Women and the Lebanese Civil War: A Literary Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Women writers of fiction on the Lebanese civil war (1975-1992) suggest that women were active participants in the war experience, compelled to act as agents of change because the war was everywhere. This thesis focuses on the works of Etel Adnan, Ghada Samman, Hanan Al-Shaykh, Hoda Barakat, Emily Nasrallah, and Mai Ghoussoub. These women writers used the war as a background for their novels to highlight other existing issues aggravated by the war such as economic and political corruption, social discrimination and the oppression of men and women through the application of social traditions.

INTRODUCTION

Historical writings on war often fail to provide evidence of women participation in the war experience. Where historical documents fail literature succeeds, offering, in Evelyne Accad's words, an understanding of the political and social realities of a society. (1990,5), allowing the reader to grasp the complexities of a situation. Women novelists tackling the Lebanese civil war (1975-1992) suggest that women were integral players in the war experience, and made valuable contributions to their society. The purpose of this paper is to explore the interpretation and understanding of the civil war from the point of view of the following fiction writers: Ghada Samman, Hanan Al-Shaykh, Emily Nasrallah, Hoda Barakat, Etel Adnan, and Mai Ghoussoub.

The novels studied in this essay, use the war as a platform to discuss pre-existing problems in society, aggravated by the war. Various Lebanese groups experienced social and economic inequities, which placed limitations on self-determination and self-expression for both men and women. The women novelists mentioned above, argue that during the civil war, women were forced to take on new roles outside the home and continue their roles in the home. They realized that the war compounded the existing problems and that they were the key to resolving them. They acted as agents of change in their societies, thus guaranteeing their own liberation from oppression. They also realized that emancipation cannot be separated from the social context, making the topic of personal and national identity central to their writings. They developed a new sense of their own identity, and an appreciation of their society.

ROOTS OF THE CIVIL WAR
Economic, political, and demographic divisions caused the 1975 civil war. Christians dominated the Lebanonese political and economic systems led by a he a Western-oriented business men. Foreign capital helped build strong bonds between the economic and political institutions of the country. Those who benefited from the system denied basic social services to broad sections of the population through a common practice of exploitation and corruption. Communities in Beirut, and in mountainous areas north and south of the city prospered economically while communities in the Akkar region to the north, Jabal Amil in the South, and Bekaa Valley in the east, all largely populated by Shiites and Sunni Muslims, were financially depressed. (Mackey 1989, 13)

Demographic changes in population affected the balance between rival factions. The Muslim population increased after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, when Palestinian refugees settled in Lebanon and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) carried its operations across the Lebanese borders. The Muslim population accounted for approximately 60% of the total population by 1975. The Druze community claimed a 6%, the Shiite 22%, and the Sunni Muslims commanded 32% of the Lebanese population. Religious identification masked the root causes of the civil war. Lebanese society resided along communal lines of family loyalties, regional differences, economic rivalries, and generation vendettas. (Mackey 1989, 12). In 1975 the civil war erupted with attacks along religious lines, Muslim and Christian. It consisted of opposing militias defending self-claimed turf. (Mackey 1989, 161)

The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon further complicating the economic, social, and political situation, and conflicts continued to escalate between the Iranian supported Hezbollah groups and Israeli in Southern Lebanon. The country failed to elect a president in 1988 after the end of President Amin Gemeyal's tenure, leading to a constitutional crisis. The Tripartite Arab Committee attempted to bring peace to Lebanon in 1989, but it was the Taif Agreement that drafted a national charter of reconciliation. The war(s) ended in 1992 with many conflicts still unresolved. However, the reforms established by the Taif Agreement asserted some semblance of peace in the country.

**ART IMITATING LIFE**

Literary critics argued that Lebanese women novelists writing on the civil war saw women's issues as the underlying causes of social unrest between men and women, Christians and Muslims, rich and poor. Cooke and Accad argued that male and female writers differed in the way they viewed the war and the solutions they proposed. The major themes that these literary critics address are subjectivity, patriarchy, responsibility, sexual oppression, political and social activism, and the emergence of a feminine consciousness. According to this thesis, the novels studied here, reflect a lack of national cohesion in the Lebanese society. Women writers rejected society's stigmatization of women who work outside the house.
and women who defy social taboos. They denounced the weakness of men, promoted women's strength and depicted the various forms of oppression, endured by women and men alike. The protagonists in the various novels examined, example Adnan's Sitt Marie Rose in Sitt Marie Rose, Ghoussoub's Umm Ali from Leaving Beirut and the narrator in Samman's Beirut Nightmares, acted as agents of change because they wanted the war to end. Men on the other hand, as shown through Barakat's the Stone of Laughter, Ak-Shaykh's Story of Zahra, wanted the war to continue because it gave them a false sense of power over their environment. Women realized that in order for peace to settle in Lebanon, they had to take responsibility and act. They were empowered because they achieved a sense of self-worth and achievement.

CONCLUSION

The novelists chosen here represent the diversity of experience on women and war. They advocate change and support women's emancipation. The female characters were not acting as second-class citizens but as integral players in the efforts to build a new society based on gender equality, as well self-determination and freedom of expression for both men and women.

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REFERENCES
