

# SCHOLARSHIP... NOVEL WRITING AND MUSIC

*A conversation with Evelyn Accad*

by Laurie King-Irani

Although Dr. Evelyn Accad is a renowned scholar, a talented novelist and a gifted singer and songwriter, the predominant trait one notices after two hours of talking with her is not only her intelligence, creativity and sensitivity, but first and foremost her bravery. Dr. Accad's personality is a rare combination of intellectual courage, deep empathy, emotional vulnerability and spiritual strength. She is not afraid to ask any question, to experience any feeling or to explore any emotion, whether in herself or in the other. This unique amalgam of qualities and gifts has enabled her to be a pioneer in her academic work, her art, and her personal life.

Evelyn Accad is currently Professor of French Comparative Literature at the University of Illinois in Urbana, Illinois in the United States. She does not lead the conventional life of a cloistered scholar, however, as a quick glimpse at her impressive curriculum vitae reveals. In addition to teaching courses and writing scholarly articles about modern French Literature, the role of women in Francophone Literature, postmodern criticism, and feminist theory, Accad has also penned three critically acclaimed novels, *L'Excisee* (1982), *Coquelicot du Massacre* (1988), and *Blessures des Mots: Journal de Tunisie* (1993). At present, she is working on two books which do not fit into pre-existing academic genres such as analytical research or autobiography. The first, entitled *From Setting to Rising Sun*, is a collection of interviews Accad has conducted over the past ten years with a wide variety of women throughout the Arab world. The second book is based on a journal that Evelyn Accad has been keeping since March of 1994, when she was diagnosed with cancer: a malignant tumor was discovered in her left breast. Entitled "My Night with Cancer", the book details every aspect of Accad's battle with the disease (see Accad's moving article, "My Journey with Cancer", in *Al-Raida*, Vol. XI, No. 67, Fall, 1994, pp. 10-13).

During Accad's July visit to Beirut, the city of her birth and childhood, she shared with us some of her views on the artistic process, the role of the artist in society, and future trends in feminist studies. No matter what the topic of discussion, Accad's basic principles and ideals shone through. She strives for mutual understanding, the widening of consciousness and the deepening of compassion in every project she undertakes. The ordeals she has recently confronted, which might have left many women bitter and broken, have instead strengthened Accad and enabled her to transcend all forms of pettiness. She brings a spirit of love, empathy and harmony to all of her endeavors.

Evelyn Accad was born in Lebanon in 1943 to a Swiss mother and a Lebanese father. She grew up during Beirut's golden era, a period of relative peace and prosperity that witnessed a rich cross-fertilization of East and West. In the cosmopolitan atmosphere of 1960s Beirut, the young Accad explored a variety of ideas, musical trends and art forms. A growing concern with women's issues in general, and a dissatisfaction with women's status in Lebanon in particular, contributed to her decision to pursue an academic career in the United States. In 1973 she received her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Indiana University-Bloomington. The topic of her dissertation was the image of woman in the contemporary fiction of the Middle East and North Africa. In 1978, Accad's dissertation was published under the title *Veil of Shame* to critical acclaim; nearly twenty years later, it is still recognized as a pioneering study of literary depictions of the sociological and psychological realities confronting women in the Arab world.

After accepting a teaching position at the University of Illinois at the age of 31, Accad felt a deep desire to write a novel inspired by some of the books she had read on female circumcision in the course of researching her dissertation. It was not her first foray into creative writing; in 1971 she had entered and won a short-story competition. Her entry was entitled "In Between", and dealt with the relationship between two sisters living in two different countries and cultures. Accad recalls that she wrote her novel, *L'Excisee*, in one long stretch during her first year of university teaching. "It was like being in a trance; I wrote and wrote and hardly made any corrections. It was a very spontaneous process, there was nothing studied or forced about it. They say that novelists tend to be emotionally attached to their first works, and in my case, this was certainly true." Accad relates that the novel was so long and detailed that her editor in Paris wanted to cut out substantial parts of the text. She adamantly refused, telling him "I will not excise *L'Excisee*!" The novel was published by L'Harmattan, without any editorial excisions, in 1982. (An English version was published in 1989 by Three Continents Press.)

Now a published novelist and an accomplished scholar, Accad was not able to bask in the glow of her considerable successes. Rumbblings of war in her homeland, Lebanon, did not permit her to enjoy such simple pleasures or peace of mind. In the late 1970s, disturbed at the monstrous violence that had suddenly engulfed the beautiful city of her childhood, Accad began composing and performing songs to communicate her anguish and ease



File File File File File

her pain. "I was so upset and shocked to see my country destroyed and my friends hurt and killed; the only way I could really express the sorrow I felt was through music, and it was quite cathartic to do so. Some people commented that my songs from that period are too sad and plaintive, but it was the healthiest way for me to deal with the war at the time."

