

The Politics of Verbal Conflict

Evelyne Accad's

Blessures Des Mots: Journal de Tunisie

Cynthia Hahn

"There are so many injuries, so many scars on the words, so many wounds in the dance, rhythms of a silent, deaf earth. Grieving for this pain, I gather life in."(1) In this excerpt from *Blessures des Mots: Journal de Tunisie*, the "I" is Evelyne Accad as politically engaged writer, metaphorically 'gathering life' from the sorrow of suffering. This novel, as well as Accad's other fictional and critical works, is structured around the expression of a personal politics. (2) "Maux" (injuries) in the French text, is poetically associated with its French homonym 'mots', in this passage linked to 'wounds' and 'scars'. "Mots" and "maux", or the association of language and suffering, are omnipresent in this novel, confirming its principal themes of verbal conflict and the possibility of conflict resolution through self-expression. This conflict of language is referred to in one poetic text in the novel in which the narrator calls forth women of various towns in Tunisia, generalizing the source of conflict: "...all these women, each with scars in their words, open wounds in their heart, tears in their writing, cries in their song, voices which call out, grow stronger, tear, pierce the indifference of heaven, light a thousand fires of rebellion and hope" (p. 25, my translation). The progression in this poem from individual "scars" in the

women's words representing past suffering to the resulting "fires of rebellion and hope" is a positive political statement about societal transformation growing out of women's expression of suffering, through song and in writing.

'Gathering life in' for Accad is a process which involves writing about painful experience in order to transform the injury into an expression of truth and with it, to emphasize the power of self-expression to heal the self and society. In the novel, she juxtaposes examples and interpretations of injustice with examples and discussion of the ideal, inserting her political view which promotes cultural tolerance and a non-violent reconstruction of social identity. Accad's fictional work contributes in this way to the development of a political discourse which validates literary examination of the personal experience and links it to the resolution of personal and societal conflict.

For the Lebanese author and scholar, Evelyne Accad, "the personal is political"(3). Accad's political views, expressed in *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East*, can be summed up as the need to counter Western liberal particularism (4) by combining the concepts of na-

tionalism and feminism to recreate a Lebanese cultural identity. These concepts, "Lebanism" ("...electing to belong to a culture conceived as pluralistic, and as accepting of other's differences"), as well as 'femi-humanism' (a movement of societal rebuilding with the participation of men and women, "...working with a reformed nationalism stripped of its male chauvinism, war, and violence..."), form the basis for a political agenda found in Accad's fiction and critical writing (*Sexuality*, 25-26). Accad's juxtaposition of the personal experience with discussion of issues of collective importance strengthens her fiction by contextualizing the political within the dimension of the personal. As in her other novels, the author of *Blessures des Mots* constructs a multidimensional narrative incorporating poetic, descriptive, interpretive and dialectical voices to express multicultural intolerance and gender-based societal and interpersonal conflict.

Evelyne Accad attests to the autobiographical nature of the "Journal de Tunisie"; she has stated that her first two novels are also based on much personal experience.(5) The firsthand account invites reader empathy by personal identification, while Accad chose to maintain some narrative distance through the use

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of third person narration in all of her novels. The use of the third person also provides the reader with the distance necessary to see the characters in a larger political context. The main character, Hayate, like Accad, is a Lebanese and American professor of feminist literature, who conducted research in Tunisia in 1984-5. Her support of cultural tolerance, "Lebanism", is sharply contrasted with the intolerance of different cultures and perspectives she witnesses among Tunisian feminists in *Blessures des Mots*.

