

## The Strangled Echo by Nazik Saba Yared\*

Nazik Saba Yared is a well known writer, novelist and critic in Lebanon and the rest of the Arab World. She is at present Professor of Arabic at Beirut University College and the Lebanese University.



**The Strangled Echo** is a novel written in Arabic with the Lebanese war as background. The events take place in Beirut and Paris between October 1975 and April 1976, i.e. the beginning of the war. Najeeb and his family live in Sanayea, an elegant bourgeois quarter of Beirut — before the war. But soon its inhabitants find themselves caught in a cross fire where the bullets, rockets and bombs of the fighting parties fall heavily on them. Many buildings and hotels are damaged or burnt, and Najeeb's flat receives a direct hit. His wife and two children were frightened to death, so Najeeb decides to evacuate his family during a short pause in the fighting. He sends them to Paris where his brother-in-law lives with his family. With time the fighting decreases. Najeeb goes back to his work, and renews his ties with old friends and acquaintances who are still living in Beirut. Among the employees in his office is an intelligent, efficient young girl called Noha, who takes pity on her lonely colleague. One day she asks him to come home with her to meet her mother and brother. As time passed the comradesly relationship between Noha and Najeeb turns into a close friendship. Encouraged by their loneliness and the emptiness of their lives in the devastated city, their friendship begins to take a turn that both of them want to avoid. Najeeb flies to Paris over the Christmas holidays in the hope of bringing back his family. But his wife, who is still traumatized by her experience in Beirut, refuses to accompany him and decides to stay behind.

Back in Beirut his friendship with Noha quickly turns into love — a desperate hopeless love. Noha clings to it being the only rich thing in her boring existence, as all her friends have gone, and there is nothing to do besides her work. Najeeb discovers in Noha an intelligent, interesting and generous person who is able to fill his life

and replace the vacuum created by the absence of his wife and children. When his wife finally comes back for the Easter vacation, Noha decides to put an end to their relationship. Uselessly, though, Najeeb's home life turns into hell after his wife discovers his liaison with Noha. Noha once again takes pity on him and accepts to see him but she fully realizes the hopelessness of their situation. Where lies the solution?

In the end the reader finds her sitting alone watching a T.V. documentary about the first weapon made by pre-historic man.

This unexpected and symbolic ending gives the reader food for thought as do many other passages in the novel.

**The Strangled Echo** shows the impact of war on the Lebanese family. Its realistic depiction of Beirut under fire, of the devastation, kidnapping and death. It gives also a lively and precise picture of life in that city during the early months of the war. The novel also transports us to Paris, painting the lives and emotions of the Lebanese who had fled their country to escape death and unemployment. The author describes and analyses with great exactitude and insight the thoughts and emotions of her characters both in Beirut and Paris, their fears, hopes, dreams and longings; and mainly the conflict that goes on in the heart and mind of each of them, especially in her two protagonists, Noha and Najeeb, as they face their insoluble dilemma. A dilemma which so many Lebanese men and women faced because the war dispersed families, wrecked homes, changed values and altered personalities and people.

However, the author does not fall into the trap of a melodramatic story so easy within such a context. She deftly gives the most dramatic events a humorous turn which keeps the novel within the bounds of the realities of life with all its human strength and weakness, joy and sadness, gravity and ridicule. All related in a lively, easy-flowing and succinct style so rare in the Arabic novel, captivating the reader's interest and curiosity, and sustaining the suspense of the story till the last word in the book.

\*Beirut, Nawfal, 1986, pp.226