Gender and Violence in the Lebanese War Novels

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«Children here find refuge in their hopes to die. The fact that death is equated to life is horrifying me. How are we going to deal with this generation in the future, how could we talk about life?»

(Message from Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, working in the Palestinian Balata camp during the recent Israeli raids, March 2002)

Present and Past War Conflicts in the Middle East

This passage from an email message I received from Nadera, an extraordinary woman I met in Istanbul for a conference on women and war, who works with and for women in Israel and Palestine, very much sums up the place we have reached in our present world: children hope to die, the world offers them only despair, injustices are the order of the day... How can it go on like this? How can we go on living in such a world?

The situation in the Middle East, which has been left to fester since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, has degenerated, and is manifesting itself at many levels now, among which the September 11 attacks. Israeli Prime Minister Sharon, who as Minister of Defense in the early eighties spearheaded the invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and was cited as responsible
for the massacres of Sabra and Shatila in the Palestinian camps that left upwards of 2000 Lebanese and Palestinian civilians dead, is now taking advantage of Bush’s war cry, «war on terrorism» to once again massacre the Palestinian people, «to smoke them out» of their crumbling shacks, to crush and annihilate them, an extension of Bush’s campaign against terrorism, or so he thinks.

As I watched the news these last few weeks, the tanks and heavy artillery against the major cities of Palestine, against the camps and the civilians, I was reminded of 1991, of the first air raids of the US forces against Iraq, and I was reminded of Beirut, the summer of 1982. That summer, I remember it so vividly; my sister was in West Beirut, spending most of her nights in the shelter. Israel was bombarding by air, land and sea, civilian targets, an urban center, and innocent victims. Most nights were filled with the sounds of shells crushing, detonating, burning, with the Beirut sky going up in fires, flames, explosions and lights. The massacres in the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian camps were to soon follow exactly in the same manner as today. The bodies of women, children, old people, young people, their throats slit, their stomachs open, blood flowing in the earth, holocaust repeated by the victims of the holocaust, just like today. But today, it is much worse, and the problems have reached proportions beyond words. Today, I feel a sense of urgency and doom I had not felt then.

**Connection Between Sexism and the War System**

Many important studies by women and men in the last few years see a link between sexuality and national/international conflicts. In an article published in an important French review untitled *Alternatives Non-Violentes*, Jean-William Lapierre, well-known specialist on the subject, sees a real « deep connection between masculine predominance and the importance of war. » According to him, most civilizations are based on conquest and war. « The importance of hunting, then of war in social existence, in economic resources, in cultural models (which valorize the warrior exploits), are at the roots of masculine domination and of women’s oppression. » He explains how in so-called « modern » societies, politics, industry, business, are always a kind of war where one (mostly men, and sometimes women imitating men’s behavior) must be energetic, aggressive, etc., to be powerful. It is not only capitalist societies which « carry war like clouds carry the storm, but productivism in all its forms, including the so-called ‘socialistic’ one. In all societies in which economy and politics require a spirit of competition (while its ethic exalts it) women are oppressed. » And Bob Connell sees a relationship between masculinity, violence and war. He says that it is not by chance if the great majority of soldiers are men–of the 22 million people
under arms in the world in 1976, 20 million of them were men. « Most of the police, most of the prison warders, and almost all the generals, admirals, bureaucrats and politicians who control the apparatus of coercion and collective violence. Most murderers are men. Almost all bandits, armed robbers, and muggers are men; all rapists, most domestic bashers; and most people involved in street brawls, riots and the like. »\textsuperscript{iv} But such connection should not be attributed to biology which would absolve masculine responsibility—men’s violence associated to some human « destiny »—but rather to social and cultural factors.

Georges Corm, analyzing the Lebanese war, showed how violence nourished itself on the Lebanese confessional system. Aggressiveness and violence were founded on the prism of the communities. « Once started, this violence became cumulative, especially in a society where the dead had to be revenged, and in light of a failing State. In the kidnappings and counter-kidnappings, the reprisals and counter-reprisals, sometimes spontaneous, sometimes organized, a ruthless amplification of violence followed, where those who had started the death machine disappeared in the anonymity of the militias; in fact, the militias not only committed acts of barbary on the territories they controlled, but often instigated them. »\textsuperscript{v}

Arab society in general, and Lebanese in particular, have always had pride in the za‘im (leader, chief, hero). The za‘im is the macho man par excellence. Not only does he embody all the usual masculine values of conquest, domination, competition, fighting, and boasting, but also that of shatara(cleverness). The Lebanese war transformed the za‘im into the askari (man-with-the-gun, militia-man). The askari used weapons of war to destroy and seize control of one region or of another group. He participated in looting to benefit his clientele of family and to extend the range of his influence. Given the extension of his influence, he built a system of wealth distribution and gains even more power.

