

PAPERS ON LEBANON

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WOMEN WRITE WAR

THE CENTRING
OF THE
BEIRUT DECENTRISTS

by

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WOMEN WRITE WAR: THE CENTRING OF THE BEIRUT DECENTRISTS

Miriam Cooke *

The War is one of the most important things in my life. It can't really be called writing. I found myself looking at pages, regularly filled with small, calm, extraordinarily even handwriting. I found myself confronted with a tremendous chaos of thought and feeling that I couldn't bring myself to tamper with, and besides which literature was something of which I felt ashamed.

Marguerite Duras, *The War: A Memoir*
(NY: Pantheon Books 1986), p. 4.

The Lebanese Civil War, 1975–82 was an unprecedented event in the history of human violence and savagery. There was no single pretext, no single cause, no single front, no single enemy. The war was the explosion of anger, hatred, and fear that penetrated every corner of people's lives; it tore into the calm of the boudoir and the kitchen. No space could provide shelter against the ubiquity of danger. There was no longer any difference between the experiences of the home and the street. Private and public merged; more, they were wrenched into each other.

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This war has been variously described as economic, religious, political, civil and international. Economic because of the rapidly growing poverty belt of refugees from the Israeli-threatened South which was tightening its hold on the bourgeois centre of power. Religious because of widespread dissatisfaction amongst the various religious communities that proportional representation along confessional lines was no longer equitable. Political because it represented a power struggle among communities or groups defined not as religious but as political units, e.g., Nasserist, Nationalist Socialist, Ba'thist. Civil because it was a crisis of tensions that generally embroiled the citizenry of the whole of Lebanon. International because it pitted Lebanese against Palestinians, and also engaged in perpetual conflict dozens of local militias who were supported militarily and financially by foreign powers. In the light of the past twelve years, it has become clear that this war assimilated aspects of all these issues into one diabolical saturnalia of violence.

Many responded creatively to the war. Painters, sculptors, musicians, poets and writers tried to do what the political and economic analysts could not. They tried to capture the pulse of the violence. In this creative efflorescence the most active were women, and particularly the women who wrote in the capital but were tangential to its literary tradition. They were the Beirut Decentrists.

Who are the Beirut Decentrists? They are Ghada al-Samman, Hanan al-Sheikh, Claire Gebeyli, Daisy al-Amir, Etel Adnan, Laila Usairan, Emily Nasrallah, and many others—a group of women writers who have shared Beirut as their home and the war as their experience. They are decentred in a double sense: physically, they were scattered all over a self-destructing city; intellectually, they moved in separate spheres. They wrote alone and for themselves. They would not conceive of their writings as related to those of others, yet their marginal perspective that gave insight into the holistic aspect of the war united them and allowed them discursively to undermine and restructure society around the image of a new centre. Literature tends to create self-referential canons. Only those who write as a school or as a movement or as exemplary individuals are included retrospectively in a canon. The Beirut Decentrists, while not sharing the usual or expected traits of literary recognition, still merit inclusion in the canon of modern Middle Eastern literature. Although these upper and

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middle class women, who wrote in Arabic, French and even English did not consciously form a group, the style and content of their work bore the unmistakable stamp of the civil war. Whether the war was the explicit subject of their writing or merely the pretext, it dictated a discourse that dug deep into the collective psyche of those who stayed in Lebanon. The staccato spray of bullets shot out of the mouth of a kalashnikov provided at once the subject and the rhythm of much of the writing. The Beirut Decentrists, compelled by the war to become an increasingly visible part of the public sphere, began to recognise the role they might play in a society undergoing massive transformations at all levels. This new consciousness inspired novels, short stories and poetry that became increasingly feminist in orientation.

