

ETEL ADNAN

THE SECRET OF BEING A WOMAN *

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I read Etel Adnan. I meet her sometimes in Beirut. I try all the time to perceive the kind of writer she is, the woman she is. She tells us that her books are the houses she builds for herself, that she settles nowhere, that she lives all over the world in newspapers, railway stations, cafés, airports. Feeling different early in life she writes: "Memories are as fresh as cool water and a cool breeze floats over one's fever".

Her memories take her back to her childhood in Beirut where she lived in an "old big house, with huge windows, lace curtains and a flowerstand painted in green". She remembers Beirut as a magical place flooded all over with light. Her mother was a Christian Greek from Smyrna, her father a Muslim Syrian from Damascus. He belonged to a family where the men served in the Army of the Ottoman Empire. They settled in Beirut at the end of World War I and Etel was born in 1925. Lebanon was a French mandate and French schools multiplied then. Arabic was forbidden in these schools and Etel spoke French as a child. She said later in an interview that she could only express herself in Arabic through painting. Educated in a strict nun's school, she felt that dogmatism occupied the totality of her mental space. She

grew up thinking the whole world was

French and felt alienated from
her natural

like a boy and to wear a boy's hair cut, with her hair cut very short à la garçon, in the latest Parisian fashion. Her mother decided, as well, to have her baptized, while she discovered, simultaneously, the East through her frequent visits to Damascus with her father. They stayed with relatives and she delighted in the discovery of this different world with Muslim feasts, dinners on huge copper trays put on rugs, mounts of delicious sweets brought in from the market by boys carrying them on their heads. In brief, Damascus was the East with all its splendor. There she was a child of city Arabs mixed with Turkish blood and culture, at the door of the Islamic world:

Thus I got used to standing between situations, to being a bit marginal and still a native, to getting acquainted with notions of truth which were relative and changed like the hours of the days and the passing seasons.

Would this "standing between situations" be the basis for Etel's inner freedom, a freedom one feels in all that she writes? This question will be entertained throughout our quest for Etel's identity as woman and writer, and for her own approach to feminism.

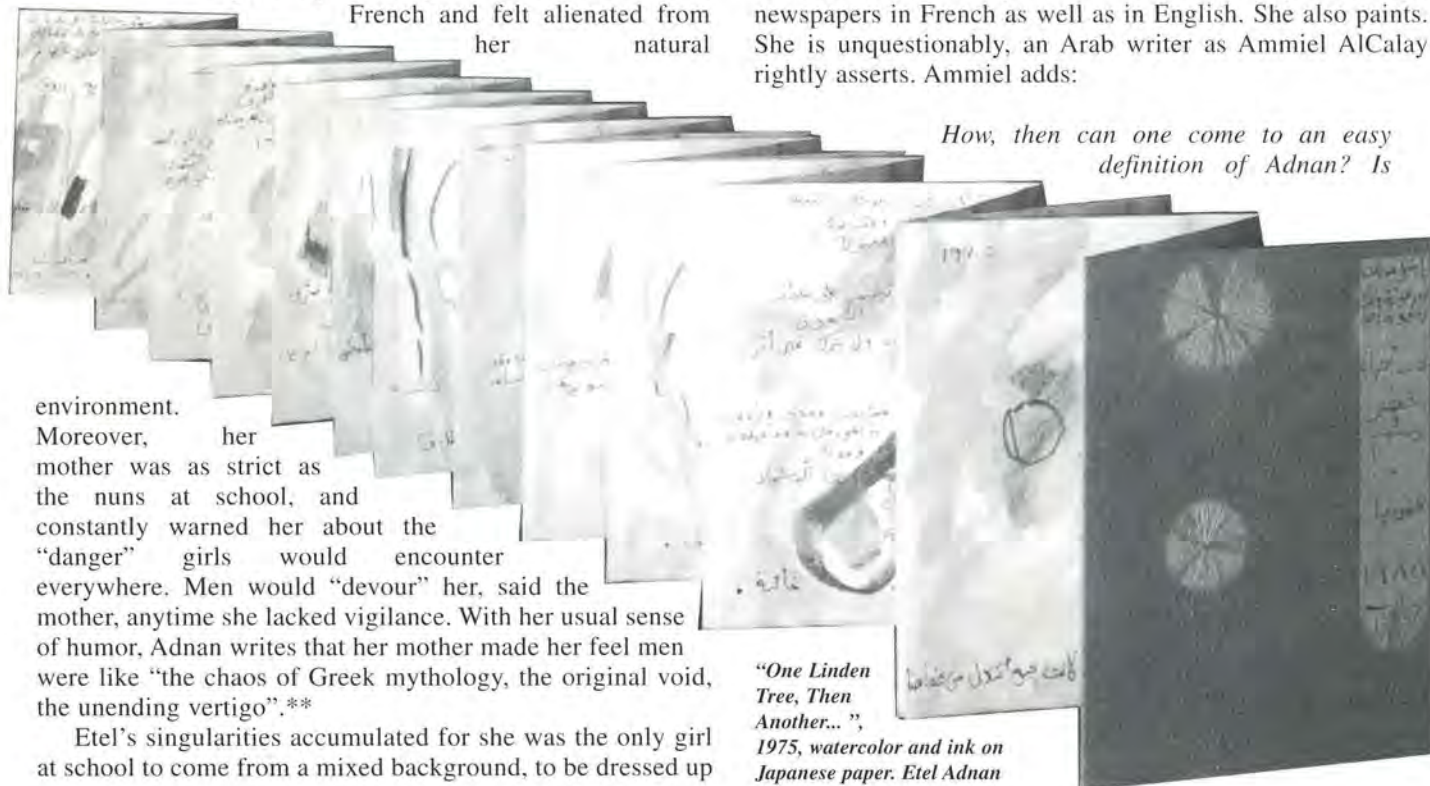
Later, Etel works for a living in Beirut and continues her higher education in Beirut, Paris, and the United States where she has been living for very long. Thus, she writes poetry, novels, essays, literary criticism, articles for journals and newspapers in French as well as in English. She also paints. She is unquestionably, an Arab writer as Ammiel AlCalay rightly asserts. Ammiel adds:

How, then can one come to an easy definition of Adnan? Is

environment.