Soon, Accad was back in Beirut. She returned in the early 1980s as a Fulbright scholar, but instead of spending her time in libraries, classrooms and seminars, she frequently found herself huddled on the basement stairs with her sister's family as shells fell incessantly on Beirut. In this stressful

and dangerous environment, Accad's second novel began to take shape. *Coquelicot du massacre* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998) is set in Beirut during war-time. The main character is a woman who, with her small daughter, is trying to cross the military demarcation line separating the two halves of the wounded and divided city. She overcomes her hardships with courage, the help of compassionate strangers, and song. Accad produced a cassette tape of her own musical compositions to accompany the book and enrich its meaning by providing melody for the lyrics of songs which appear throughout the book. Although some people might find the mixing of two distinct genres, literature and song, surprising, Accad finds it only natural. "For me, there is no problem in combining my music and my novels; I see writing as a form of music. In fact, whenever I experience 'writer's block' in the course of writing a novel, I pick up my guitar and resolve the problem through music." She had hoped to sell the book and the cassette together as a package, but the publisher did not agree to this unusual arrangement. Accad revealed another unconventional aspect of *Coquelicot du massacre*: its ending was not her own choice and creation, but rather, a collaboration between herself and some friends and family members who had been reading the draft chapters as she wrote them. "I had wanted to end the book on a tragic note, but people around me said 'No! End it on a note of hope!', so I did."

In her third and most recent novel, *Blessures des Mots: Journal de Tunisie* (Paris: Cote des Femmes, Collection Premices, 1993), Accad draws not upon singing and song-writing, but another of her favorite daily activities, journal-writing, to tell the fictionalized story of the year she spent in Tunisia on a Fulbright scholarship in 1985. The novel deals with the personalities and relationships among a group of progressive Tunisian women activists and scholars who come together to found a women's studies journal, *An-Nisaa'*. Accad now realizes that she was



Evelyn Accad: Scholar, Novelist and Musician

fortunate to be in Tunisia at such a crucial period in the history of the North African women's movement. The novel captures all of the excitement of this historical moment, and also describes the problems—personal, social and political—that led to rifts among the women and the journal's demise. Accad admitted that not all of the women she had known and worked with in Tunisia were pleased with the novel. "Of course, the women portrayed favorably in the novel loved it, and those portrayed in a less than favorable light were upset!". Regardless of individuals' personal responses, the novel clearly struck a chord among many of the women Accad had known and interviewed during her year in

Tunisia. In 1995, some of these women, who appear as fictional characters in the book, decided to stage a play based on *Blessures des Mots*. It was an instance of life imitating art imitating life, the textual richness and ironies of which were not lost on Accad. She traveled to Tunisia especially to view the play, and relates that "it was one of the most moving experiences of my life, to see one of my novels staged as a play. I was crying! It is so touching to hear your own words spoken eloquently by an actress before a rapt audience. Even if some of the women gave different interpretations to the characters and to the plot of the original novel, I didn't mind in the least; they brought their own meanings to it — they made it their own."

Noting that novels do not, unfortunately, count as much as researched articles in the world of academe, Accad quickly pointed out that she is able to reach more people through her songs and her novels than she can through her scholarly writings. She gave a compelling example of the different effects of scholarship and art by recounting her involvement in an academic conference in the 1980s, at which she delivered a scholarly paper providing objective criteria for condemning the practice of female circumcision, which Accad terms female mutilation. "After I finished reading my paper, the male scholars and policy-makers present jumped up and attacked me, saying 'It is our culture! You have no business judging it!'. African women who were present immediately and vociferously agreed with the men. A polarization along racial rather than gender lines became very apparent during the final plenary session of the conference: Black men and women for female circumcision and against whites who were asking critical questions about this practice. Later that night, I performed some of my songs about the horrors and injustices of circumcision, accompanying myself on guitar. Many of the African women who heard the songs were crying. Some came up to me after the performance and said that they agreed



with my position, but indicated that in public, they had to be loyal to their men. This experience was very moving for me, but it also left me with a lot of questions I have been trying to answer for the last decade, specifically, why is loyalty more important than the truth? Camus phrased this powerfully when he said, 'between my mother and justice, I choose my mother'. It clearly has something to do with the difference between a mentality based on the individual and a mentality based on the group."

Such questions lead Accad back to her professional field: academia, specifically multi-cultural studies and women's studies. Although she is pleased with recent developments in her own field and in the wider, interdisciplinary field of feminist theory, she voiced some concerns about the relevance of scholarship to those beyond the walls of the academy, and raised questions about the dangers of pronounced politicization of scholarly research, whether from left-wing or right-wing perspectives. She also finds academia increasingly stressful and overly bureaucratized: "all the unending paper-work keeps one away from important work and conversations with colleagues and students!". Concerning the issue of "political correctness", which seems to preoccupy so many people inside and outside of academia these days, Accad says, "political correctness can be extreme from either direction, left or right. The positive aspects of so-called political correctness center on the fact that it has allowed us to introduce a lot of worthy topics and courses that were previously neglected. Also, we have a new generation of graduate students who are highly interdisciplinary and multi-cultural in their personal and professional outlooks. On the negative side of the ledger, political correctness, whether from left or from right, can prevent the search for truth for the sake of truth. It is not good for scholars to have a political agenda. Again, we are up against the 'truth versus loyalty' phenomenon."

