

ETEL ADNAN

Interviewed by Randa Abul-Husn

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When she was seventeen she wanted to become an architect, but her mother was horrified, **it's a man's job** she had said. Consequently, Etel Adnan went to L'Ecole Superieure Des Lettres, a literary school in Beirut. Her mother's attitude and concurrently that of society created a barrier between Etel and her parents, and she dreamed of leaving the country.(1) Eventually, she got a scholarship and went to the Sorbone in Paris and then on to Berkeley and Harvard in the United States of America.

Etel Adnan is a writer and a painter. She discovered her talent in painting later in life, for her mother had discouraged her as a child. She had told her that she was clumsy with her hands and Etel believed her.(2) It was not until she was 33 that Etel was introduced, through Ann O'Hanlon, to the experience of painting.(3)

When Etel went to the U.S. she could not speak English so she decided to paint. **They did not teach me Arabic in French school, so I said I would also paint in Arabic. I found painting to be an international language beyond languages.**

Etel Adnan, the writer, is also a novelist, essayist and a poet. She writes in English and has composed in French. She says that she likes writing but

had not planned on a profession in it. **I still like architecture. It is complete, both socially and visually. Writing, although complete in a different way, is sometimes more like storytelling.**

In painting she expresses the happy side of herself and in writing and poetry, the tragic side. If you notice, **I did not paint the Lebanese war, she explained, but I wrote about it.** She is always and constantly negotiating what she calls the two poles,(4) the two cultures of her birth as the daughter of a Greek Christian mother and a Syrian Moslem father, in addition to the heritage of having been brought up in Beirut. She has had some struggle with her Arab identity, and in many ways still does.

Etel writes her discontents with history, wars, society, and gender relations. She uses each language and its corresponding culture as her battle ground. Towards the end of the 50s, she stopped writing in French for a while as a symbol of protest against the French occupation of Algeria and in support of the Algerians in their struggle for independence. **I like English, I prefer it to other languages because I find it more adventurous, and it has a beautiful sound. I like languages just as I like colors.**

Etel told me that when she began writing poetry in the 60s & the 70s, her poems converged on political issues. She addressed herself to the Palestinian issue, **which was an Arab problem**, she said. Her recent poems are more personal. **There isn't much that I can say about politics now. Ten or twenty years in history are not much. Some of the details may have changed, but in general, they do not**, she said. **For instance, the French started the crusade against Islam, followed by the German and British. I don't think this has changed, it is only presented in a different way. Terms may have changed but the facts remain the same.**

It was only recently that Etel made her peace with France, the French language and culture for their colonial overbearing on the cultural identity of their protege. **I wanted to settle my account with France. I loved Paris as a city and I resented it because of its colonial system, a system that destroyed the identity of the people** (that were colonized). **I discovered that it did not have to be a problem. I can enjoy the things that I like about France and reject the things that I dislike.** In her book **Paris, When It Is Naked**, Etel made her peace with France after years of residence in the U.S. (now travels between Paris, the U.S. and Lebanon). **Paris, When It Is Naked is the testimony of a lover whose conscience is stricken, whose awareness has been pierced by the fruit of other knowledge and experience. The lover is Adnan herself, the object of her desire is Paris and the forbidden fruits are her past and present allegiances.**(5) **I have solved one of the most important problems in my life,** she said at the end.

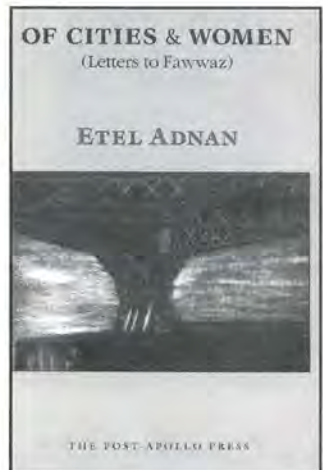
The idea of her other recent book, **Of cities and Women (Letters to Fawwaz)**, reveals Etel's sensual disposition when dealing with international issues. The idea began when Fawwaz Trabulsi, a close friend who had an Arabic magazine in Paris (Zawaya) had asked her to write an article about Feminism. **I told him that I did not want to write an academic paper because women cannot be confined to theory. I told him that I**

was going to Spain and will send him a letter because it is a free form of writing. In a letter you are freer, you can wander around, and you can contradict yourself. So I sent him a letter from Barcelona on June 5, 1990. When I came back to Paris, I discovered that his magazine had gone bankrupt and been shut down, but I was already interested in the project. I told Fawwaz that I would send him letters from different cities as I visit them. Hence, I wrote him from Scapulas, an island in Greece; Moursia, where Ibn Arabi was born; Amsterdam; Berlin; Beirut (2 letters) and Rome on August 7, 1992. These letters compose her book, *Of cities and Women*.

I wanted to know Etel's connection between women and cities: **When you**

write you discover what you think. I think cities are ideal places for women because women are freer and can escape there. In villages, they live under close surveillance by their communities. Cities are more dangerous for women and therefore good experience.

I asked Etel if she was suggesting any specific feminist themes in her book, she replied that in her search about cities, she had not discovered a message. **I discovered that women like men are different. Some are freer than others. Women are oppressed and men too,** she said! **You cannot think of one without thinking of the other. It is a relational problem and therefore, a social problem. If you want to change the life of women you have to change society.**



Al-Raida extends special thanks to Ms. Nadine Bekdash of the Gallerie Janine Rubeiz for making this interview possible, and for helping us make contact with prominent women artists.

(1) Helen Khal. 1987. **The Woman Artist in Lebanon**. Beirut: The Institute for Women Studies in the Arab World, Beirut University College. pp.97.

(2) Ibid.

(3) Ibid.

(4) Ammiel Alcalay. Our Memory Has No Future. **The Nation**. March 7, 1994.

(5) Ibid