

Sexuality and War Author: Evelyne Accad

Review by Rose Ghurayyib

In her latest book, "Sexuality and War : Literary Masks of the Middle East," Evelyne Accad deals with two aspects of human activity emphasizing male superiority under the patriarchal system. What relationship exists between the two aspects? Evelyne Accad defines sexuality as "attitudes towards one's mate, family and society," i.e. the total complex of relations between men and women in society. She postulates that the topic has been neglected in the handling of social problems, particularly in women's studies, which led to the development of perverted sexual relations. The violence practiced in war is itself an inhuman act. It must be a result or one of the results of inhuman sexual behavior on the personal and social level. "War carries the load of sexual violence . . . The warrior settles his accounts with the archaic femininity which threatens him." (1) Evelyne Accad is concerned with the Lebanese war, which, for 16 years, has been raging in her country. The corruption she refers to is the oppressive attitude towards women, Attitudes which impose on them a double standard, and demand total submission to the male.

Accad also postulates that women who have been excluded from war practices and historically restricted from the performance of peaceful tasks, are more fit than men to assume political leadership. Hence, she quotes a very familiar feminist theme "that the personal is political." (2) Accad suggests a sexual revolution which begins on the personal level but aspires to a transformation of the traditional relations of domination and subordination that permeate interpersonal relationships. She believes that novels are a source of knowledge which illustrates such relationships and reflect collective imagination and the culture of people (3). Consequently, she undertakes a detailed psychological analysis of six novels: three written by women and three others written by men. In her analysis, she tries to show the difference between men and women novelists' attitude, future visions and suggested solutions for the war problem.

The three novels written about the war by three outstanding women are stories of revolt against the war and the perverse conditions which created it. Each

writer reacts in her own way. "The Story of Zahra" by Hanan al-Shaykh gives, in a natural, fluent and imaginative style, poignant descriptions of corruption and destruction in her environment. The main character, Zahra, a Shi'ite young girl from South Lebanon, is brought up in a stifling atmosphere of family cruelty and sexual licentiousness. Her experiences arouse disgust. Hence, after a period of resignation, she decides to revolt and, taking advantage of the sexual liberation encouraged by the war, has a love affair with a sniper. She is finally



killed by the sniper who decided to get rid of her when she told him she was pregnant. In this story, Zahra is a rebel who tries to free herself in the best way she can. She was daring but ignorant, so she fell victim of her ignorance and brought a fatal end to her problem.

Sitt Marie Rose is the main character in a true story written by Etel Adnan. The protagonist is a Syrian-Lebanese woman who, moved by a nationalist or philanthropic feeling, decides to help the Palestinian fighters. Her daring action costs her her life. Her fate was similar to Zahra's, only it was more constructive. Evelyne Accad admires this women's heroic action which expresses criticism of the perversion permeating the other local militias. However, Accad comments that

the author, Etel Adnan, was wrong in having Sitt Marie Rose make emotional statements glorifying the Palestinian fighters; because their war was as ruthless, as hungry for power, and they had a macho attitude towards their women which is similar to other militias.

Andree Chedid's novel, "A House Without Roots" adopts a more positive attitude than the other two novels. The female characters are more balanced, thoughtful, economically independent, religiously tolerant and socially conscious. Each one practiced a new profession: law and pharmacy. In politics, their attitudes were visionary and revolutionary. They visualize a future which is secular where civil marriage is practiced and the hybridization of culture is utilized. This novel represents Andree Chedid's idealistic view of Lebanon and the Lebanese woman of tomorrow, of the future.

I shall not dwell long on the three novels written by the male authors. Barakat in "Days of Dust" uses allegorical language to show his disappointment with the Palestinians and the Arabs in general. He emphasizes that they failed to use sacrifice and heroism in their struggle against Israel, therefore, losing the war. Tawfiq Awad is fond of portraying violence in eloquent terms and is more interested in tragic events than un-humanitarian messages. In "Death in Beirut" he gives vivid pictures of corrupt sexuality, male arrogance, women's enslavement and nasty exploitation of the students' revolt in 1970. Both Barakat and Awad end their novels with the protagonists joining the Palestinian fighters, at a time when the Palestinian cause was sacred for the Arabs.

Elias Khoury's novel, "The Little Mountain", presents symbols of surrealistic destruction: street battles, looting, a mob marching to the sea symbolizing, according to Accad, woman or dreams or aimless romantic notions. Fascination by death is one of its recurring themes. Finally, we may conclude from the interesting accounts made by Evelyne Accad, and her detailed analysis of characters and symbols, that a bent toward violence and war is shown in the descriptions and endings of the stories written by men.

The causes of the Lebanese and other wars in the Middle East are complex and intricate, direct and indirect. Evelyne Accad emphasizes perverted sexuality as factors of war in order to show the necessity of a sexual revolution or a general reform in that domain.(4) As an example of her interest in reform and change, she redefines "nationalism" from a feminist point of view. She insists that it should transcend its narrow, patriarchal limits and reflect a sense of unity and love of the

whole nation (5). She also clarifies the meaning of the peace movement by adopting Laure Moghaizel's (6) definition of the term "non-violence", which does not imply a passive, inert attitude but a sustained, energetic and non-violent struggle. Accad's analysis of the Lebanese Problem (p. 27-39) and her explanation of such stereotyped words as "chabab", "zaim", "Shatara", reflect a deep understanding of the Lebanese warlike spirit and of the Middle Eastern mentality.

In our age, militarism has evolved into frightful terrorism. Sophisticated arms, nuclear and chemical weapons threaten the world with imminent extermination. Internationalism as represented by the U.N.O. has created a movement for peace in the form of non-violence, dialogue, negotiation and exchange of views. The worldwide women's liberation movement, supported by a large number of men thinkers and leaders who have been influenced by Ghandi's systems of non-violence, can serve as a great agent for international understanding. It seems true that the novels written by men show a certain approval of war, are less sincere and optimistic than those written by women. However, can we infer from this analysis that violence is an intrinsic trait in men? According to certain researchers, violence may have developed in men during their hunt for food in the primitive periods, while women stayed home to cultivate the soil and take care of babies. The hunting activity may have evolved into organized fighting. Regardless of whether violence is acquired or inherited, it should be our task to help men get rid of it. How? One way is by reading and promoting the works of a new generation of writers whose social research is committed to peace, non-violence and social justice. The author of "Sexuality and War" belongs to that group. *

(1) Evelyne Accad, *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East*, New York: New York University Press, 1990. p. quote by Jean Libis "Le Mythe de l'Angroline."

(2) Ibid. Foreword by Kathleen Barry.

(3) On p. 4-5 of her book, Accad says that creative work "not only include all the various fields - social, political, anthropological, religious and cultural - but also allow us to enter into the imaginary and unconscious world of the author."

(4) Ibid p. 12-26.

(5) Ibid. Foreword by Kathleen Barry, p.x.

(6) Maitre Laure Moghaizel is a prominent Female lawyer and a leading feminist. She is active tapping various channels to secure women's legislative and political rights. Maitre Moghaizel was nominated for this year's parliamentary elections. She is one of the founders of the Lebanese Association for Human Rights, who is active in demanding for human rights in Lebanon. Maitre Moghaizel is also a good friend of Al-Raida. We have published many of her articles and recommendation for women's empowerment in the region.

Illustration from Churches in Solidarity with Women.