

Debate on War

Review of Evelyne Accad's The Broken Mirror and the Death Wish

Rose Ghurayyib

Since 1976, i.e. since the end of the first two-year stage of the Lebanese war which lasted 17 years, many books and articles have been published about the war. Yet much more needs to be written, particularly about the underground causes and the multiple secret hands that wove its threads. The article I am reviewing, written by Evelyne Accad (1) reproduces a debate of nine pages, followed by a commentary of fifteen pages.

Like her book, "Sexuality and War"(2), this article reveals a desire to study and analyze the Arab male's attitude toward war compared with that of the Arab female. Her study contains an analysis of the debate she organized in Tunis in the summer of

1992, before the Gulf war and during the last year of war in Lebanon. In this debate, some twelve women, and about an equal number of men, discussed the Lebanese war, its causes and implications while Evelyne acted as participant and moderator. Those who took part in the debate belonged to the intellectual Tunisian class, though one of the women, Maria (of non-Arab origin) denied being an intellectual (pg. 165). This debate seems to the author, in many ways, exemplary of the position taken by Arab men and women regarding the Lebanese war.

MAIN POINTS OF THE DEBATE

The male participants in the debate, represented by Ali and Hameed,

emphasize the necessity of destroying Beirut, the quintessence of the Arab world. "Beirut = city = woman = prostitute, therefore Beirut must be destroyed." "Beirut = broken mirror = sightless eyes = faulty memory, therefore Beirut must be destroyed". The events of Lebanon signify a decline of the Arab world. War means rebellion against the ugly present, a desire for change and rebirth. Quoting Ethel Houry, author of the "The Little Mountain", Ali wishes that every Arab capital may have the fate of Beirut!

The women's attitude is totally opposed to that of the men. They refuse the idea that change may come through violence and war. The patriarchal system is responsible for war but war has not abolished the patriarchal system. One of the women dared to say that the "Arabs had turned their petrodollars into a brothel" which means that they used their oil income to multiply nightclubs, to make of Beirut a corrupt city, to buy arms for the militias which destroyed Beirut. These women expected hope to come from women who believed in a peaceful change, whose action during the war was much more positive than that of men.

In her commentary (pp.173-188), Accad first explains the sequence: "Beirut - city - woman - prostitute, therefore Beirut must be destroyed"

Beirut = City = Woman = Prostitute



Beirut must be destroyed

Beirut = Broken Mirror = Sightless Eyes



Beirut must be destroyed

by saying that a city in old literature has always been considered as feminine because it is round like a matrix, a womb, surrounded by a fence. Beirut is corrupt and must be destroyed because it is westernized, it is not more westernized than Tunis, but because it represents the triumph of urbanization which is to conservative Arabs an object of hatred. Although Arabo-Islamic civilization is essentially urban, the Arabs feel a nostalgia for the desert, which they glorify as the birth-place of the pure Arabic language and of the authentic Arab life and character. Urbanization means to them a loss of authenticity and of purity, a loss of identity. Here Hameed and Ali cannot but recall the glorious past of the Arabs, their great culture which haunts them, crushes them, because it is inaccessible and is being challenged by another culture whose power fills space. The conflict between authenticity and impurity, between a great past and a miserable present, constitutes the broken mirror. It forms the second sequence, which is parallel to the first and a compliment to it. "Beirut = broken mirror = sightless eyes = faulty memory, therefore Beirut must be destroyed".

Accad considers the violent attitude of men, shown through the metaphor of the broken mirror, as the result of their inability to realize their aspirations or to achieve self-realization. It reflects total despair, leading to the death wish or "fascination of death", which Issa Makhoulf detects in the writings of Elias Houry (mentioned earlier), "who endows death with an attractive power, a real charm" (pg. 184).

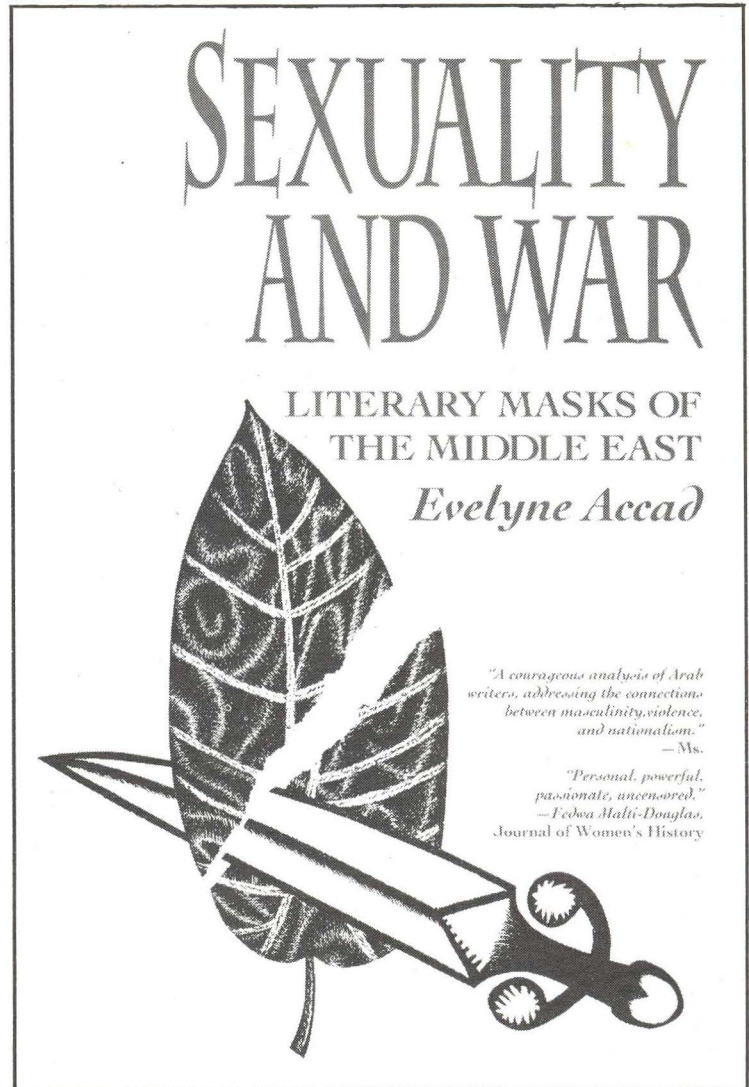
A broken window, a loss of identity, means a condition beyond repair, requiring a total renovation or a new regime. It means a radical change including the abolition of the

