

## **GENDERING CIVIL WAR: FRANCOPHONE WOMEN'S WRITING IN LEBANON**

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*Learn a language and you'll avoid war  
Arabic Proverb*

### **OVERVIEW**

*Gendering Civil War: Francophone Women's Writing in Lebanon* by Mireille Rebeiz is a book that examines narratives surrounding the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) written by women authors in the French language. The book, published in 2022 by Edinburgh University Press, offers an analysis of the literature and theories adopted by these authors. The ten novels studied in the book are Georgia Makhoul's *Les Absents* (2014), Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978), Andrée Chéhid's *La Maison sans Racines* (1985) and *Le Message* (2021), Evelyn Accad's *Coquelicot du Massacre* (1988), Hyam Yared's *L'Armoire des Ombres* (2006) and *La Malédiction* (2012), and Vénu Khoury-Ghata's *La Maîtresse du Notable* (1991), *Vacarme pour une Lune Morte* (1983), and *Les Morts n'ont pas d'Ombre* (1984). The text sees the literary works of the authors, or narrative, as body and body as a narrative. It employs intersectional narratology to uncover discriminatory representations in narrative structure and meaning. The book also employs post-colonial narratology since the classical one does not include gender, history, and text interpretations. Although Lebanon is a predominantly Arabic-speaking country, French has had its influence on the society making its way through

academia, publishing, and the arts. The book acknowledges the influences of the language and its use as a segue to expressing thoughts, emotions, and experiences surrounding the war.

## **THE FEMININE 'I'**

The book is organized by topic; and the first topic deals with the usage of the feminine 'I' in some of the novels understudied. The first chapter of the book titled "The Feminine 'I'" examines Georgia Makhlouf's *Les Absents* and Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose*. Rebeiz (2022), in this chapter, highlights the importance of choosing 'I' as a pronoun in those texts, signifying individuality. Miriam Cooke (1987) referred to the authors as "Beirut Decentrists" meaning that they experienced the war and wrote alone for themselves and not for others. They did not identify their writing as part of theirs (p. 23). The author discusses the notion of how identities are shaped due to a choice in the pronoun 'I' while discarding other pronouns such as 'he/she/it' to be able to address the audience 'you' (p. 50). In *Les Absents*, Rebeiz (2022) argues that the feminine 'I' is used to amplify the concept of trauma since the Civil War was a traumatic experience for Makhlouf (2014). Rebeiz (2022) also notes the alternation between 'I' and 'we' to remind the reader that the events are people's collective memories, and that Makhlouf was part of this community (p. 60). On the other hand, Etel Adnan (1978) uses the feminine 'I' for a different purpose in *Sitt Marie Rose*. The book is based on a true story of Marie Rose Boulos, a feminist Syrian social worker who helped the Palestinian refugees during the war and was killed by militia. In the novel, it was highlighted that women had no name and could not be identified, unlike men. Therefore, Adnan (1978) used the feminine 'I' and 'we' to associate herself with the group of women and to represent transgression in time and space. Rebeiz (2022), in this chapter, refers to these two novels to amplify the effect of trauma during the Civil War which is key to the understanding of the circumstances of the war.

## **THE OMNISCIENT NARRATOR**

The second chapter of the book reviews narratological choices taken by two understudied authors. Dawson (2013) notes that the omniscient narrator is a choice adopted by an author to show that they know all information that will be presented regarding the events of the story (p. 65). This technique is a classic narrative technique used in the past. Its usage decreased with the rise of postmodern literature and feminist literature. The way in which this technique started disappearing in feminist narratives is through the usage of first-person narration. Rebeiz (2022) discusses, in her text, how Evelyn Accad's *Coquelicot du Massacre* and Andrée Chedid's *La Maison sans Racines* adopted the omniscient narration for various reasons (p. 96). The

