

A Hymn of Compassion and Love
**The Scarlet Poppy:
 Massacre in Beirut (*)**

by Evelyne Accad

Reviewed by Mona Takieddine Amyuni

*The line breaks down mending the separation
 "I love you," she murmurs with some reserve.
 She fears to put him off. Her revelation may drift back to the demarcation line, the heart of rupture. (p.5)*

Evelyne Accad starts her war novel in this fashion. She dramatizes a love scene by the beach which does not end in separation as the woman, who is not yet given a name, had feared. When she expresses her true feelings, he starts worrying. He wants her to go back with him to the world of daily chores, of work and responsibilities. She muses, *what is the meaning of work, of a road, of a life without love?* They walk side by side, separated now. A wall stands between them, silence prevails. Communication, suddenly, becomes impossible. She runs in the wind, the tempest carries her to the sea, far from the shore. He stands behind. He calls her with all his strength. In vain! It is too late, he has lost her.

The scene expands at the end of this first episode. The demarcation line now separates not only the first couple we meet, but Accad's countrymen, as well. Her heroine attempts to understand the real causes behind so many walls erected between men in her own country, Lebanon, which had been torn apart by a bloody war since 1975, but also in the world at large.

Musically, in "theme and variations" technique, Accad probes into the issue of violence through different scenes situated mostly in Beirut, but also in Chicago where her first heroine lives. We learn later in the novel that she is called Hayat (Life) and she stands, indeed, for the will to live, to struggle, to construct. Hayat, a professor of Psychology, tries to analyze, to understand, to change people's mentalities, to

show her friends how much we are all subjected to the folly of men so long as we accept to erect walls between us, demarcation lines of so many types, sexual, sectarian, political, etc...

Thus, the demarcation line lies, graphically, at the heart of *Massacre in Beirut*. It draws to it, in centripetal fashion, the threads of the novel constructed on several stories which dramatize the lives of several protagonists under conditions of extreme duress: Amal and her young child who try to cross the *death bridge* which cuts war-torn Beirut in two bleeding halves; Najmé, the bourgeois university student who commits suicide with an overdose; Amal's old music teacher who lives in the shambles of the city near the *death bridge*, and who guides mother and child across the bridge with her beautiful song.

Other people also inhabit Evelyne Accad's world. They represent a large sample of the Lebanese society who have refused to submit to the order of hatred and violence. Good, compassionate and generous, they really stand in this novel for a traditional system of values that have allowed Lebanon to survive in spite of a savage war often called a civil war. Yes, a handful of brothers turned enemies have killed each other for long years, across demarcation lines. The majority of the Lebanese, however, resisted in action sometimes, in silence some other times, but they constantly helped each other, unconditionally.

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Thus, Accad's war novel is punctuated by gestures, rituals, music and songs, which preserve human beings' basic fraternity and their will to overcome walls, barricades, and demarcation lines constructed by men's folly. Accad's theme is held in tension between the two poles of love and hatred, of the will of country and people to live and build up in the midst of so much violence and destruction.

Mother and child, significantly called Nour (Light) and Raja (Hope) occupy much space in *Massacre in Beirut*. Their attempt to cross over the *death bridge* sums up Accad's above mentioned theme. We first meet them in the midst of an air attack. Children and mothers scream, bombs fall like rain, panic and chaos prevail. Raja shakes all over, his face distorted by fear. Nour is agitated, she cannot control her heart beats. But her mind is set. She will try to cross the death bridge and find refuge at her brother's who lives on the *other side of the city*, quieter at this stage of the war: *Will they reach the other side, she wonders with anguish. Will they succeed in crossing over the demarcation line, which cuts the city in two, this no-man's land, the empire of terror, of destruction and death?* (p.25)

Nour knows well that many people before her had been killed, sniped at or kidnapped on that bridge. But with great courage, she sets out holding tightly to Raja by the hand. When the shelling increases in intensity, they throw themselves into the entrance of a half-destroyed house. A woman calls them in, and the first series of heart-warming rituals begins as the two women immediately get busy preparing a meal for the big family. With hardly any food left, they manage to cook the traditional *moujaddara* made of lentils, rice, and fried onions. The scene is so vivid that the reader's senses feel it, smell the cooking, and taste the dish. The meal, for a moment, neutralizes the violence outside.

Early the following day, Nour bids her hosts good-bye and gets ready to cross over with her child. Each of the people gathered around her, says farewell with a simple gift and send messages of love to the people out there: tell them we want to resume the good life we've always lived together (p. 63).

Accad's dramatic title *The Scarlet Poppy: Massacre in Beirut* is inserted for the first time in this moving scene which, in contrast, speaks of communion and brotherhood. Her host offers Nour two *mankoushi*, traditional loaves of bread soaked in olive oil and covered with thyme. While the scarlet poppies of Beirut feed on the blood of its citizens, the hands of Nour and the man she hardly knew, are united and olive oil drips from the soaked bread into their fingers. Accad captures, thus, a sacred moment of harmony through the atavistic symbol of the *mankoushi*. We, of course, have all been given bread soaked in olive oil and thyme by our mothers in difficult moments of stress, be it exams at school, or later, in times of mourning.

Elsewhere, during the same trip less than a kilometer long but infinitely stretching out in people's psyche, Nour finds her former music teacher, a majestic figure in the novel, simply called A. (as in all?...). Ritualistically, both women sip coffee and reminisce. Later A. sings for mother and child. Her voice fills the ruined neighborhood sustaining Nour and Raja who walk away: *Let's walk together to erase fear. Let's walk together to erase forgetfulness. Love will allow us to start again...* (p. 71)

The melody penetrates into the ruined walls, the buried corpses, the ashes, the dried-up blood over the stones: *I love you shining in the night. I love your faith in a better world...* (p. 72). The voice extinguishes the bombing, covers up bullets and canons. Hatred and violence are replaced by a melody which speaks of love, tenderness, and harmony.

Some would say Accad's message is naive. But the world fares much better with such messages conveyed through ritual, poetry, and song. Shakespeare knew it well when his demarcation line was erected between those who had music in their souls and those who had not.

Nour and Raja will reach the other side of the demarcation line. The Nours, Rajas and Hayats of Lebanon will destroy the line and rebuild the country, affirms Accad.

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(*) The original French title: *Coquelicot du Massacre*. (Paris: L'Harmattan, "Ecriture Arabe", 1988). excerpts and paraphrases from the novel are in my translation. *Massacre in Beirut* is the abbreviated form in which the title of the novel appears in the body of the paper.