Tunisian feminists have also recognized the destructive nature of intolerance expressed in their society. Tunisian psychologist Emna Bel Haj Yahia, along with Nadia Omrane, in their article entitled "Balayer devant sa porte" for the second issue of *Nissa*, express their dismay that discrimination continues even among feminists of their society who do not often recognize and fight against the cultural intolerance they have learned: "That we are the designated victims of discriminatory attitudes does not protect us from adopting them as well, and our denunciation of this discriminatory against us loses all credibility if we are incapable of taking a critical look at ourselves and fighting against the intolerance that remains inscribed in our laws, is written in our newspapers, shows itself in our streets or takes place behind closed doors."(6) Diversity and plurality of perspective, though publicly endorsed by Tunisian feminists in formal debates and articles in their new journal, *Nissa*, is shown (through the novel's ac-

count) to be difficult to apply. *Nissa* published just eight issues, and in the novel, Accad notes the internal dissension of members, a leading cause of the demise of this publication and ultimately the women's group altogether. Their expressed desire for multicultural tolerance which is often not achieved, is witnessed through the story of dissolving relationships in Accad's novel and historically confirmed in published articles on the subject by the same feminists.(7)

Difficulties involved in expression of the self, through written and spoken language and dance, is at the heart of this novel. Internal squabbles regarding the creation of the new women's publication, *Nissa*, one character's short-lived self-destructive foray into creative writing and her critique of Hayate's work, the unsympathetic, critical atmosphere of a conference on feminism in Tunisia, discussion of Arab universities' research restrictions, heated debates concerning current world conflicts, group criticism of one character's original skits on a sexual theme, verbal arguments, gross stereotyping and slander, Hayate's difficult deposition of a formal complaint of assault against her landlord, problems with telephone communication... even the title, *Blessures des Mots*, emphasizes that the main conflict in this novel is expressed through language emphasizing the intolerance of difference.

We can interpret this latest novel in light of the political concepts outlined in *Sexuality and War*, de-

spite the fact that *Blessures des Mots: Journal de Tunisie*, is not set against the background of war in Lebanon, as are Accad's other novels. References are frequently made to Lebanon and the Israeli-Syrian war in the third novel, in order to compare and contrast Hayate's perspective with that of Tunisians she encountered. For example, whereas Hayate advocates a march for peace such as one planned in Lebanon, one of the Tunisian feminists, Nayla, interprets this call to action as a protest march at the Syrian embassy in Tunis. Hayate's explanation of her point of view falls on deaf ears:

I would have liked to organize a march for peace and not a demonstration against a regime... I understand your denunciation, don't think that it will have a real impact or lead to a solution for Lebanon, for those suffering there, on both sides...peace marches...have united people, calmed them. They have filled a crowd of desperate civilians with love and hope...they promoted the belief that the country can be reborn for its ashes. In the current absurd chaos of Lebanon, a success albeit symbolic, is a great step forward. So won't you join us? (p. 122, my translation)

The political opinion expressed by Hayate is one of cultural tolerance; she calls for an end to suffering on both sides and promotes unification and the rebirth of a country. She advocates the power of planned political action, its symbolic importance which can be used to fuel hope and love involved in rebuilding a peaceful society. Hayate's growing experience of personal estrange-

ment from others in Tunisian society is paralleled with references to the growing internal dissent of communication due to a general fear of others and intolerance of individuality as the basis for every interpersonal and societal conflict mentioned. The tension created reminds us of the forementioned concepts of cultural tolerance and the non-violent establishment of cultural identity which are emphasized by Hayate's contrasting voice of pacifistic, non-judgmental interaction and action she proposes.

The journal *Nissa* in the novel gives a framework to the debate of varied political perspectives. One of these debates contrasts the reaction of two women to the war in Lebanon. Imane praised by Hayate, had organized a march for peace along Beirut's line of demarcation. The march, supported by both men and women, did not take place due to excessive bombing. It then became a symbol of collective unity, demonstrated by the signatures of thousands on a long banner for peace, stretched along the line in their place. Hayate concludes: "On peut tuer les gens mais ni les mots, ni la foi" (p. 91). Some Tunisian feminists in the novel interpret this as a failed initiative and laud instead the action of Sana, a seventeen year old Lebanese woman who sided with the Syrians and threw herself against Israeli tanks in a suicidal act that gave her martyr

status. The Tunisian population in the novel celebrates her act, as the media claimed it to be an effective public display of selfless attachment to a worthy political cause. Hayate's story of Imane which demonstrates non-violent political action balances this attitude by providing specific alternatives to the continuation of death and destruction. This example then gives rise to a dialectical discussion of the larger issues -- the male-controlled media which celebrates acts of violence and ignores the less dramatic peace initiatives (p. 92). The power of public opinion, which causes self-censorship even within the pages of *Nissa*, is a controversial issue.