The more men desired omnipotence and the control of others, the more weapons were used. The means of conquest were given a value in proportion to their success. The gun, the machine-gun, the cannon—all masculine sexual symbols which are extensions of the phallus—were put forward and used to conquer and destroy. For Adam Farrar, there is a kind of jouissance—pleasure in a sexual sense, no equivalent word in English—in war:

\textit{One of the main features of the phenomenology of war is the unique intensity of experience. War experience is exactly the converse of alienation. In war, the elimination of all the norms of intersubjectivity produces, not alienation, but the most intense jouissance. The machining of events on the plane of}
intensity (to use the Deleuzian image), the form of desire, is utterly transformed. Power no longer consists in the capacity to redeem the warrants of communicative intersubjectivity. It consists in the ability of the spear, the sword, the gun, napalm, the bomb etc. to manifest ‘in a blast of sound and energy and light’ (or in another time, in the blood of a severed limb or a disembowelled body), the merest ‘wish flashing across your mind like a shadow’.vi

Farrar continues, quoting an article by William Broyles in *Esquire* entitled « Why Men Love War, » that it is at some terrible level, for men, the closest thing to what childbirth is for women: the initiation into the power of life and death.vii

In the despair I felt throughout the Lebanese war and feel again today in the turmoil this part of the world is in, two women were an inspiration to me. They have done a lot of research on the connection between sexism and the war system. Their words echo in my ears with such soothing comfort! Cynthia Enloe, in *Does Khaki Become You?* writes:

*Personal relations are so basic to the dynamics which sustain the military’s grip on social policy that militarism cannot be pushed back so long as dominance, control and violence are considered ‘natural’ ordering principles in relations between men and women–i.e. So long as patriarchy is deemed ‘normal’.*viii

And Betty Reardon, in *Sexism and the War System*, explains it well, when she says:

*At a very deep level feminism is recognized as a powerful peace force–not only in the sense of the term as an intervention in a course of violence, but more significantly as a vital energy for peace. Feminism is a force for the transcendence of organized violence, violence rooted in sexism, strengthened by sexist values, and perpetuated by male-chauvinist behavior.*ix

Ten years ago, in *The Nation* Ann Crittenden had already rightfully observed that:

*It wasn’t Iraqi women who ordered an invasion to grab the toys the selfish Kuwaitis wouldn’t share. And it wasn’t Barbara Bush who turned a laudable resistance to aggression into a deadly game of chicken, played with the lives of more than 400,000 young Americans.*x
She quoted the polls by Louis Harris and others, which revealed an incredible gender gap on the issue of military action in the gulf. For example, on attacking Iraqi forces in Kuwait, women opposed it by 73 percent to 22 percent, and on bombing, American women were against it 63 percent to 29 percent, while men had been roughly divided on these two issues, 57 to 40 percent favoring air strikes against Iraq. She had noticed that « these differences were all the more striking in view of the fact that concerning resistance strategies that do not involve loss of human life, women were just as men and opposed giving up some Kuwaiti territory in return for an Iraqi withdrawal. »

I do not know what the polls are today in the US since I have been away for a while teaching at the Lebanese American University and conducting research while on a Fulbright, and since I know that September 11 has had an effect on the American people that will take a long time to heal and has made them feel very vulnerable and afraid, but I can tell you what happened during the war in Lebanon in terms on non-violent active struggle.

**Non-Violent Active Struggle**

Lebanese women and some men were very active in organizing peace marches, hunger strikes, sit-ins, petitions, appeals to international and national peace organizations, conferences and talks between the various communities. Lebanese women often stood between the guns and tried to stop the kidnappings. Wafa’ Stephan documented how « they tried to appease the fighters by paying visits to refugee camps and military headquarters and putting flowers in the nozzles of guns. » Women one day tried to eliminate the militia checkpoints where people were being kidnapped. Going from East Beirut to West Beirut, from Phalangist checkpoint to Progressive checkpoint, they were speaking in the name of spouses, mothers, and sisters. They wanted the butchery to stop. They had built homes, but contrary to what an Arab proverb says about boy’s positive contribution to home and country, the sons had started destroying the homeland. They blocked the passageways dividing the two sides of the capital, organized all night sit-ins, and stormed into local TV stations to interrupt the news in order to have their demands broadcast.

