

Miriam Cooke — Claire Gebeyli,

10 June 1983

One of the highlights of the month of June at Beirut University College was the lecture given by Dr. Miriam Cooke of Duke University on "Women's Literary Responses to the Lebanese Civil War". Attended by a large number of individuals including many women writers, poets, and academics. The lecture, organized by the Institute of Women's Studies in the Arab World, was one of many Dr. Cooke gave during a tour of Arab Gulf and South-East Asian countries at the invitation of American Embassies in the region.

Because of her knowledge of the Arabic and French languages, and having lived some time in this part of the world, Miriam Cooke was able to understand and analyze the literary production of many Lebanese women writers first hand. It was this factor, added to a poetical and vivid oratory style, that gave her lecture such authenticity and impact.

After a brief analysis of the way most women writers in Lebanon chose to talk about the war, Cooke concentrated during the rest of her lecture on Claire Gebeyli's poetry of war, called "Billets". The "Billets" being a series of political commentaries of some thirty lines which focused on an event or an incident that had touched the poet. These commentaries were published weekly in the French-language newspaper *L'Orient—Le Jour*, "They were a celebration of life that was harsh, violent and ugly, but defiant of death"; summarized Cooke.

Through her "Billets", says Cooke, Claire Gebeyli tried to touch her readers and make them aware of the "anarchy and obscenity" around them, while avoiding description and repetition. Moreover, Gebeyli deals with war as a "process". She lives through the "interstices of the art of war", by weaving a "canvas of sound, touch, smell, taste and then sight". In other words, the war for the poet has become a language, "a form of discourse that should insinuate itself into the souls of men". But most of all, the war should be "acknowledged".

To "acknowledge" a war, explains Cooke, is not just to contemplate it by calling it "the events", "hawadith", "evènements". It is to perceive it and see its intertwinement with life and language. Moreover, it is the poet and writer's responsibility not to create a "seperate system, a story, a quasi-dialogue with an interlocutor called War". "The artist must perceive and make others perceive that discourse is life and here (in Lebanon) life is war"

Thus for Cooke, a true artist is the "mirror of his time". But more than that, a good writer chooses his words carefully making sure they will

not "dry up and calcify". And it is precisely Claire Gebeyli's ability of using language as a "sword to be seized" that Miriam Cooke seems to admire most in her. No wonder then that she quotes her saying: "But what is the use of the pen if it forgets to press down on the chests of others, if the words that it pours out are merely particles that have been sewn and re sewn on the body of language."

In conclusion, Cooke told her audience that the Lebanese war which cannot be explained rationally or logically was better interpreted by women writers than men writers because women knew best how to describe the moods it provoked, the multitude of little events that made it, its irrationality, and its repetitiveness. And if women writers as different in style as Claire Gebeyli, Emily Nasrallah, Ghada Samman, and Hanan el-Sheikh succeeded in their mission as writers, it is because they all felt responsible for what was happening, rather than feeling guilty, heroic, or epic like most male writers did.

Wafa' Stephan

(1) Translated from the French from Gebeyli's "La Vie en Sol Mineur".