Collectively, the Beirut Decentrists have forged a war myth whose protagonists were both men and women and with time became primarily women. The Beirut Decentrists describe the dailiness of a war that was not always the inferno the media and political scientists portrayed, but rather an uncanny normality. Their cataloguing of routine identified a hitherto unacknowledged aspect: the war became a reality only when individuals were directly involved. At other times, life flowed on as before. They wrote of weddings, parties, natural deaths. With the exception of the omnipresent 'armed elements', the burnt-out buildings and the relentless news of skirmishes in some part of the country, it was possible to ignore the war, to become numb to its evil, until a strike hit home. But it was this very numbness that the Beirut Decentrists attacked. The war, even when it was far or quiescent, was a reality and it was condoned by neglect or by overzealous participation in warmongering. Using the studied understatement of the language of war, the Beirut Decentrists described a 'situation' for which all were answerable, yet most—and particularly the men—resolutely rejected responsibility. In the literature of the Beirut Decentrists, the women stay in Lebanon and wait without a clear sense of why. The men fly to Paris, London and the Gulf states rattling off fine sounding excuses, or they stay to fling themselves irrationally into a war of gangfights. The issue of responsibility did not become central until the end of the 1970s when a protracted period of relative peace allowed the writers to venture assessments of behaviour. The Beirut Decentrists criticised those who left Lebanon in its time of need. Many also hinted at a radical

transformation in identity. They described those who had left as having forfeited their right to belong. In all pre-1975 writings that deal with the question of emigration, it is axiomatic that whereas the men were expected to leave for a while, make good and then return to brighten the twilight years of aged parents and to conjure up images of *dolce vita* in the dreams of potential village brides, the women, especially rural women, were expected to wait. They were condemned to live in the shadow of tradition, excluded from the world of change that was Beirut, identified in the minds of many with the *mahjar* or lands of emigration. Should they decide to defy convention and follow the men, even if only to Beirut, they became outcasts.

With the advance of the twentieth century, writers began to investigate the gulf between Beirut and the village, between modern and traditional life, between expected behaviour for men and for women. Were such dichotomies still possible? Or was it an illusion to believe that the village and the women in it could remain the unchanging reification of an idealised past? If change was to be introduced, how much could be accommodated? How? How quickly? Did any modification of the *status quo* threaten the villagers' identity?

With the war, writers could no longer indulge in the luxury of idle reflection. The war, and all the change that it necessarily connoted, forced itself into the villagers' consciousness. Emily Nasrallah, a Decentrist whose entire *oeuvre* from 1962 until today, focuses on this dichotomy between modern and traditional, between Beirut and the Lebanese village, between men and women, has dramatised the incursion of the war onto village life. Radwan, the protagonist of her 1981 novel *Flight Against Time*, describes the latest air raid: '. . . the Israeli planes used burning bombs they called "napalm" and then "cluster" bombs.'¹ Later, he sees three planes swoop down on a village protected by four other planes that 'formed an air shield (that was a term he had heard on the radio: air shield). That was how they had bombarded Naba' al-Hāṣbānī' (p. 56). The experiences in the village and those in Beirut became war experiences and survival became the key. The illiterate villager was sharing the fate of the sophisticated Beiruti. As these two poles began to approach each

¹ *Flight against Time (Al-iqlā' 'aks al-zamān)*, Beirut: Mu'assasat Naufal 1981, p. 43. Hereafter, all page references will be included in the essay.

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other, attitudes to emigration began to change. Writers were no longer concerned with the female villagers' move to Beirut, but with the Lebanese citizens' move to the *mahjar*.

The writings of the Decentrists epitomise the changing attitude of those who stayed in Lebanon *vis-à-vis* those who left. At first, when the violence was intense and peace was still being discussed as a not too distant prospect, there was little opprobrium attached to those who left for Europe or the Gulf. Those who stayed—mostly women and children²—stayed out of necessity or out of some dimly perceived notion of responsibility to others or to the country. However, as the violence persisted beyond all predictions of its ending and not all who stayed were killed or even injured, a new assessment emerged: those who left before and during the war no longer had a right to belong. All Lebanese had to stay in Lebanon to assure the survival of the country and of individual identity.

Whereas most of the Beirut Decentrists' literature published before 1979 merely hints at women's steadfastness and men's cowardly vacillation, by 1982 male protagonists had become explicit targets of the Beirut Decentrists' bitterness. There is anger in this writing, but also a strange exaltation. Men who had always been the dominant class, to whom obedience had been an unquestioned duty, had proven themselves weak and unworthy. When the protagonist of Umayya Hamdan's *The Blue That Comes With The Wind* (1980), challenges all who threaten her freedom of action, her male interlocutor complains: 'You're a woman and I'm an oriental man. . . . Deep in you are voices whose escape I fear.'³ As the patriarchal structure was falling apart, as the country was collapsing, women were finding a voice. The Beirut Decentrists recall the women writers on the First World War about whom Sandra Gilbert has written:

even though they mourned the devastation of the war . . .
[they] felt that not only their society, but also their art had

² In the section on Lebanese women, Rose Ghurayib writes that by 1980 35 per cent of Lebanese households were headed by women; this is especially striking in an Arab country. Robin Morgan (ed.), *Sisterhood is Global*, NY: Anchor Books 1984, p. 418.