patriarchal system, which the Arabs refuse to abolish. Why? What role does the patriarchal system play in a disaster? In the first place, it is a form of unjust, democratic behavior.

Imposing on women a way of life which excludes them from the political field and forbids them to share in the planning and handling of decisive, national questions. It tends to create in them a dwarfish personality, centered around the worship of males, characterized by dependence and submission. It leads them to idolize their boys, to encourage in them the macho, i.e. a feeling of superiority and a tendency to aggression. That is what Aisha,

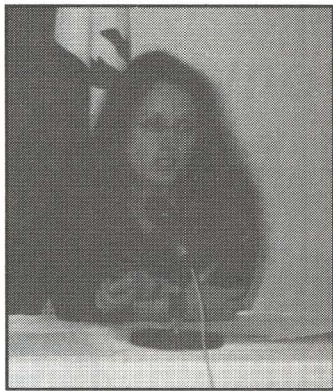
one of the women participants in the debate, tries to show in a brief, timid way, when she says: "The problem lies in us women, in the way we bring up our boys. Do we encourage violence in them?" (pg. 169). Family disorganization, based on the formula of "domination-dependence", falls back on the political scene. The private turns immediately into the political.

The commentary enumerates other reasons for Arab decline besides defective education and unhealthy family relations. The author mentions the effects of colonialism-imperialism, which paved the way





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Evelyne Accad

the change should mean getting rid of certain archaic mentalities, of some leaders' lust for power, of men's entrenched desire for women's enslavement. They want change but they don't know how to do it and what should be changed because they are blind to their defects and ignorant of their needs. Should a modern-minded leader rise and propose a practical, necessary change, they oppose him and thus fall into contradictions".

Finally, this debate and the following commentary raise so many questions and are so rich in suggestions, including psychoanalytic references, that it looks impossible to discuss all their contents in a short review. Accad, a writer dedicated to the cause of peace, dominated by the fear of another war or a generalized armed conflict in the Arab world, is eager to prove that war is a major crime, that "the broken mirror" reflects a feeling of powerlessness, implying a sense of disillusion in Arab youth.

The Lebanese war has proved that real change will not come through violence. The moderating influence of women, successfully presented in the debate, should qualify them to participate fully in political activity •

(1) Evelyne Accad "Le Miroir Brise et le Desir de Mort - The Broken Mirror and the Death Wish" *Mediterranean Peoples*, a quarterly review, No. 58-59, January-June 1992.

(2) Evelyne Accad, *Sexuality and War*. New York. New York University Press. 1990. Also reviewed by Rose Ghurayyib in

for the rise of dictators, the tension between East and West, the accumulation of sophisticated arms which swallows a large share of Arab wealth, the creation of Israel, an expansionist state, in the midst of the Arab world. Another factor is the gradual deterioration of the old Arab societies formed of tribal structures which depended on tribal alliances to control latent violence. We are witnessing the emergence of independent states which build their authority on the destruction of clans.

Yet, in spite of this evolutionary step, the patterns of family relationship resists, moves very slowly, maintains in a destructive society, the mechanism of violence which, in the future, will be difficult to restrain.

VALUE OF THE DEBATE

Its value lies first in its authenticity. It gives first hand information about the involvement of the Arabs in the Lebanese war. It is fairly representative of a section of the intellectual class in Tunis and in many other parts of the Arab world.

It represents a favorable ground for comparison between the point of

view of men and that of women regarding important questions such as war, violence, change, causes of Arab unrest and break-down, etc . . . At the same time, it allows the reader to notice the wide difference in character and demeanor between the two groups. Women seem to be self-controlled, rational, outspoken and independent in their thinking, while men participants are emotional, rhetorical, visionary and superficial. Their ideas are mere repetitions of statements given or written by a Lebanese writer, Elias Khoury, known for his bent toward violence and destruction. It looks strange that this one person should have so much impact on Arab intellectuals of today that his sayings spread far and wide as if they were divinely inspired and his name is mentioned thirteen times in the text. On the whole, the debate reveals clearly the positivism of women versus the negativity of men. Here, I like to give the abstract of a discourse contributed by Maria, one of the women participants in the debate (pg. 165). "I was in Beirut in 1966. Everybody talked about the necessity of destroying the city. This probability meant a desire for change which they thought would come through destruction. In my opinion,