There is a strong contrast between the growing solidarity of close women friends in the novel, and the mounting atmosphere of suspicion and rupture in the group caused by misinterpretation of or lies about Hayate and others, with the emphasis on the latter, hence the title, *Blessures des Mots*. The character Aida in the narrative is abstracted in Accad's poetry to a symbol of the politically engaged, self-aware Tunisian woman, "Femme de Tunisie... criant la rage de vivre, la soif de liberte..." (p. 10). Hayate's relationship with Aida is one example of the political principles Accad supports -- cultural tolerance and the non-violent affirmation of cultural identity. Rima, another character who agrees with Hayate's perspective,

comments: "Things change slowly; it has to start with the women among themselves. The support that we give each other is a strength that allows us to have an impact on areas dominated by men. Progressively, we will change things, influence public opinion" (p. 93-94). Evelyne Accad's emphasis on the possibility of positive change through self-expression perhaps best characterizes her writing; despite the verbal conflicts of this novel, we know that the novel itself is an expression of suffering resolved through the power of the written word. She writes of her character Rima: "You have given a voice to her pain/ Through words anguished and innovative/ you have described the woman who dared / the march reconciliated the irreparable" (p. 119). Giving a voice to the pain links "maux" to "mots" and accomplishes a reconciliation through the dual action of "grieving" and "gathering life in," a process for personal and societal transformation.

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- (1) *Blessures Des Mots: Journal de Tunisie*. Paris: Indigo and Cote-femmes, 1993, p. 63. Hahn's translation
- (2) Major work include *L'Excisee*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1982; *The Excised*, Burner, Wash. D.C. Three Continents Press, 1994; *Coquelicot du Massacre*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1988; *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East*. N.Y. New York University, 1990; *Des Femmes, Des Hommes et La Guerre*. Paris: Cote-femmes, 1993 (Prix France-Liban, 1994).
- (3) Personal interview. Urbana, IL, 1989.
- (4) Accad's "écriture engagée" counters Western liberal particularism, a form of cultural relativism Kathleen Barry refers to in the preface to Accad's *Sexuality and War*, p. ix.
- (5) Evelyne Accad confirmed this in a personal interview, September 2, 1994, Milwaukee, WI.
- (6) See Emma Bel Haj Yahia and Nadia Omrane, "Balayer devant sa porte", *Nissa*, No. 2, May 1985, p. 8, my translation.
- (7) Already in November of 1985, four of *Nissa*'s founders resigned due to internal conflicts. Their statement in issue 4 documents this. Azza Ghanmi, Zeineb Guehiss, Nadia Hakim and Neila J'Rad, "Nissa: Notre desillusion... l'expérience de 4 co-fondatrices du journal", *Nissa* (No. 4, November 1985), p. 3. Also see Rachida Ennaifer, "Les Femmes au pays de Saladin," *Tunisiennes en devenir*, 2. *La Moitié Entière*, AFUJRD, Collection Enjeux, Tunis: Ceres Productions, 1992, p. 171. The first Tunisian women's group formed in 1939, called today the National Union of Tunisian Women, U.N.F.T. The women's group of the Tahar Haddad Club was founded in 1978. It is no longer active and their journal *Nissa* lasted but one year (April 1985-April 1986). Also see the articles in *Al-Raida*, Volume 3, No. 33, August 1, 1985: "Women at the Tahar Haddad Club" p. 7-8. "Nissa, A New Women's Journal", p. 8-9. "The National Union of Tunisian Women," p. 9. The most sweeping reforms for Tunisian women occurred in 1956, when President Bourguiba did away with the veil and polygamy, while adoption, abortion, contraception and mutual consent divorce were allowed as part of the new Personal Status Code. According to Tunisian feminists I spoke with in 1993-94, because of these reforms, which to date are still more comprehensive than their North African neighbors, the government is able to turn a deaf ear to women's demands for more rights. They also fear the growing conservatism due to the influence of Islamic Fundamentalists. Some women experienced repercussions this election year (1994) for signing a petition against political injustice in Tunisia.

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