³ Umayya Hamdan, *The Blue that Comes with the Wind (Al-azraq al-qādim ma'a al-rīh)*, Beirut 1980, p. 156.

been subtly strengthened, or at least strangely inspired, by the deaths and defeats of male contemporaries.⁴

Only in the Lebanese case, the men had not died nor had they been defeated. Decentrists like Nuha Samara describe men who had left the war zone for international capitals. From safe new homes, the men sent back tender letters, exhorting their wives to pray for peace so that they might return.⁵ How could such an attitude foster gold star mother jingoism?

Then came the Israeli invasion. Within the space of a summer, dreams of renewal, models of patriotism were challenged. The war persisted but international intervention was no longer disguised. As Lebanon teetered on the edge of collapse, opportunism became rampant assuming an increasingly confessional aspect. Shi'as encouraged by Shi'i triumphs elsewhere mobilised. The relatively small though influential Druze community emphasised confession. Sunnis appointed sheikhs in every town in local bids for power. The Maronites continued their in-fighting in the hope that the chaos would allow for the emergence of new sub-groups, however small, which might legitimately vie for the highest offices in the country.

The nature of Lebanese society was changing. This axiomatic mosaic was becoming an unsightly mass of multi-coloured stones each trying to impose its colour as the dominant one. Where conflicts before the invasion had not maintained clear-cut lines but had responded to emotion and ephemeral interest, after 1982 they assumed strictly religious markings. Not even at the cultural level was there interaction. The intra-communal literary salons had become a thing of the past.

Society was splintered into autonomous groups that refused to communicate, much less co-operate with each other. Like the characters in Nasrallah's post-1982 story 'All Of Them are His Mother' analysed below, it could be said that everyone was shouting and no one was listening long enough to know if answers were being

⁴ Sandra Gilbert, 'Soldier's heart: literary man, literary women, and the Great War', in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, VIII, iii (Spring 1983), p. 446; see also p. 426.

⁵ Nuha Samara, 'Two Faces One Woman', in *The Tables Lived Longer than Amin*, Beirut: Manshurāt Zuhair Baalbaki 1981, p. 112.

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given. Such an atmosphere assumed the loss of dialogue, though not the loss of others. The shouters assumed that the others were silent for that was what they wanted. In such an atmosphere, compromise and communication were no longer possible.

How was the writer to react? In a society of individuals who refused to listen, of what use was language? Did universal deafness mean that the writer no longer had a role to play as public conscience, analyst and guide? Or did the new situation impose a new role on the writer? A new function for writing?

Before 1982, the Beirut Decentrists had consciously fragmented and subverted language so as to start anew. The fragmentation was for the construction of a new entity defined by the civil war context. The language available for the post-1982 writer was, therefore, either the language of the creatively fragmented wartime experience, or the language of the unfragmented remembrance of a pre-1975 Lebanon that had exploded into hate and violence. Writing, as a revolutionary process, had to borrow from one of these two languages, for as Barthes writes in *Language Degree Zero* 'Revolution must of necessity borrow from what it wants to destroy, the very image of what it wants to possess.'⁶ Writing, therefore, was resisted.

Writing was also resisted because as a discursive project it was not so much a communication as the expression of 'history and the stand we take in it' (Barthes, p.1). How could the writer express a stand in a totally incomprehensible history? Events were so fluid that the role of witness gave way to that of 'incarnation of tragic awareness.' (Barthes, p.3). Writers had to communicate awareness not facts. But how could the writer communicate when writing resisted communication? The instrumentality of communication had to be questioned.

