

Arabist Miriam Cook Acclaimed Lebanese Women Writer's Contributions on War. Emily Nasrallah's Works Were Given Special Tribute

Dr. Miriam Cook, Professor of Arabic at Duke University, wrote a paper on **Women Write War: The Centring of the Beirut Decentrists** in the series of papers on Lebanon that the Centre for Lebanese Studies issued at Oxford University* in July 1987.



Who are the Beirut Decentrists?

They are: Ghada al-Samman, Hanan el-Sheikh, Daisy al-Amir, Claire Gebayli, Etel Adnan, Laila Usairan, Emily Nasrallah, Nuha Samara and Umayya Hamdan.

According to Cook, Lebanese writers, artists and poets tried to capture the pulse of the violence of the war in Lebanon better than political and economic analysts. They produced fantastic accounts of Beirut horror and Lebanese traumatic life. "In this creative efflorescence the most active were women and particularly the women who wrote in the capital but were tangential to its literary tradition. They were the Beirut Decentrists." (p.4)

The common denominator of this group of women writers, shared Beirut as their home and the war as their experience. They abhorred the use of violence and were disgusted with armed militias. They were decentered in a double sense: physically, they were scattered all over a self-destructive city; intellectually they moved in separate spheres. They wrote alone and for themselves. According to the author "they would not conceive of their writings as related to those of others, yet their marginal perspective that gave insight into the holistic aspect of the war united them and allowed them discursively to undermine and restructure society around the image of a new centre". (p.4)

Cook added "the Beirut Decentrists, while not sharing the usual or expected traits of literary recognition, still merit inclusion in the canon of modern Middle East literature." (p.4)

Most of Beirut Decentrists belong to upper or middle class backgrounds. They were compelled by the war to become an increasingly visible part of the sphere and began to recognize the role they might play in a society undergoing massive transformation at all levels. This new consciousness or awareness inspired novels, short stories and poetry that became increasingly feminine in orientation.

Collectively the Beirut Decentrists had forged a war myth whose protagonists were both men and women. With time it became primarily women. They spoke about daily life, the routine and boredom, the omnipresence of gunmen and armed militias who were always present on all occasions; weddings, funerals, parties and other surprising incidents of warmongering.

In the literature of Beirut Decentrists, women stay behind and men leave the country to look after their business interests in the Gulf, Europe or the Americas. All the writers seem to agree in their criticism of those who left their country in time of need. Many hinted at a radical transformation in identity in their excellent treatment on the subject of emigration.

With the intensity and cruelty of the war in Lebanon, writers could no longer indulge in the luxury of ideal reflections. The war and all the change that it necessarily connoted forced itself into the villagers' consciousness. Emily Nasrallah, a Decentrist whose entire literary works from 1962 until today focuses on this dichotomy between modern and traditional, between Beirut and the village, between men and women, has dramatized the incursion of the war into village life. Radwan, the protagonist of her 1981 novel **Flight Against Time** describes how Israel used to air raid villages in South Lebanon, and how ordinary people managed to carry on with their lives as normally as they could.

Experiencing war and surviving it is a keynote that could be found among all Decentrist writers. Although one could draw an analogy between the emigration of the village to the city and overseas emigration from Lebanon to far away places, like the U.S., Canada and Europe.

(*) Centre for Lebanese Studies, 59 Observatory Street, Oxford, OX 26EP.

The writings of the Decentrists epitomise the changing attitude of those who stayed in Lebanon during the war vis-a-vis those who left.

The works published before 1979 usually hint at women's steadfastness and deep commitment to their country and traditions compared to men's cowardly vacillation. By 1982 male protagonists had become explicit targets of Beirut Decentrists' bitterness as best shown in Umayya Hamdan's **Blue that Comes With the Wind**.

Nuha Samara in **Two Faces One Woman** also wrote about men who fled to international capitals and sent tender letters to their wives exhorting them to pray for peace so they might return.

The Israeli invasion in 1982 was an important landmark in Lebanon and for its women writers. Before 1982, Beirut Decentrists had consciously fragmented and subverted language so as to start anew. The fragmentation was for the construction of a new entity defined by the civil war context. The language available for the post 1982 writer was, therefore, either the language of the creatively fragmented wartime experience or the language of the unfragmented remembrance of a pre 1975 Lebanon that had exploded into hate and violence.

