

From the Winner of the Franco-Arab Book Award, 1993

Evelyne Accad 'Blessures des Mots' (Wounds of Words)

Reviewed by Rose Ghurrayib

You know her from the articles and book reviews she has contributed to Al-Raida. Yet, Evelyne Accad is well-known through her own books. They are regularly reviewed in this periodical, thus highlighting, even further, her special interest in Arab women's issues. After publishing The Veil of Shame, L'Excisée, Le Coquelicot du Massacre, Sexuality and War, she reveals, in her latest work, Blessures de Mots, the poignant experience of a daring young woman.

Evelyne Accad won the the Franco-Arab Book Award, 1993 for her book Des Femmes, Des Hommes et La Guerre 1993, Paris, Côté -femmes.

Blessures des Mots (Wounds of words), is her journal of a year spent in Tunisia with "wonderful Tunisian women," some of whom she had met on a previous visit.

These "wonderful women" were a group of cultured young Tunisians whose lives were torn between modern European and traditional Maghrebi

cultures. They felt a burning desire for freedom and displayed a relentless energy which allowed them to divide their time between home, job, extracurricular social activities and feminist interests. Some were widows, others divorced or leading unhappy lives.

They formed a group of satellites around a visiting Lebanese writer and journalist called Hayat, who was none other than Evelyne Accad. In her company, they poured out their grieves, problems and hopes. They discussed stories about militant women writers from Lebanon and other Arab countries. They talked about projects of their own like "al-Nissa," a feminist magazine they published in French, and "The Taher Haddad Club" that organized regular meetings and colloquiums to deliberate important issues.

They discussed the Tunisian constitution promulgated by Bourguiba in 1965, supposedly the most progressive in the Arab world with respect to the personal status

code. This code establishes the abolition of the veil, polygamy, unilateral or non-premeditated divorce and forced marriage. It stipulates the legality of civil marriage and adoption, but it confirms the law which allots a woman half of a man's share in inheritance and forbids the marriage of a Moslem woman to a non-Moslem. Other claims dealt with women's non-representation in the judiciary courts, general administrative offices, and university faculties and staff. They charged that the martial law requiring a woman to obey her husband should be replaced by one of mutual respect between the spouses.

Several other topics were suggested for the next colloquium at the Taher Haddad Club, and these progressive women finally agreed to debate the following basic question: "What kind of women movement do we want for Maghreb?" This issue entailed various sub-issues such as absence of democracy in the workers' syndicates where women's claims were neglected; and, women's silence over physical and social problems like abortion, birth

control, and lack of social interaction between the sexes causing serious psychological problems. Furthermore, analysis of the causes of women's indulgence in jealousy and chattering were discussed from a psychological point of view.

The more conservative members of the group brought up the problem of the influence of fundamentalism on the women's movement, which it accused of westernization. Fundamentalists condemned women's ignorance of Arabic and demanded their return to Arab history for the roots of women's emancipation and of successful family relations.

Hayat, moderator of the meeting, noted that many advocates of Western culture misunderstood Eastern people. They looked down on them and treated them with an air of superiority. She felt a strong desire to do away with this bias by creating a means of rapprochement. Therefore, she suggested that a lecture on American feminism be included in the next colloquium at the Club and offered to give it herself. The suggestion was immediately debated but the group was divided into those in favor and those against. Americanism, to most of them, was an object of mistrust. Yet after long argumentation those in favor won the debate. Hayat felt that her success in this particular case was the climax of her successful activities in Tunisia.

At the appointed lecture she spoke about American feminism as a

flourishing movement with four objectives: First, a democratic one entailing a firm belief in women's right to freedom in accordance with the Charter of Human Rights which proclaims gender equality. Second, an economic objective, i.e. working to improve women's economic conditions through the application of the American law prohibiting discrimination against women in education and work, and stressing equal representation in academic fields. Third, a scientific objective encouraging women's studies on a larger scale and in all areas, especially sexual problems which require an analysis differentiating between acquired and inherited sexual behavior. Fourth, a universal trend which makes this movement non-racial, seeking to reach all the women of the world and, at the same time, taking into consideration ethnic and cultural differences.