The Beirut Decentrists chronicled the Lebanese war from its inception and in some cases, such as Ghada al-Samman's *Beirut 75* (Dar al-Afaq al-Jadida, 1975) and Etel Adnan's 'In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country' (1973), they anticipated it. Their marginality to society and to literary canon gave them the perspective of the other. Exclusion gave them a holistic, if peripheral, vision that the excluders had lost when they set themselves up as the all-important

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, tr. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, NY: Hill & Wang 1978, p. 87. Hereafter, all page references will be included in the essay.

self, or centre. The writings of the Decentrists trace a thread of normality that links the usual accounts of violence and explosions. Writing allowed these women to perceive a routine that did not deny the war but rather pinpointed a new logic, the logic of the bullets. This logic undermined previously unquestioned modes of behaviour and allowed for the emergence of a new *Weltanschauung*, a new social order and civic structure.



The evolution in feminist consciousness that transformed male emigration into cowardice and female waiting/staying into honour is best seen in the works of Emily Nasrallah, for the theme to which she calls repeated attention is emigration. In her post-1982 works, Nasrallah explores the implications of the invasion on the question of emigration and searches for a new language to deliver the change and subsequent chaos.

Nasrallah was born in a village in South Lebanon in 1938. Nine years later she left her family to attend a boarding school in Schweifat, near Beirut. Her tuition and board was paid for by a rich uncle who had emigrated to America. Hence, already at the age of nine, Nasrallah was beginning to learn and to derive benefit from the fact that successful Lebanese males emigrated. She was soon to learn that Lebanese females stayed, awaiting the return of their menfolk.

From Schweifat she went on to earn her B.A. from the American University of Beirut. Throughout her university career she worked, writing articles and short stories for papers and journals to earn her keep. Her life was to be a model, an affirmation of a life for women beyond the narrow confines of traditional village life. In the meantime, however, she suffered the loneliness of the village girl in the big city and writing became her solace for absence. Writing became a passion.

Her early writings, which include *September Birds* (1962) and *The Oleander Tree* (1968), reflect the concerns of Arab women writers of the 1950s and 1960s. Like Layla Ba'albaki and Colette Khuri, who wrote of the prison-house of domesticity and the stifling of women's individuality within patriarchy.

What was unique in the writings of Emily Nasrallah was her preoccupation with emigration. In 1962, Nasrallah published her first

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novel, *September Birds*, which won her acclaim at home and in the Arab world at large. This autobiographical novel recounts the story of Muna the village girl who witnesses the fates of her companions—of the boys who leave, of the girls who stay, and of the boy who stays in the village and grows up to ‘have the sensibilities of a girl’⁷—and who rejects her traditionally sanctioned role. The tone is not angry but sad: like the migrating birds of September, she had left, but, unlike these birds, response to this instinct made her an anomaly in a society that excised the anomalous.

During the thirteen years that intervened between the appearance of this first work and the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975, Nasrallah wrote two novels, *The Oleander Tree* (1968) and *The Pawn* (1974), two collections of short stories, *Island of Illusion* (1973) and *The Source* (1978). Two children’s books, *Bahira* (1977) and *Little Shadi* (1977), were published after the beginning of the civil war. In each work Nasrallah struggles with the conflicting values of her society that was at once modern (male) and traditional, even feudal (female).

In Nasrallah’s works the women were responding to the perceived mandate to be passive and the challenge to change. Some protested quietly, like the heroine of *The Oleander Tree* who ran away with the man she was supposed to marry but did not love and who then committed suicide. Some protested dramatically, like Muna in *September Birds* who left the village for Beirut. The latter were described as ‘escaping’ even if their departure was against their wills. They were escaping the physical location but also their numbed condition of passivity. The violence they thus committed on village mores exacted a toll—ostracism. A woman who chose a man’s path might as well have died, and her return, if she dared risk it, would be greeted if not with hostility then at least with coldness. Return was impossible, rejection complete: ‘the village had rejected me the minute I left it to sink my feet into another soil’ (p. 244).

Such was Nasrallah’s portrayal of Lebanese society on the eve of the war. It was a two-tiered entity neatly divided geographically and demographically⁸ between modern Beirut and traditional, rural

⁷ *September Birds (Tuyūr Ailul)*, Beirut: Mu’assasat Naufal 1980, pp. 180-189. Hereafter all page references will be included in the essay.

⁸ On the eve of the civil war 50 per cent of the population was in Beirut.

Lebanon. The gap between the two was being perceived. A first step: but the bridging was not yet conceivable.