Numerous Lebanese delegations were sent to various conferences throughout the world and to the United Nations. Numerous vigils, sit-ins, conferences, peace marches were organized inside and outside the country. I personally witnessed and participated in one of the actions for peace on May 6, 1984, when I taught at the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World of the Beirut University College, located in West Beirut. The action was initiated by
Iman Khalifeh, a young woman from the Institute who also worked in the kindergarten of the school. She woke up one day, telling herself: « Enough! Enough of this useless butchery! » She worked with the population of both sides of the city. The march was to carry as its sole slogan: « No to war, no to the 10th year of war! Yes to life! » It was to unite both sides of the city at the only cross point, known as the Museum passage or demarcation line. Thousands of people were to participate. Unfortunately, the march was stopped by a « blind » shelling (the word « blind » in Lebanon designates any shelling which does not appear to have precise aims or targets, but which according to many studies knows exactly what and why it is hitting and what areas it wants to control) which resulted in many victims—dead and wounded—on both sides. Iman had declared: « I was not introducing an original thought—it was not a new idea. But it was the cry of the « silent majority » voiced aloud by a people that suffered and endured nine years of ugly war and by a people who carried no arms to defend themselves but struggled to avoid death, violence and ruin in order to live, to build and to continue to be. »

Another significant march was that of the handicapped, organized and carried out by Laure Moghaïzel, a woman lawyer and activist in the Non-Violence movement and human rights in Lebanon, during the summer of 1987. Asked what she meant by non-violence in an interview, Moghaïzel replied:

*I am not a pacifist, I am revolted, revolted against injustices and violence. This is why I use the term non-violent. There is a nuance. Pacifism is a form of passivity, which Non-violence is not. It is a movement which wants peace and which is making itself known through an opposition of unconditional disarmament... Non-violence is a struggle and who says struggle also says activity, dynamism...It is a political action sustained and energetic which refuses to exercise violence. But it should not be confused with love for the other. We are not in the era of Love. When there is conflict, there is struggle. Non-violence is a theory very little known in Lebanon.*

She went about explaining the origins of the movement with Gandhi and Martin Luther King—to cite only the well-known names—and the differences and similarities in Lebanon. They were ready to suffer but martyrdom was not the aim of non-violence. Their objective consisted in eliminating violence through non-violence. With dialogue, persuasion, they hoped to modify the actions of human beings.
Is Literature a Good Tool for Analysis?

To illustrate the connection between sexuality and war, I would like to use examples from novels on the war in Lebanon. As a student and professor of literature, I believe literature can be very enlightening. The questions often asked when illustrating my topic are: Is literature an adequate field to understand political and social realities? Can novels be used as social, anthropological and political documents? What about the imagination, fantasy of the author? What about his/her « distortions »? My immediate reaction is to say that creative works are more appropriate than other works to be analyzed and give us the « total » picture because, not only do they include all the various fields: social, political, anthropological, religious, and cultural, but in addition, they allow us to enter into the unconscious and imaginary world of the author, with all the implications in hidden meanings and underlying significance. An author reflects his/her own individual vision, which is linked to the collective imaginary. What he/she says is an image of his/her society. The tension between individual and collective imagination adds complexities and subtleties not found in more direct scientific documents. Therefore, in my opinion, literature covers the most complete domain. It can make us grasp the whole picture because it is multi-disciplinary and reflects the complexities of a situation. In addition, it is artistic and entertaining. It can educate and amuse us at the same time.

A novel has its own internal logic, which can escape both the novelist and « reality. » As such, the logic of a novel is one of fantasy. It goes from a reality with one or more characters, or from a certain dimension, and follows their logic to the end. As such, any novel is dated, as the German critic Lucas, has shown, analyzing it as evolving from a problem of society. At the same time, it carries the logical dimension of this society to the limit, therefore leaving « reality. » A novel is recognized as « belonging » to a society at a given time, but it is not a sociological or anthropological work as such. Said differently, it is the imagination of the novelist which is expressed in a novel, but this imaginary is of someone who belongs to the society under consideration, she/he is its witness, even if she/he is not representative sociologically speaking. On the other hand, the imaginary of a novelist, expressing itself in a work, marks a generation, a society, in a specific way worth discovering. In this sense, the novelist is an actor of her/his society, a privileged actor. The novel is not so much a reflection of a society, as it is a witness, an actor, and an agent of transformation.

The war Arabic novel has added its distinctive dimension to a body already quite impressive and fascinating in quantity and quality. War creates such conditions of despair that writing becomes a necessity, an outlet and a
catharsis. It helps heal the wounds. It offers another alternative to fighting and destruction. It can become one of the active non-violent struggles so dear to my research. The war has seen an appreciable increase in productivity, the measure of which becomes quite apparent when one starts putting a bibliography together—without talking about all the unpublished works, which Miriam Cooke has documented.\textsuperscript{xvii}

The themes and forms have evolved and matured. The problems are so intense, urgent and horrible that new forms are created to meet the needs. For example, writing in a shelter, or while waiting to cross the demarcation line, or kept in a basement as a hostage, has to be done fast and without basic comfort. Short poems, often surrealistic (since they are more difficult to decode) will be a form often used. We still find, as in the main corpus, a blend of poetry and prose, realism and symbolism, but the war novels delight in surrealism, the absurd and extreme irony (see in particular the works of Vénus Khoury, Ghada Al-Samman and Rachid Al-Daeef). Such modes of expression become a refuge from the war’s cruelty and inhumanity, the author reversing its effects through distortions, irony reaching the baroque, emphasis on certain aspects bringing out the absurd. In this respect, there is a marked similarity between women and men authors and between those writing in Arabic and in French. A notable difference between how women and men authors treat war stems not from the style and techniques, but from the way they view war and the solutions or lack of them they foresee.