Accad is particularly pleased and excited by the new work coming out of the wide and inclusive field of women's studies. "Feminist studies have enriched so many other fields of study — anthropology, literary theory, history, art — feminist theory englobes so many different trends and ideas and connects so many different scholars all over the world. But, I worry about a trend I see in Women's Studies, a trend towards a certain kind of elitism. We in the academy are losing touch with the average woman outside the university. Non-academic women cannot even begin to understand the jargon and theories we use; they feel alienated. Because of her consistent concern to break down artificial barriers and enhance communication and understanding, Accad embarked on a project with the French sociologist, Dr. Paul Vieille, which took her to the most impoverished sections of Cairo. There, she and Dr. Vieille conducted lengthy interviews with men and women who "live in oceans of misery" in an

effort to understand, from their perspective, the concerns and realities of daily life in one of the most important cities of the contemporary Arab world. Accad reports that the women's lives are hemmed in by unbelievably harsh conditions. In spite of this, they are strong, witty, and quite eloquent and insightful in describing the joys and travails of their lives. She mentioned in particular the four hours of testimony she collected from an elderly woman, Um Ashraf, who recounted a childhood spent in poverty, an unhappy forced marriage, problems related to contraception, difficulties in dealing with governmental bureaucracies, political corruption and economic uncertainty.

Accad clearly felt the same sort of connection and empathy with Um Ashraf as she does for the privileged women she met in Tunisia and her colleagues in Urbana, Illinois. In a world characterized by competing groups and divided loyalties, it is clear that Evelyn Accad, scholar, novelist and musician, is one of those rare beings who live in a world without borders, a world without fear. Perhaps this is the source of her ability to face life with so much love and courage.

### *Samples of Evelyn Accad's song lyrics*

#### PERHAPS IT WOULD BE ENOUGH

Perhaps it would be enough  
to have one single word or two interlaced hands  
To turn madness into love  
To turn leaving into coming back  
To change death into life

O South of my country  
O heart of the madness  
Where the child has fallen  
At the point weaned of hope  
At the point where we should have planted love

Perhaps it would be enough to have one gesture  
To have one saying or one symbol  
For the sword to turn into flower  
For the blood to become earth  
For your name to be inscribed in me

O heart of my country  
Heart of the universe  
O center of the earth



Where the camp gave up  
Where we should have given hope

Perhaps it would be enough to have faith  
To reinvent some words  
There where hatred is let loose  
Where the bird is burnt to ashes  
Where my past remains caught

Perhaps it would be enough to write  
One melody or one chorus  
For the screams to become songs  
For the child to become bird  
For man to learn to love all over again

O city torn apart  
O vineyards stained with blood  
O bodies tortured  
O ravaged faces  
Where we should have weaved love

Beirut, 1978

THE CITY IS IN FLAMES

The city is burning twisted with fear and encircled  
with wires  
A blind child is groping for the road of the river  
His hands are getting bruised on the thorns  
The stars have been extinguished consumed by the  
flames of hatred

The woman is looking for a way out  
The woman is scratching with patience the stone that  
hits her  
The woman is holding in her arms a dead child  
The city has become quiet under the ashes

I am screaming for the women sewn under their tents  
I am screaming for the women excised in the gardens  
I am screaming for the bird dying at the crossroads

The South is divided  
Torn from one side of the sea to the other  
The waves are rolling over a shore of blood  
The bird soars and falls in the wind of the plain

Tyre has become quiet under the ashes

Man pounds the earth and man hits his brother  
Man pounds the earth and man kills the child  
The wind is heavy with the dust of hatred and mad-  
ness  
I am screaming out for tenderness  
I am screaming out for love  
I am crying for the bird dying on the crossroad

South of Lebanon, 1980

WE HAVE A CITY TO PATCH UP  
(or She writes what is not popular)

She writes what is not popular  
She unveils hidden problems  
She hits herself on the walls of reason  
Of semiotics and of criticism

She saw the sun of harvest  
She put her heart in a prison  
She took the bird of her novels  
She told it to go, to go to the horizon

Chorus: We have a city to patch up  
The orange tree, the vineyard to  
replant  
The sun above to search for  
Woman to help rise up  
Hope to find again

They will go on holding hands  
They will trace flowers on the roads  
They will plant trees in the gardens  
They will light the morning star

She moves on encircled by canons  
She draws wings to her prison  
She picks up each line of her violin  
She leads the child to the evergreen's dawn

I learnt to sing in your hands  
I wove the thread you stretched out  
I found the words you missed out  
And I wrote, I wrote tomorrow's vision

Urbana, Beirut, Tunis, 1981