

“In War, I Discovered the Resilience of People”

An Interview with Dr. May Majdalani, Psychologist Conducted by Hania Osseiran

Hania Osseiran: Could you describe your overall situation before the war in 1975?

May Majdalani: I left Lebanon before the war began, in 1969. I had married a U.S. citizen and we went to study and live in the U.S.

HO: So, your reason for leaving the country was not due to the war, but due to marriage?

MM: Yes.

HO: Can you tell us something about your educational background and socio-economic status?

MM: I was born in 1945, and started my education at the College Protestant until the third intermediate, after which I continued at Nazareth until the Baccalaureate. I entered AUB in 1961, where I received my B.A. and M.A. in Psychology. I started working as the director of a school for mentally retarded children after graduation. Four years later, I got married and moved to the United States. My husband was accepted at Yale, and I was lucky enough to do my internship there. I wanted to resume my Ph.D. work, but at that time I was told that getting a Ph.D. was necessary only if one wanted to pursue a career in academia, rather than getting into clinical work. For the latter, I was advised that I should get my internship and supervision and I chose to do so. I studied child and family therapy under the supervision of a Yale professor of child psychiatry.

HO: What was your vision or plan for your life before the outbreak of the war? How did you expect that your life would unfold?

MM: The war didn't really influence my plans, because I was not here. When I came back in 1981, I believed that Lebanon was still the same. However, upon my return, I discovered that I couldn't get adjusted to the community. I am not sure if the war had anything to do with it, or if my difficulties stemmed from the fact that I had lived abroad for such a long time and married an American. In retrospect, I guess the war had a lot to do with it, because it upsets the values of people. I reconsidered for a long time whether or not it was better for me to stay abroad. This definitely affected my career in Lebanon.

HO: You never considered living in Lebanon?

MM: Yes, I definitely considered living in Lebanon! My husband and I had gone to the US to finish our studies with the

intention of coming back to settle here. But circumstances and the war decided differently.

HO: How did the war affect you, both positively and negatively, as a psychologist and as a person?

MM: As a person, experiencing the war was a puzzling and disappointing eye-opener. I couldn't understand or accept the violence that I saw around me. I still can't; I couldn't understand the logic. I saw myself and my family, like many others, constantly running, hiding, and being scared. I couldn't accept that people could do that to each other. It always seemed to me that there had to be reasons much deeper than the confessional and political ones on the surface.

A positive effect, if one can call it that, of the war was that it clarified my interests and goals. It gave them direction and made them more tangible. I have a hypothesis that I am still working on: Peace starts within oneself, then spreads to the immediate surroundings, *i.e.*, the couple, the family, then the friends and the community, and eventually, if a whole community feels at peace, the risks of war erupting will be significantly diminished. This hypothesis led to my involvement with movements of peace, with movements working on domestic violence and its effects on each member of the family unit. My profession helps me greatly in this; I believe that working for peace is more than non-violence. While the latter is a negation of something, the former is a useful and active approach.

The war also had a positive effect in that I learned a lot from something terrible; I wish the war had not happened and that I had still learned all that it taught me, but I am sure I would have learned things in a different way.

HO: In your experience, did women react to war differently than men did?

MM: I saw women during the war essentially concerned with the survival of the family, and thus, helping in every way they could. If men were not fighting, often they would brave the dangers of the bombing to go to their jobs and make sure the family was provided with the necessities of survival. I think each one of the genders did as much as they could in their respective traditional domains in order to achieve a common goal: survival.

Although I work on issues connected with domestic violence and I think that women are often the underdogs, I do not tend to view the situation rigidly, *i.e.*, men *versus* women. We are all human beings; each of us is born with certain capacities, personalities, strengths, weaknesses, reactions, etc. I think that war showed me that I do have certain strengths, but it also helped me recognize different kinds of strengths in others. I never thought I could experience fear in such intensity, some-

times in ways that made me react irrationally. But I also never suspected that in spite of very dark moments, I could keep up hope so strongly and help others to do so. I suppose I discovered first-hand the resilience of people, the many capacities they have which they do not use, or which we do not notice in them at other times. One day, I did something foolish. I just could not go on waiting out the bombing passively. So I decided to take my car and go through the autostrade to Ras Beirut, where life was more active. I can't describe my fear crossing the empty autostrade where the electric poles were lying in the middle of the road, near the craters left by the bombs. I could hear nothing except the sounds of the bombs. I got to the port area where the regular road was detoured. I kept losing my way and I started panicking, until I saw a soldier. I drove straight to him and started shouting, my voice and hands were shaking and the most extraordinary thing in my life happened. The man looked at me, smiled and said 'Calm down now and tell me about yourself.' No words could have had a more sobering effect! Without any effort or training, that soldier displayed such know-how on how to deal with the situation. I think this had a lasting effect on my way of looking at people and their potential.