\textit{Examples from the Lebanese War Novels}

I will quote two passages from two Lebanese war novels, and I would like you to guess which one was written by the woman and which by the man:

\textit{And this city, what is it? A whore. Who could imagine a whore sleeping with a thousand men and continuing to live? The city receives a thousand bombs and continues its existence nonetheless. The city can be summarized by these bombs... When we had destroyed Beirut, we thought we had destroyed it... We had destroyed this city at last. But when the war was declared finished and the pictures of the incredible desolation of Beirut were broadcasted, we discovered we had not destroyed it. We had only opened a few breaches in its walls, without destroying it. For that, other wars would be necessary.}

\textit{This city is like a great suffering being, too mad, too overcharged, broken now, gutted, and raped like those girls raped by thirty or forty militia men, and are now mad and in asylums because their families, Mediterranean to the end, would rather hide than cure...but how does one cure the memory? The}
city, like those girls, was raped...In the City, this center of all prostitutions, there is a lot of money and a lot of construction that will never be finished. Cement has mixed with the earth, and little by little has smothered most of the trees. If not all.

In these two images of Beirut, two opposing feelings are being expressed, two contrasting visions emerge. The first wants to get rid of the sinner, the whore, source of all evils, decadence, and the problems of modern existence. The total and violent destruction of the woman is seen as the only way out of an inextricable situation. The second feels sorry for the woman, the city, victim of rape, victim of man’s violence. Mediterranean customs are accused. Hypocrisy and the oppression of women are presented as the origin of madness and the destruction of the city.

The first quote is by a man, Elias Khoury, author of The Small Mountain (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1990). The second by a woman, Etel Adnan, author of Sitt Marie Rose (Sausalito, Calif.: Post-Apollo Press, 1982). This difference between a man and a woman’s visions of Beirut and their ways of expressing them was even more clearly defined one year during the war, as I watched women friends, determined to cross Beirut two or three times a week, pass through the demarcation line—the most desolate, depressing and often dangerous spot in the city. They went most of the time on foot, as only a few cars with special permission were allowed through. They were convinced that by this gesture, real as well as symbolic, Lebanon’s reunification would take place. They did this against all logic, under the ironic and sometimes admiring look of male companions. Defying weapons, militias, political games, women friends told me how that site had become a meeting place where each morning they looked forward to seeing this friend or that one, walking steadfastly in the apocalyptic space of the museum passage (another name for the no man’s land dividing the city, because the museum is located there). They smiled at each other as they walked assuredly, conscious that their march was not an ordinary one, that their crossing was a daring act, important and vital to Lebanon’s survival.

I have chosen six novels about the war to illustrate the connections between sexuality, war, nationalism, feminism, violence, love and power as they relate to the body, the partner, the family, Marxism, religion, and pacifism. These novels do not necessarily represent the entire range of creative works about the war. They were chosen for their significance in terms of the issues under discussion and for their availability in languages understandable to the Western reader. The works, originally written in Arabic or French, are by Lebanese women and men authors who have lived or are still living in
Lebanon. All of the novels chosen are set in Beirut, in the context of the war. *Days of Dust* (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1983) by Halim Barakat and *Death in Beirut* (London: Heineman, 1976) by Tawfiq Awwad—works written before the war started in 1975—foreshadow the events. Even though the subject is treated differently, all of the writers show how war and violence have roots in sexuality and in the treatment of women in that part of the world. Most of the characters meet a tragic fate due to the war, but women are the principal victims of both political and social violence. For example, the heroine of *Death in Beirut* is seduced, raped, beaten, her face slashed, her ambitions smashed, as she tries to gain autonomy and education in the midst of her country’s social and political unrest. Zahra, in *The Story of Zahra* (London: Readers International, Quartet Books Limited, 1986) by Hanan El-Cheikh, who tries to find a way out of herself and of the civil war that has just erupted by having a sexual relationship with a sniper, becomes the target not only of his sexual weapon, but of his kalashnikov as well. In the end, he kills her. In Etel Adnan’s novel *Sitt Marie Rose*, Marie Rose is struggling for social justice, Arab women’s liberation, and directs a school for the handicapped. She is put to death by Phalangist executioners who first torture her to get rid of their bad conscience. In *House without Roots* (Paris: Flammarion, 1985) by Andrée Chedid, Sybil dies from a sniper’s bullet at the point of possible reconciliation, the place where Kalya advanced trying to save Ammal and Myriam, one of them having been hit by the sniper’s death machine as they were starting a peace march. In *Days of Dust*, Pamela, trying to find herself by helping the refugees and protesting against American imperialism, loses herself in a no-exit relationship with the male protagonist. And in Elias Khoury’s novel *The Small Mountain*, the female characters are destroyed, disappear, or are trapped in disgustingly hateful marriage routines.

