should be uniting on these crucial issues (see my discussion of these conflicts in *Sexuality and Sexual Politics: Conflicts and Contradiction for Contemporary Women*). I have also become aware of the importance of music, poetry, testimony, etc. versus strict analysis. As Françoise Lionnet (1991) puts it, talking about El Saadawi's novel *Woman at Point Zero* and my novel *L'Excisée*: "It is a more effective and convincing denunciation than many pragmatic or political treatises because

it allows the reader to enter into the subjective processes of the woman, to adopt her stance" (p. 3).

According to Lionnet, differences in ideologies among feminists produce disagreements that threaten dialogue. It is therefore very important to examine the sources of these disagreements, to engage in comparative feminist criticism without necessarily finding solutions but in order to open up dialogues. Ethnocentric value judgements have no place within a diverse, multicultural feminist quest. She uses the debates surrounding the practice of excision to reexamine the debates on universalism and particularism. Two claims emerge from the debates: those who campaign for the abolition of all such practices on the basis of universal ethics and those who favor respect for the cultural autonomy of African societies and criticize all forms of intervention as "acculturation" to Western standards.

Coming from a mixed background gives me a perspective I might not otherwise have. It is the kind of *métissage* Lionnet (1989) describes as "a dialogical hybrid" which brings together diverse elements. It gave me courage to leave when I felt life was closing in on me, and strength to return when I thought I might be effective in bringing about some necessary changes.

The ideas expressed in my thesis were to compare the role of Arab women in the writings of women and men, in French and in Arabic, and to see if this reflected the "realities" exposed in the first chapter. Some of my conclusions determined how insufficiently those problems were expressed in the literature, due in part to the fact that many of the authors who had escaped those conditions were the ones able to write, but were not concerned with the suffering of others. Along with Marilyn Waring (1985), I wished to tell them that: "The litany of disappointments and distress is not only the justification for our being indignant about woman's condition, it is also real cause for concern about our world" (p. 59).

It was therefore on a fixation with pain that I wrote my first novel. *L'Excisée* shows a woman, E., Elle (She in French), Eve (woman everywhere, myself to a certain extent), woman excised symbolically by a fanatic religion in war-torn Lebanon, socially by the tyranny of man, and a witness to the physical mutilation of other women. Where can this woman

go? Is love between a Moslem and a Christian possible? The story of E. is both a protest and a sad, hopeful prayer. Dominated by a stern Protestant father in destroyed Lebanon, the idealistic young woman yearns for peace, harmony, and love. But she is gullible and naïve, as well as innocent; she falls under the domination of her seducer/lover who transports her into his desert world. She is witness to the traditional excisions of the young girls in the women's quarters. Through all the horror, the story is "sung" in the poetic voice of a young woman who refuses to hate or to act with violence.

"Woman against the wall. Woman who tricks in order to live. Woman who compromises herself to live. Woman who pierces the wall with a pin to see the other side of her prison, the side of liberty, the side of space" (Accad, 1982, p.14). This first novel is the story of my adolescence trapped by a family whose religious system suffocates me, in a country where religion has no tolerance for the other. It is also a love story, which ends in tragedy, for how can a Christian and a Moslem love under a sky of hatred, in a country divided by dogmas and religions? "They risk death, assassination, there in the open road under that sun which crushes and kills" (Accad, 1982, p. 36). And even if they could manage to escape and run away together to another country, how could she bend to his customs, which crush women even more than those of her childhood? Where can this woman go except to suicide, to death?

*L'Excisée* is also 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 a 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" (Accad, 1982, p. 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, the desire for return feed the breath of writing. The vision of new forms, new ideas, new rhythms takes place thanks to these rubbings, tearings, sufferings

calling for fusion, harmony, understanding, love of life and of others beyond the frontiers.

Another event, which turned my life upside down, was my experience with cancer in the summer and spring of 1994. I never thought I would have to go through this hell in my life, the "poison, cut and burn" treatment, which breast cancer patients know only too well. I decided to hold a journal on my journey through cancer. I needed to do it for myself, to exorcise the pain, and to do it for other women, those going through the same calvary, or those who will in the future, and all those who need to be made aware of the dangers we are living in this century: the post-modern era. I feel I have been made to pay the price for modern civilization. Someone has to pay the price for all the pollutants thrown into the atmosphere, all the pesticides sprayed on the fruits and vegetables, all the hormones fed to the animals, all the contaminants dumped into the rivers and seas, all the chemicals destroying the atmosphere, the air we breathe, the water we drink, the sun our skin receives. And I was one of the seven women who gets breast cancer in her life time (these are the latest statistics for the States and Canada, I don't have those for Lebanon, but from my little experience of talking to people around here, I believe it must also be quite high). Yes, the figures are frightening and cancer is on the increase in all cancers, but especially in breast cancer, and I did ask: "Why me?" Yes, I did ask this question. I was not like one of my friends who reversed it and said: "Why not me?" Later, I learned to ask myself: "What can I learn through this ordeal?" But when it hit me (I was diagnosed with lobular carcinoma on March the 2nd, 1994), I was too shell shocked. I was not prepared to live through that hell. I never thought it would happen to me. I had not been informed, or I had ignored the articles on the topic. I felt that if I could help someone through the lines I was writing, my suffering would not have been in vain. I also composed new songs in the middle of chemotherapy: "Take me to the river going to the sea. Take me towards healing."

As Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (2003) well expresses in an article titled "Ectomies: A Treasury of Juju Fiction by Africa's Daughters":

Cultural determinism becomes the focal point of the politics of ectomy: to cut or not to cut? The mind boggles at Western culture's playing on

women's bodies: hysterectomies, oophorectomies or ovariectomies, salpingectomies, episiotomies, mastectomies ... I envision ectomy as a trope to express the excision, the cutting off, the exclusion attached to woman's destiny. (pp. 4-5)

Twenty years had passed by since I wrote *L'Excisée*. Little did I know at the time that I would be experiencing mutilation in my own flesh, as I did last year. I felt the link tying me to all the women around the world being reinforced in this tribulation and sorrow.

And this is how my writing goes, in search of the (w)human experience, in search of what others did not see, or left out, trying to express the meaningful moments of my life, and those of others, to give them new grounds and to move forward. I am reminded here of Dillard's (1982) words:

Art is an instrument ... and with religion the only instrument for probing certain materials and questions ... When in the art object the artist has mastered his own confusion, he has gained new ground ... (p.168)

Like in my childhood, when confident and daring, I faced audiences with invented songs and stories, like in my difficult adolescence, when I searched for authenticity, for the real me, and for what caused the pain I felt inside and all around, I continue to search for that linking thread, for what might give meaning to a world I see shrouded in despair, lack of imagination, and bent on destruction, I search for the *mot juste* mixture of many different voices, in various languages, yet harmonious, melodious, forming a chorus, playing a symphony, I search for correspondences and connections so present in nature, the life which gives hope. And perhaps, in the end, when all is said and done, when life's experiences have given us the rounder, sharper vision, one is able to see writing, singing, art, culture as a fuller, more complete hopeful picture, ways to recreate the hidden face of the world, the lost image of one's childhood.

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