HO: What impact did the war and its after-effects have on your views concerning national and confessional identity? Power and powerlessness?

MM: The war experience awakened me to the meaning of a nation. And I felt that in fact, despite all the patriotic songs we have, we do not behave in a way that shows that our allegiance is first to the nation. I may be wrong in my perception, and hope you can convince me otherwise!

As for our confessional identity, my previous beliefs were shattered, too. It seems to me that people were free to worship in their own way, according to their convictions. I couldn't understand how people could kill in the name of God, and I am convinced that this is not the real reason behind all the killing, although it might appear to be.

As for power, it can mean different things to different people. Similarly, it can also manifest itself in different ways. The power of the strong, it seems to me, is silent and calm; it resides inside a person, it requires few movements or words. The power of the insecure, on the contrary, is usually just a "show of muscles", as they say. This kind of power manifests itself with noise, shouting, speeding, threats, aggression. I remember a particular experience during the war; we were stopped by a 14-year-old kid with a gun who asked for our papers. My companion wanted to joke him out of it, referring to the age of the kid. The kid got ready to shoot and he would have if we had not quickly changed our attitude and showed him respect and obedience. He was powerful. But, is that power? I suppose it is a kind of power one needs to take into consideration, after all, it can kill!

Powerlessness, in my opinion, is one of the most destructive feelings anyone can experience. Imagine the feeling of being caught in a situation that does not coincide with your principles,

values or aspirations in life and sensing you can do nothing to escape from it. Imagine knowing that you will not be listened to and that your needs will not be taken into consideration. I think this is a shattering experience which can have profoundly negative consequences on an individual's self-esteem and behavior, and thus cause depression and/or anxiety.

HO: In your view, have women's roles changed as a result of the war?

MM: Yes, the roles of many women have changed for a number of reasons. One, because they were asked to carry certain responsibilities and duties during the war, and having seen that they could carry them successfully, many women continued with them. Family and society, which used to object to women having some of these duties, lost reasons for their objection because women performed these responsibilities well in a time of need. Secondly, the economic consequences of the war demand that women share in the financial responsibilities.

HO: Do you think that the war had any impact on women's role in the power structure of Lebanese society?

MM: Obviously, there are more women in the political arena now than before, but unless I am mistaken, their investiture was not the result of a political program. But at this point, I feel very uncomfortable discussing the political aspect of the question. I would rather focus on the economic and social aspects. From the economic viewpoint, I see more women in the work arena, making good salaries and contributing significantly to their own and the families' well-being.

As for the social aspect, I feel that we are now at a very important cross-roads in Lebanon: there are two currents, and the one that prevails will shape the future. One current is for women, as a specific sector of society, to start facing the reality of their existence, what they want, and deciding what price they are willing to pay to achieve their goals. Another current is to go the more traditional way, accepting and exploiting the role of woman. These are two extreme currents, and people seem to choose anything in between as long as it satisfies their needs. I suppose what I am trying to say is that what is needed is an attitude of fulfilling potential, facing reality and taking responsibility, *versus* an attitude of avoiding, depending, and hiding behind false excuses.

HO: If you could sit and talk with women in other war-torn societies, such as Bosnia, Rwanda or Chechnia, what would you advise them about surviving a war and its after-effects?

MM: I don't know. I guess I would tell them 'Take situations as they come and make the best of each moment. Don't fall prey to discouragement and don't worry about possible future misfortunes. Be prepared as much as possible, but then trust that each moment of time will take care of itself. One never knows where good fortune comes from and when it will come. But if it doesn't, one can still be satisfied knowing that he or she did his or her best.' But most of all, I suppose I would advise them to never become skeptical or lose faith in human nature.