In addition to the relationship between war and sexuality, I examined the positive and negative actions and resolutions male and female characters took, the differences and similarities between male and female protagonists, between male and female authors, and between those writing in Arabic and in French. I also tried to assess the necessary changes Lebanon had to undergo to solve its tragedy and play, once again, the democratic role—melting pot of tolerance and freedom—it had in the region, and which is so much needed in that part of the world.

In this study, my hypothesis was verified and showed that although both female and male novels make the connection between sexuality and war, their ways of expressing it, and most of all the solutions implied, are quite different. Women writers paint the war and the relationships between women, men and their families in the darkest terms: sexuality is tied to women’s
oppression and the restrictions put on their lives, the war brings destruction, despair and death. The female protagonists look for alternatives in non-violent active struggles such as peace marches, engagement in causes to help the oppressed and the dispossessed. At the same time, they seek for changes in their life styles and in their relationships with the men and families around them. Men writers also paint the war and men/women relationships in the bleakest terms, emphasizing the connection between the two. But their depression does not lead them to search for alternatives different from the historically accepted ones: heroism, revenge and violence as catharsis to men/women deplorable communication.

In both women’s and men’s writing, the war is used to break down the patriarchal system and the traditional order. The female protagonists do it through masochism while the male ones use cruelty and sadism. But such action/reaction leads nowhere because the use of war to free oneself from domination and oppression only reinforces the authoritarian order by reproducing the power structure with different colors.

Both women and men writers question God and the use of religion in war. Institutionalized religion is blamed explicitly, while faith and personal belief are praised implicitly and constitute—more specifically in the women writers—strength and a way of overcoming war. So while male protagonists justify their fighting through religion or to show how it was used for imperialist purposes, the female ones draw their strength in helping the oppressed, sacrificing themselves for others welfare and in active non-violent struggles.

Both women and men writers seem to concur in showing female protagonists whose political outlook and actions are accompanied by similar ways in their personal lives, while male protagonists live double standards and hypocritical attitudes. In male authors, the female protagonists who are concerned and active politically also reject the traditional passive roles and refuse the taboos surrounding virginity and sexuality. They find themselves in situations where they are unable to live this conscious desire to be free because the men around them cannot cope with it. The irony is that these men voice beautiful statements concerning the need to achieve revolution in both domains: the private and the political, but when it comes to actualizing these theories in interpersonal relationships, it is as if they were paralyzed. It leads one to really doubt the effectiveness of what they advocate. Both male and female authors agree in portraying this difference between their male and female protagonists. To this characterization, women authors add an element not found in the men: their female protagonists often affirm themselves and live different life styles even if it means being marginalized, having to live in exile or being put to death.
Another major preoccupation of female and male writers is their outlook on multiculturalism and the question of roots, exile and pluralism mixed with violence and war, and how it is reflected in interpersonal relationships. Female authors tend to see mixity as something positive. Exile often means freedom. The search for roots can be an expression of nostalgia for one’s childhood or a need for security and love. Male authors tend to depict mixity as confrontation. Their search is for purity, mixity meaning dishonor. Multiculturalism increases their schizophrenia and makes them uneasy and depressed. Roots are a search for identity and exile is a terrible fate.

For example, Kalya in *House Without Roots*, raises questions about the significance of roots, and expresses the importance of grafting within her all the various roots and sensitivities of the cultures she is made of. She insists on the positive aspects of such hybridization and cosmopolitanism, and the enrichment, tolerance and openness it brings. These values are what Lebanon used to represent and what Kalya had come to seek. While Ramzy in *Days of Dust*, despairs at multiplicity which he associates with loss of identity, and sees it as one of the causes for the war. Ramzy is constantly split between East and West. It leads to schizophrenia and the inability to harmoniously integrate the various sides of his personality.

Intercultural and interconfessional marriages reflect the same outlook. Women authors depict female protagonists who live them harmoniously and with a great sense of achievement, commitment and possible solution to the war (even when they get killed because of it as with Marie Rose). Men authors show male protagonists split between a desire to achieve mixity on the political level and an impossibility to live it in their personal lives, even when they have voiced the importance of breaking down tradition on that level. Men authors also depict female protagonists better able to harmonize the personal with the political. Their failure to achieve true liberation stems not from their lack of action, but from the males’ inability to realize it with them.