Beirut Decentrists chronicled the Lebanese war from its inception and in some cases, such as Ghada al-Samman's **Beirut 75** (1975) and Etel Adnan's **In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country** (1973), they anticipated it. The author describes their contribution by saying "their marginality to society and to literary canon gave them the perspective of the other. Exclusion gave them a holistic if peripheral, vision that the excluders had lost when they set themselves up as the all-important self or centre." Cook adds "the writings of the Decentrists trace a thread of normality that links the usual accounts of violence and explosions. Writing allowed these women to perceive a routine that did not deny the war but rather pinpointed a new logic, the logic of the bullets. This logic undermined previously unquestioned modes of behavior and allowed for the emergence of a new social order and civic structure." (pp.9 and 10)

The evolution in feminist consciousness that transformed male emigration into cowardice and female writing/staying into honor is best seen in the works of

Emily Narallah, for the theme to which she calls repeated attention is emigration. In her post 1982 works, Nasrallah explores the implication of the invasion on the question of emigration and searches for a new language to deliver the change and subsequent chaos.

Nasrallah's background and personal experience was intertwined with emigration. She was born in Kfeir, a village in South Lebanon. She came to study in Beirut where her rich uncle who had emigrated to America paid for her education. Hence at an early age, Nasrallah knew that male Lebanese emigrate and Lebanese females stay behind awaiting the return of their menfolk. Nasrallah later managed to pay for her university education at the American University of Beirut, by selling her articles to local newspapers and magazines. Her life set a model or an affirmation of a life for women beyond the narrow confines of traditional village life. In the meantime she suffered the loneliness of the village girl in the big city. Writing became her only solace.

Her early writings, which include **September Birds** (1962) and **The Oleander Tree** (1968) reflect the concerns of Arab women writers of the 1950s and 1960s. In a way she resembled Leila Baalbaki and Colette Khuri who wrote of the prison house of domesticity and the stifling of women's individuality within patriarchy.

During the 13 years that intervened between the appearance of Nasrallah's first novel, **September Birds** which won high acclaim in Lebanon and the Arab World, and the outbreak of the civil war in 1975, Nasrallah wrote two novels, **The Oleander Tree** (1968) and **The Pawn** (1974); two collections of short stories, **Island of Illusion** (1973) and **The Source** (1978); two children's books, **Bahira** (1977) and **Little Shadi** (1977). In each work Nasrallah struggles with the conflicting values of her society that was at once modern (male) and traditional (female).

In Nasrallah's works the women were responding to the perceived mandate to be passive and the challenge to change. She has written about the Lebanese war two novels, **The Memories** (1978) and **Flight Against Time** (1981); and two collections of short stories, **Women in 17 Stories** (1984) and **The Lost Mill** (1985). Both novels continue to focus on the question of emigration but the new ingredient is survival.

Nasrallah's works in general dramatize what was happening in Lebanese society. The war had collapsed the difference between Beirut and the village. The war gave birth to a new attitude and a new context. The village no longer had the dubious luxury of isolation, as the war forced the village to adopt what was new and different, so that tradition might confront, and become assimilated to modernity. "Beirut and the village were identified in such a way that the village had become a microcosm for Lebanon." (p.12)

The freedom of male emigration which sanctioned unpatriotic behavior. i.e. leaving Lebanon with impunity was no longer even an option. The only options left were those that had previously faced the village women: staying or leaving forever.

Nasrallah presents the choices for being in war torn Lebanon as having been feminized: Lebanese men and women waited and maintained a continuity with the land or they could be like the radical village women who left and were rejected. Moreover to stay in Lebanon after 1975 compelled acceptance of the condition of the traditional village woman while at the same time recognizing and thus overcoming or escaping its passivity as the radical village women had done. "The war had revolutionised the consequences of "escape" so that it not longer entailed ostracism as it had done before the war and merely denoted an overcoming of destiny." (p.13)

Maha Samara



Flight Against Time

By Emily Nasrallah
Translated By Issa J. Boullata
Ragweed Press — Charlottetown — 1987.

Flight Against Time is a moving story about the immigrant experience. An elderly couple leave their village in Lebanon to visit their children and grandchildren now living in the new World: Prince Edward Island, Canada. They find a world of peace and great comfort, but despite the war back home, the old man longs for his small village and a way of life deeply etched in his heart.

Nasrallah skilfully weaves truth and imagination to create a story rich in human emotion and psychological insight. The novel stands as witness to a time and its people, a mirror of the whole cultural and historical movement that is Lebanon of the present. A work that exemplifies the strength of the modern Arabic novel, Flight Against Time reflects the emotions, ideals and passions that all immigrants experience, be they our ancestors or our neighbours of today.