Then on April 13, 1975 tensions that had been simmering for years broke into war. Nasrallah has been one of the most prolific writers on the Lebanese Civil War. She has published two novels—*Those Memories* (1978) and *Flight Against Time* (1981)—and subsequent to the Israeli invasion during the summer of 1982 two collections of short stories—*Woman in 17 Stories* (1984) and *The Lost Mill* (1985).

Both novels continue to focus on the question of emigration, but the new ingredient is survival. In *Those Memories*, two close friends spend a long night together discussing the war. Maha had stayed throughout. Hanan returns during a period of calm to survey the ruins and to re-establish connections, or at least to try. However, as the night progresses, Hanan's urgent questions gradually give way to the realisation that she cannot vicariously live the war, that she does not belong. Having left Lebanon in its hour of need, she had lost her birthright. She had become like the village girls when they took their destiny into their own hands. By leaving, she had cut herself off from her roots. The return of Hanan to Beirut is equivalent to a girl's return to the village she had abandoned—an impossibility.⁹

Nasrallah's *oeuvre* dramatises what was happening in Lebanese society: the war had collapsed the difference between Beirut and the village. The war gave birth to a new attitude and a new context. The village no longer had the dubious luxury of isolation. It had to accommodate a new reality and then become part of it. The war forced the village to adopt what was new and different so that tradition might confront, and become assimilated to, modernity. Beirut and the village were identified in such a way that the village had become a microcosm for Lebanon.

The freedom of male emigration which sanctioned unpatriotic behaviour, i.e. leaving Lebanon with impunity, was no longer even an option. The only options left were those that had previously faced the village women: staying or leaving for ever. However, after 1975 Nasrallah no longer describes the staying as passive, but as having been transformed by survival to become active commitment to

⁹ Emily Nasrallah, *Those Memories (Tilka al-dhikriyyāt)*, Beirut: Mu'assasat Naufal 1980, p. 96.

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one's country. To stay despite the natural urge to leave, and to survive and recognise the wait as transformative and active was to affirm an exclusive right to belong. To leave was to risk rejection.

Nasrallah presents the choices for being in war-torn Lebanon as having been feminised: Lebanese men and women could be like the traditional village women who waited and maintained a continuity with the land, or they could be like the radical village women who left and were thereby rejected. However, to stay in Lebanon after 1975 compelled acceptance of the condition of the traditional village woman, while at the same time recognising and thus overcoming or 'escaping' its passivity, as the radical village women had done. The war had revolutionised the consequences of 'escape' so that it no longer entailed ostracism, as it had done before the war, and merely denoted an overcoming of destiny.

A vivid example of the transformation of the significance of 'escape' comes in *Flight Against Time* where Radwan's return from a visit to his children's home in Canada to wartorn Lebanon is described as 'escape into danger' (p. 349). But no sooner had he returned to the village than he was murdered. Was this retribution at leaving at the beginning of the war? A careful reading of the funeral passage indicates otherwise. The people at his funeral 'came to tell him that he was still one of them', and his sons comment '. . . the hint of a smile is father's message to us and his countrymen' (p. 367).

Radwan's return was his first active decision. Like the traditional village women, he had at first accepted his fate which was to wait, to wait for his children's return. He then allowed these *émigrés* to uproot him for a period, to make him act as men had acted before the war. But the war had changed norms of behaviour. Radwan could not stay outside Lebanon when it was in need. Instinctively, he returned; he 'escaped' to danger. Like the pre-war women who had defied convention, and left—'escaped'—their passive fates, he was defiantly escaping. The new consciousness reformed 'escape' as the recognition and overcoming of a condition and transformed the outcome from exclusion to inclusion. The war had made Radwan realise finally that those who had left would not return, that there was no help forthcoming from the *émigrés*. It changed expectations, but not reality. Even the migrating birds were no longer seen in September because—like the *émigrés*—they preferred the cold north to the fire

of canons and bombs (p. 130). Radwan was overcoming his passive destiny by recognising that his wait, which had been empty, could now be transformative. The condition of the new Lebanese citizen was the outcome of the two conflicting pre-war conditions of Lebanese women: the new Lebanese citizen waited but also acted within the parameters of the extended village/nation. Active waiting allowed the new citizen to plant roots into the heart of the soil. Active waiting dictated the outlines of a new patriotism.