Another notion implied by both female and male novels is androgyny. In this domain, there is less contrast between the two genders. Both women and men authors depict the negative and positive aspects of androgyny. Adnan refers to an androgynous mythical past to confront the male protagonists with their corrupted values. Chedid shows women characters who assume traits traditionally viewed as masculine. And Awwad also portrays women who, in order to free themselves, take on a masculine discourse and decide to engage in guerilla warfare. In these two authors however, the outcome is not positive. It does not engender life, nor is it a solution to war. And Barakat’s male protagonist who assumes both the female and male sides of his personality is not portrayed as having harmoniously integrated the two. He is
constantly ill at ease and torn between aggressiveness and masochism, the male side being associated with victory and the female with defeat. The most positive portrayal of an androgynous character is in Khoury. One of the main protagonists is described as androgynous-looking and appears free from society’s restrictions. She is obviously a projection of who the central male character would like to be, how he imagines freedom and a way to reject war. This androgynous-looking character laughs, argues, moves freely, captivates the hero, runs towards the sea, and is unattainable because the man is too busy fighting « the revolution. » Why did the author choose to construct an androgynous-looking woman to represent freedom? Is he saying that woman and man are doomed to destroy each others and that only the androgynous can escape such fate? The novel as a whole does not seem to imply such a solution. Freedom is never chosen as the answer to men and women’s miseries. Instead, destruction appears as the ultimate response to human condition.

The question of poverty and class-consciousness related to war and women’s condition emphasizes women writers’ awareness, leading them to search for positive alternatives, while men writers use it to justify violence. Both male and female authors show the link between the fate of the dispossessed, their struggle to overcome it, women’s oppression and the war. Awwad paints a direct connection between the classes his female protagonists belong to and the degrees of abuse and violence they are subjected to. Chedid shows women characters whose private and political consciousness and commitment gives them real awareness and sensitivity to the condition of the poor and vice versa: watching the poor’s lives leads them to become socially committed and active for change in their personal as well as political lives. Similarly, Adnan portrays a female protagonist who is socially, politically and personally committed to women’s issues and to the fate of the poor, the dispossessed and the oppressed in general. As for Khoury, he often talks about « the war of the poor » to describe the link between oppression and war, and to justify a revenge of the dispossessed. The crowd, which invades the plush hotel district of Beirut, is coming from camps, ghettos and the poor areas of Lebanon. Khoury ironically recalls the name they walk on « France » (there is such a street in Beirut), to show it is also a revenge of the colonized against the colonizers.

Both male and female authors paint the disastrous consequences of virginity rites connected with the notions of honor, ownership of women and sexual relationships. It is these customs, which lead Al-Shaykh’s female protagonist to despair, madness and final death. She rejects them from the beginning and is revolted against male’s views of her body and sexuality. She would like to be freed from them and in control of her body and of her life. She uses the
war to break down the taboos and to assert herself sexually. She finds out that the war is much stronger and more destructive than anything she has known before, and that the customs she hoped to get rid of through it are only temporarily shifted. They come back with greater strength and more destructive violence. And Adnan uses the narrator’s voice to comment on the frighteningly dangerous outcome of the codes of honor related to virginity, and how they reinforce tribal confessional sectarianship. As for Awwad, he shows the direct link between the customs of virginity, the exclusive propriety of women leading to violence and crimes at the foundation of a society built on divisions and an exclusive sense of propriety. In such a system, women are dominated, raped, led to suicide or killed by men themselves manipulated by political power. It is a vicious circle of power struggles in which women are the ultimate victims. And Barakat, through the interwoven stories of the Hyena and the Flying Dutchman, demonstrates the importance of the concept of virginity and the codes of honor related to women’s roles in society, with the strong implications of woman as earth, and Palestine as the ultimate woman.

In most of the novels under study, the codes of honor—related to virginity and to crimes meant to wash the family’s or tribe’s honor/pride in blood—are connected to rape, itself associated with death. Rape is linked to the notion of death. It is the absolute forbidden (specially on women of one’s tribe) therefore the absolute temptation of death (when inflicted on women of the other tribe). Men prove their masculinity through sexual acts of violence against women of the other clans. It, therefore, reinforces the system of the clan by making women vulnerable and in need of the men’s protection. In Al-Shaykh, the major female protagonist is subjected to rapes throughout her sexual life, which ends with death as the ultimate rape. In Awwad, the sexual act, in most of the men’s imagination and in their practice, is associated with rape. They seem unable to conceive of it differently; it is part of the system of power where they prove their masculinity and domination. Their way of conceiving sexuality often results in the death, suicide or annihilation of the female protagonist. And in Khoury, the wish of the central male protagonist is for the city/woman to be raped because she is like a prostitute and incarnates all the decadent moral values of industrial and modern life. But rape is not enough, it has to reach its limits into total destruction, and the devastation has to spread to other cities/women in the world, leading to annihilation and oblivion. While in Adnan, who also compares the city to a woman, she sees her rape/destruction as men’s ultimate cruelty, sadism and violence. She feels sorry for this woman/city and seeks for solutions in peaceful non-violent alternatives, even in the notion of self-sacrifice if that could help alleviate the hate and destruction. As for Barakat, the images used for the Arabs’ being defeated by Israel are of invasion, destruction and rape,
taking place on the male protagonist’s body that is utterly frustrated and depressed because rendered powerless.

