

# Dunyazad

By May Telmissany  
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One of life's greatest tragedies is the loss of a child. At least that's what Egyptian writer May Telmissany's *Dunyazad* tries to portray. The novel, which in March 2001 was short-listed for the Independent Foreign Fiction prize, is an intense and moving account of the psychological and physical trauma that befalls a family at the death of their stillborn child. It is also the story of their slow and painful recovery.

Written in the first person narrative and in simple, poetic language, the 95-page book opens with a very powerful scene that sets the tone and mood of the novel. A little baby wrapped in a "tiny white shroud," with a "round bluish face," (1) is brought to her half-anesthetized mother. The child is dead, but the mother (narrator) does not notice. All she can think of is how much her baby looks like her. Yet, it is only upon learning of Dunyazad's death and the manner in which she died that the real tragedy unfolds. The narrator, who is herself a writer says, "She had emerged from my womb-grave to be placed into her own grave," (23). This idea haunts the latter every minute of every day and drives her to write about the ordeal.

As the narrator recollects the months of pregnancy, anticipation and expectation, the reader is given an intimate glimpse into the inner workings of a mother who cannot accept or acknowledge the death of her baby. The narrator asserts:

*I am determined not to forget; on every possible occasion I name things once more. So she was Dunyazad, but from today she'll only ever be those few lines on a page. Now I recall the image of her when for the first time I saw her thigh on the screen in the doctor's clinic, the screen they use to measure the embryo's age; and then the second time, with the cluster of dots for measuring how long she was. Everything was just as it should have been. I can remember other things too, many things I haven't said. Now my nipples hang loosely. When I undress, I turn away from the mirror.* (25)

For the narrator of *Dunyazad*, the only way to handle the loss of her little infant is to shape her world accord-

ing "to the laws of what is not there" (25). It is a world where everything evolves around the presence of the dead baby. The reader is told of the manner in which the absent Dunyazad sleeps quietly beside her mother, of the single white tooth that is visible between her lips and of the way she plays with her brother and flies through the corridors and walls. Although Dunyazad has died, she continues to live in her mother's memories and imagination.

While the main narrative of the book revolves around the narrator's relationship with her dead child, the author still portrays the strain the child's death has on other members of the family, notably the father. After all, it is he who is to make the burial arrangements, to break the news of the death to his wife and to offer comfort. Indeed by blending both parents' reactions to the baby's death and the manner in which they try to recover, Telmissany highlights the domestic and marital anxieties they are subjected to as they try to overcome the tragedy. Even in their lovemaking they find themselves thinking of the day the baby was conceived.

Telmissany's novel is beautiful in its portrayal of the simple, moving details that roam through the consciousness of the characters as they recall the baby they have lost. Yet, it is also a novel that gives an illuminating picture of the social scene in Cairo. For example, the decision of the narrator's in-laws to sell the old family home and buy a new apartment reveals the social changes occurring among middle class Egyptians at the time. Also references to figures such as Nasr Abu Zayd- a prominent Egyptian intellectual who was declared a heretic after the publication of a book entitled *Critique of Religious Discourse* (1992) brings up some sensitive political issues.

*Dunyazad* is effectively a novel about family relationships and motherhood. Yet against the backdrop of this world is a subtle reference to some social and political issues. It shouldn't be missed!