Hayat amplified this general plan by presenting a brief history of the movement, its evolution, the rise of Freud's theories and how they have been amended. She spoke about the burden that women have to carry when they perform the double task of home-making and working outside the home. She emphasized the necessity of men's participation in housekeeping and children's upbringing. She also stressed the need for women's active role in legislation and in studies concerning women.

Some members of the audience objected by saying that American

feminism dealt with problems like rape, lesbianism, pornography and others which do not concern Eastern women. The goal of the latter concentrated on obtaining sexual equality while in America it was granted long ago.

That is exactly what American feminism refers to, answered Hayat, when it insists on considering pluralities and recognizing the impossibility of generalizing experiences to all the women of the world. "I just said that this feminism is both universal and local. This precaution, however, does not exclude behavior in every group, in light of modern scientific methods which are universal. Do the women of the Third World consider love and sentiments to be Western imports or superfluous forms of luxury?"

The discussion that followed revolved around the following question: "Does feminism imply an annihilation of woman's identity and her identification with foreign cultures?" The answer to which they agreed was as follows: "Because we, Eastern people, depend to a large extent on Western theories and ideologies in our present evolution, it seems necessary to modify them that they may fit our particular needs. A defensive, negative and hostile attitude towards them would not be productive."

Hayat's year in Tunisia was filled with experience and exchange of ideas which led her to believe that she had found a center of open-mindedness and solidarity among women. She thought it would provide answers to the many

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questions confronting women in the Arab world.

Her hopes were shaken when she discovered that, despite their progressive demeanor, Tunisians still indulged in magic rites and incantations to expel demons from the bodies of hysterical women. Why aren't these rituals used in the treatment of men? she asked. How is it that modern-minded women could still accept these practices and yield to their influence?

Her adventure in Tunisia was not free of difficulties. She was criticized for socializing with men in the neighborhood and for maintaining friendly ties with the American Embassy there. Hayat overlooked the first criticism because of its pettiness. As to her connection with the embassy, it was a natural result of the cultural links she developed with Americans when completing her higher education

and having a teaching position in one of their universities. Criticism was instigated, especially, because of the help and attention she received from the embassy when she was molested by her landlord.

Nevertheless and on the whole, Hayat succeeded in creating an atmosphere of understanding with her Tunisian hostesses because she was willing to consider opposing arguments in her presentation of American feminism and objectively condemn certain imperialistic practices adopted by Westerners.

The Wounds of Words represents a step toward more understanding and friendly relations between people from different countries. It offers a glimpse into the active feminist movement in Tunisia. It shows that Tunisian women have decided to give up silence and burst into words: bleeding words, impressive words, words carrying

weight and energy, a strong arm which can shake mountains without shedding a drop of blood!

The author is a committed writer, poet and musician. She travels all over the Arab countries carrying her pen and guitar, raising the sound of optimism in the midst of pessimism, watching flowers bloom from the blood of massacres, and breaking barriers with words that address everyone without discrimination. Her style takes the form of a narrative with vivid and detailed descriptions, dialogues and genuine comments. In moments of deep emotion, she moves from prose to poetry, especially toward the end of her chapters (see excerpt below).

Evelyne Accad. *Blessures des Mots*, *Journal de Tunisie*, Indigo, Collection Premices, Côté Femmes Edition, Paris 1993.

*I write in the language of love
Accompanied by the rhythm of the lute
The guitar and the drum.
My voice is a song, crossing barriers,
A sweet sound of flute traveling from East to West
No frontiers in words gathered
On the roads of countries that call me
I discover them in the signs and symbols
Deciphered on open pages,
To my desire for comprehension
For communication,
For finding out meanings that burst out in sunlight
Or in feeble candle light,
I invent a melody for each name,
Draw a design for each wound
I give a color for each word
Thousands of rainbows floating
Around the Earth*