Sexual relations conceived in a system of power struggles and a structure of submission/domination will obviously result in rapes and in the abuse of women. Rapes are associated with unwanted pregnancies and abortions. In none of the war novels do we find conception, pregnancy and giving birth as something positive and happy. Both female and male authors seem to view life conception and creation as impossible and repulsive in the context of the war. The female protagonists are the ones who pay the price, because the male protagonists view women as having to assume the whole responsibility of contraception and pregnancy. The sexual act being, in most instances, one of rape and domination, women appear as mere objects of possession, vessels into which the men pour their anger and frustration, prolongation of the feelings and acts of war. Abortion is the direct result of rape, like destruction is the direct result of war. Life cannot be engendered in such a context.

The novels by both male and female authors end with the brutal death of some of the female protagonists. Their death is the direct result of the male protagonist’s violence, worse perpetrators of the war. Zahra and the child in her womb die from the sniper’s–and father of the child–bullet. A gang of young Christian militiamen executes Marie Rose. Young Sybil also dies from a sniper’s bullet. Zennoub is cruelly gang raped and, as a result, she commits suicide. While Miss Mary, who shows real solidarity for her female friends, and who tries to protect Tamima dies, shielding her from her brother’s cruel hand. In only one of the male author’s novel, one of the male protagonists dies. It is from fighting and one does not feel as sorry for him as with the female protagonists’ deaths. His death is the result of his own violence and not a cruelty inflicted from the outside as with the women. Even if violence coming from the oppressed holds a certain justification, the death of its victims does not stir our sympathy, as does the death of innocent victims. In all of the studied novels, female and male authors concur in portraying their female protagonists as the ultimate victims. Where they disagree is in showing their responsibility and/or innocence. Khoury is the one who holds women responsible for their own victimization. His rage against the victims is so great that he calls for their total destruction. It is as if he were blaming the oppressed for being oppressed and calling for more oppression to get rid of oppression. Fanon’s view of violence as catharsis can be compared to Khoury’s call for total annihilation. They both call on negative, destructive means for the transformation of society. There is a similar element in Al-Shaykh’s novel where Zahra who goes to the sniper seeks a homeopathic cure against the war. The difference between Khoury and Al-Shaykh is that Zahra
does it through masochism, thereby emphasizing her own victimization, while Khoury inflicts it through sadism, thereby increasing the cruelty and expressing a total lack of compassion for the victims.

Finally, an obvious conclusion to this study is that the fear men have of women leads them to domination and war, while the fear women have of men's violence leads them to masochistic submission or/and rejection of the men, and commitment to political, human and feminist causes. Both the female and male authors agree on this. For example, the sniper’s first reaction to Zahra is rape, as a way of proving his masculinity through control and domination. Fear is one of his primary motivations: fear of life, fear of women’s capacity to reproduce, to give birth, fascination with death and destruction. He does not want to assume the responsibility of the life he has engendered in Zahra’s womb, when he daily kills innocent victims and destroys life. In order to reestablish the chaos, daily drug and only meaning of his existence, he must kill her. And for Talal in *The Small Mountain*, fighting is like making love to a woman: it is frightening and never fulfilling. The author describes a group of fighters who have lost the meaning of life, a fraternity of men always afraid, attracted and repulsed by women and by war, who know only destruction in which they loose themselves. The hate and fear they feel for women becomes their ultimate motivation for war. Such fear is epitomized by the relationship the central character has with his wife. The author describes boredom and weariness in their relationship, thereby trying to justify the need for war to bring about necessary changes. The main character has an obvious fascination with death and destruction, which is closely related to his sense of pleasure. He is chained to his wife through habits he can only destroy through war. And he runs away from the other two women in his life, because they represent life and freedom, which he is unable to accept, busy as he is with destruction. It leads to an obsession with destruction, as if destroying the city and the woman it symbolizes brings in ultimate *jouissance*. And Zahra, afraid of the violence ripping her country apart, submits herself masochistically to one of its worse perpetrators, thereby hoping to overcome her fears. While the central women characters, in *House Without Roots*, live their lives independent from men and with a commitment to bring about the transformation of society through peaceful means. And Marie-Rose stands in front of the fascist young men of her country, confronting them with their perverted values, in an act that defies their violence and rejects them all together. This chabab gang is afraid of Marie-Rose who epitomizes feminine/feminist values and who dares confront them with words, showing them their corruption while asserting her femi-humanism and her commitment to the oppressed and the downtrodden. They will have to get rid of her, just like the sniper had to get rid of Zahra.
Thus, while women writers are finding a way out, a circle of hell is being perpetuated, each sex fearing the other, the male one starting the chain through violence and domination. Only a different vision, new actions, and altered relationships based on trust, recognition, and acceptance of the other can help heal the wounds and bring about the cure necessary to project a new future for the world. Such a change has already started taking place with personal and political actions aimed at solving the problems rooted in oppression, domination, and the victimization of women. Writing this article/giving this speech has been one of these actions.