Moreover, her mother was as strict as the nuns at school, and constantly warned her about the "danger" girls would encounter everywhere. Men would "devour" her, said the mother, anytime she lacked vigilance. With her usual sense of humor, Adnan writes that her mother made her feel men were like "the chaos of Greek mythology, the original void, the unending vertigo".**

Etel's singularities accumulated for she was the only girl at school to come from a mixed background, to be dressed up



"One Linden Tree, Then Another... ", 1975, watercolor and ink on Japanese paper. Etel Adnan

she a Lebanese writer, a French writer, an American writer, a woman writer?

I would answer on Adnan's behalf that she is all these. Her multiple facets enrich her personality and writings, and make any categorization impossible.

Asked by her friend Fawwaz Taraboulsi to contribute an essay for a special issue on Arab Women to appear in the journal *Zawaya*, Adnan sends him a series of letters, composed over two years, during peregrinations from city to city in the world at large. The letters are later published under the title *Of Cities and Women (letters to Fawwaz)*.

In this collection of letters, Etel Adnan hunts, with a marvelous sense of humor, for *the secret of being a woman*. She looks for this secret in the specific atmosphere she finds in the cities she visits. She also identifies city and woman in the wake of world artists who have done the same since atavistic times. Adnan allows herself, as well, free rein while she vibrates with each city she visits. She opens up fully to the manifold spectacles cities offer her, and lives deeply each single experience.

Adnan, thus, walks in Barcelona, looks at women, and marvels at the freedom and harmony they seem to live inwardly and with the world around them. In Marrakech or Beirut, she reflects, women carry malaise in their gait, divisions of all sorts in their looks. In Barcelona, women appear to have control over their bodies and their movements. They make you feel they are whole, that there is unity in their persons, a unity between minds and lives. Adnan immediately universalizes this impression:

They remind me that it is interesting to be alive, to be a human being, and to be part of a precise moment in time and space, that theories get lost when confronted with privileged experience.

The girl who refused dogmatism while growing up would reject all along any sexist categorization, any preconceived theories. Indeed, woman and man are human beings and live specific experiences that make them what they are at a precise juncture in history.

Lived experiences are what basically interest our author who insists by saying a little later:

I've known for a long time that theories must never let go of experience ... it is in women's experience that we might find some general ideas on their condition ... by establishing relationships, all sorts of relationships.

In fact she explores all kinds of relationships between cities, places, streets, people, painting, singing, dancing, to come closer to her quest, for "knowledge acquired by experience goes directly to the heart, to the truth of the matter ..."

Woman is the keeper of memory and of origins. Grandeur is in the memory, in the belonging, in pride, the grandeur of primordial things: the ocean, everyday life, a table, fruits, a

woman. It should be so simple to think about woman! What is woman's "problem" therefore?

Of course, it's a problem of liberty, Adnan answers herself. It's personal, it's social, a secret problem, a problem of society. But it shouldn't be a problem, she adds, for inner liberty doesn't wait for institutions, "freedom is a state of mind". She illustrates her real meaning by taking the example of Ferdaous, a woman the eminent Egyptian feminist Nawal Saadaoui met in prison in Cairo, and interviewed several times. Saadaoui collected the interviews in a book entitled *Ferdaous* where she says that the woman was condemned to death for having killed a savage pimp. When President Sadat heard of the case, he said he would free the woman if she pleaded her own case. The woman refused for she did not want to owe her life to Power.

Adnan gives other examples of freedom as she conceives it, walking into the streets of Barcelona. A poor, fat old woman sings a flamenco, real, authentic, beautiful. Men and women form a circle around her, rich and poor, young and old, listening to the best voice in town. Two or three poorly dressed women start to dance, the crowd is intensely present and happy. The evening stretches on capturing a variety of emotions. Adnan suddenly realizes that in an Arab city, in Beirut for example, men would have made fun of these old and ugly women who sang and danced:

Men from our country do not accept women who express themselves with their body in public ... Here, on this avenue, the women didn't have to be considered "beautiful" to dance in the street. They were respected ... They were free.

Respect, freedom, harmony with self and world, those are the values erected at every turn Adnan takes in her voyage, in quest for the feminine, but essentially for the human.

The search for woman is, in fact, one for man and woman. The "secret" is revealed to be about human beings at large, and world civilizations. Women's liberation is a function of the liberties granted by the societies in which they live, and granted equally to all human beings.

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- * *An abridged version of an essay in Bahithat, Beirut, 1, 1994-1995*
- ** *These biographical details come from a sketch by Etel Adnan entitled "Growing up to Be a Woman Writer in Lebanon", in Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, eds., Opening the Gates, A Century of Arab Feminist Writing. London: Virago Press, 1990, pp. 3-20.*