omniscient narrator replaces the feminine 'I' in *La Maison sans Racines* since Chedid (1985) was seeking brotherhood. The context of her novel narrates a march that was supposed to unite Muslims and Christians at the Demarcation Line in Beirut but resulted in casualties. Since the novel is a recounting of the history of the war, Chedid (1985) used the omniscient narration to provide an equal distance between the narrator and any of the protagonists in the story to dissociate herself from the events of the war. Rebeiz (2022) provides numerous examples from *La Maison sans Racines* to show how the omniscient narrator voice was adopted. It also provides many examples from Chedid's *Le Message* to demonstrate how the novels align at the level of thematic and narratological choices. Likewise, Rebeiz (2022) compares Chedid's novels to Accad's (1988) *Coquelicot du Massacre* indicating that the feminine 'I' limits the narrator (p. 110). This comparison offers an insight on how narration styles may vary due to author choices and that they are not bound by the specific literary era that the novel is published in.

## WAR AND WOMEN

Besides the grammatical and narratological choices taken by the authors, Rebeiz (2022) decides to shed light on the terminologies used in the novels to voice emotional states. One of the examples that Rebeiz (2022) gives is the story of Flora in Vénus Khoury-Ghata's *La Maîtresse du Notable* where a pregnant woman was described as deformed (p. 126). Rebeiz (2022) emphasizes that, in post-feminist literature, women were portrayed as 'powerful' and 'strong.' In *La Maîtresse du Notable*, women and girls alike were portrayed as 'poisonous' and 'manipulative,' resembling the war and those engaged in it. Flora, in the story, destroys the lives of all who she touches, which is an imagery to the toxic dichotomy between the Christian East and Muslim West.

Relationships between people can mirror social constructs and can be easily reflected in language. In *La Malédiction* by Hyam Yared, the relationship between a mother and her daughter is portrayed as 'beautiful,' yet 'fearful,' since daughters love their mothers and are terrified of them at the same time (p. 139). Additionally, in the novel, the daughter, Hala, is seen as inferior to her male siblings by her mother due to the constructs that the latter had fixated onto the daughter because she is 'overweight'. Additionally, the mother sees the son's blondness as 'purity' while the daughter's dark hair 'impure' (p. 140). Another instance in this book is how the mother deals with the menstruation of her daughter as an impure state. This shows how the culture has affected the mother's thinking, emotions, and thus, her linguistic choices toward her children. Rebeiz (2022) also correlates the toxicity and hostility of the mother toward her own child to the war by how the land was treated with hostility by its very own.

## REALISM

In this book, Rebeiz (2022) also chooses to study magical realism, a concept further explained by Faris (1995). The latter defines magical realism as a technique used in literature that allows the coexistence of times and spaces. Hyam Yared's *L'Armoire des Ombres* is a great example of magical realism where the narrator has four shadows hidden in the closet. Each shadow tells a story from her personal history. According to Rebeiz (2022), Yared (2006) chooses this approach to show the multiplicity of the narrator's identity, having two of the shadows constituting her personality and the others buried deep down in her subconscious (p. 186).

In contrast, Rebeiz (2022) discusses grotesque realism as a form of literary degradation of characters. Vénus Khoury-Ghata's *Vacarme pour une Lune Morte* (1983) and *Les Morts n'ont pas d'Ombre* (1984) both utilize grotesque realism where women are degraded. This form is used by Khoury-Ghata to be able to speak up about the injustices and harsh conditions women were living in during the war.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, this book acts as a corpus of the literary choices taken by franco-phone women's writers. Rebeiz (2022) shows the audience how different novels, written in the same era and within the same context, can influence the reader differently and can portray the hardships that women had to go through during the war. The book is divided into easy-to-read chapters and each chapter constitutes of a comparison between two or three novels for an easier understanding of the various narratological preferences. This book is significant in current times where it feels struggling to understand all components that contributed to and constituted the Lebanese Civil War that spanned over 15 years.

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