The connection between sexuality and war is so present in the novels that it is probably one of the most evident unifying themes. It demonstrates how strongly at work it is in the collective imaginary or culture of the people and how central it is to an understanding of the situation and the causes of the war. The similarities and differences between the ways women and men express and deal with violence and sexuality can lead us to a greater comprehension of the complexities in the relationship between the two and bring us closer to a solution: i.e., what I have described throughout this study as the need for a new rapport between men/women, women/women, and men/men, relationships based on trust, recognition of the other, tenderness, equal sharing and love void of jealousy and possession. My contention being that the personal is political—a vision also dear to Feminist movements—changes in relationships traditionally based on domination, oppression and power games will inevitably bounce back on other spheres of life.

What Miriam Cooke writes about the Lebanese women writers’ vision of Lebanon as a sick child in need of care, became for me a reality. It was the Lebanese war, which made me want to go back and try to help. I would not have felt the same concern for Lebanon had it not been for the war and for what I perceived as real suffering in my friends and many of the people I came in contact with. I shared their pain and desire to remedy. It led me to apply for grants to go and teach there. My experiences in living the war, talking with students, teaching, conducting research, traveling in Lebanon, crossing the demarcation line dividing the city, participating in non-violent peace initiatives, spending time in the shelter when shelling became too violent, sharing the anguish and suffering of friends and relatives, gave me insights I might not have had otherwise. It led to a conviction that only peaceful means could bring about a solution to Lebanon and reunite the country. It also showed me the importance of activism for the transformation of society: peace marches, hunger strikes, consciousness raising groups, solidarity among women, singing, writing, crossing the divided city, and most of all, changing the system of rapport between men and women, the values
connected with these relations and the confessional structures tied to the concepts of honor, virginity, exclusive property and oppression.

It also became very clear to me that women’s solidarity and an international feminism, uniting women all over the world, are vital in bringing about such changes. I would like to stress the importance of achieving unity in the midst of cultural differences, if we want to provide some hope in ending the war culture which exists all over the world. I became very aware, when in Lebanon, of the strength the peace initiative started by two women from enemy communities had, first on women, and then on the population as a whole, in uniting people towards peace. It is one of the rare times in my life I witnessed the tremendous impact, which values of love and tolerance can have on people.

The activities I have described above—such as going to Lebanon, teaching, researching, living the war, crossing the demarcation line, participating in non-violent peace initiatives, discussing with students and with people directly affected by the war, writing a novel about it, composing songs on the war and performing them in public—undertaken as a result of my concern and suffering over the destruction of my country, are directly involved with the transformation of society. Changing the system and the values behind it requires more time and a long process of in-depth political, economical, psychological, religious, sexual, familial and social transformations established on an understanding of the different factors, causes and links between these various fields. My concern over long range plans to bring about social transformations necessary to end the war system and bring about hopeful and lasting changes to a world falling apart made me undertake this study and analyze the relationship between sexuality, war and literature. I hope you will find it useful too.


ii Ibid.

iii Ibid., p. 22.

iv Bob Connell, « Masculinity, Violence and War, » War/Masculinity, op. cit., p. 4.


vii Ibid., p. 61.


xiIbid., p. 119.

xii Wafa Stephan, « Women and War in Lebanon, » *Al-Raïda* (Beirut University College, no. 30, 1984) p. 3.

xiii Polity-Charara, op. cit., p. 15.

xiv Stephan, op. cit., p. 3.


xvii For an excellent overview and an in-depth analysis of the novels about the war, see Miriam Cooke, *War’s Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War, 1975-82* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).


There are also men who, believing in the reunification of Lebanon, make the gesture, crossing the demarcation line, but it seemed to me they were fewer than women—perhaps because men risk more, are more often victims of kidnappings, assaults, murders. Men do it more in a spirit of duty or for professional interests.

Cooke, op. cit.

First written in Arabic (‘Awdat alta’ir ilal bahr, Beirut: Al’Mu’assassat Al-‘Arabiya, 1969), also available in French (Le vaisseau reprend le large, Sherbrooke: Naaman, 1977).

First written in Arabic (Tawaheen Beirut, Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1972).

First written in Arabic (Hikayat Zahra, Beirut: Al-Nahar, 1980), also available in French (Histoire de Zahra, Paris: Lattès, 1980).

First written in French (La maison sans racines, Paris: Flammarion, 1985) also available in English (Return to Beirut, London: Serpent’s Tail, 1989).