In the aftermath of the Israeli invasion, Nasrallah wrote two collections of short stories: *Women in 17 Stories* (1984), and *The Lost Mill*.¹⁰ In the latter collection, Nasrallah reiterates, even more forcefully than in her previous war works, the difference between men's and women's reactions to war. The men left, or blindly fought losing battles so as to maintain a courageous front. The women proclaimed the need to stay. In *The Lost Mill* Nasrallah evokes the despair and anxiety of a society of alienated individuals who have lost their past and are desperately searching for an identity that does not rely on the old constructs of feudalism, mercantilism, egoism, and male emigration. Other stories tell of the war's madness and its strangeness: of *émigrés*' failures abroad and of their inability to return to the Lebanese homeland,¹¹ of people's need to communicate and of the difficulty of this communication.

The Wager satirises the Lebanese mentality. Lison is a little fellow whose intelligence and others' admiration compensate for his size. But Farid knows of Lison's weakness: his inveterate need to prove himself. One day, Farid challenges Lison to jump off a very high rock. No one thinks that Lison will accept the suicidal wager, but he does: 'He felt wings grow out of the tips of his fingers which bore him aloft' (p. 113). For a wonderful moment he feels himself fly, only to crash into the reality of his physical limits. His friends are amazed, but they do nothing to help him:

¹⁰ Three of the stories were written and published before June 1982 in the magazine *Fairuz*: 'From the Depths of the Ocean', 'The Meeting of Two Dreams' and 'Dawn'.

¹¹ The theme of permanent emigration is central to *Woman in 17 Stories*, Beirut: Mu'assasat Nawfal 1984. The villager's dreams of success in the *mahjar* have finally been exploded.

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Lison recovered from his crash and looked around. No one. Neither the friends nor their leader. Gone. . . . He got up and continued rising not on his own imaginary wings but on the hands of a giant will that had taken on the wager, challenged death and been victorious. (p. 114) .

He gives no thought to the fact that his survival was clearly a miracle, and that another time he may not be so lucky.

In *They Are Deceiving the Birds*, Nasrallah again satirises the Lebanese who, like birds in large cages, think they are free. The female protagonist exposes the charade: for her the delusion of freedom is worse than the certainty of restriction. She sees through all such foolhardiness and urges love and support of homeland.¹² These women protagonists stay but they also advocate action. In *The Wolf's Throat*, Nasrallah writes of a wolf that continually attacks a village. After one attack, the villagers gather to discuss what is to be done. The women remonstrate: 'You're wasting time talking. Tell us what to do.' As in *Dawn* the women know that 'the storm seems more violent when we stand on the look-out tower. But when we confront it, it dissipates' (p. 131). Although the recommended action is tied to superstition—the exhibition of a pair of old wolf jaws—it is action. Theory becomes practice when Faris sets out at dawn with the jaws over one shoulder and a rifle slung over the other, and the 'screams of the weak oppressed, the victims of the wolves' aggression generation after generation roaring in his ears' (p. 135).

There is action, but there is alienation also. In *A House That Doesn't Belong To Her*, the protagonist has lost her house to a bomb and is living in a friend's furnished apartment. The symbol of her alienation is the key. Every time she tries to open the door her fingers automatically pick the wrong key, the one to her old house. Every

¹² 'Life Twice', 'In Search of Randa', 'The Last Chapter' are all stories that describe women's steadfastness. The protagonist of 'The Last Chapter' is only Lebanese by marriage, yet she insists on staying even after her Lebanese husband had left. Another woman protagonist says: 'We had revived from the debris. This "we" means the residue of the city who remained, those who did not emigrate despite all the real and imaginary reasons . . . those whose houses, offices and shops were destroyed and returned to repair or rebuild.' Nasrallah, *The Lost Mill (Al-ṭāhūna al-dā'i'a)*, Beirut: Mu'assasat Naufal 1985, p. 256. Future page references will be in the essay.

time she is reassured by its familiar shape. She slips it into the keyhole, but then cannot move it. Every time she experiences the shock of separation as that which she had deluded herself to be hers is discovered to be another's. Although she lives alone, the house is peopled with objects that acquire life the moment she crosses the threshold. Photographs, whose innocent smiles have turned into 'angry shrapnel', glare down at her accusingly, constantly repeating what she already knows: she does not belong. Apologetically, she retreats from the accusing stares.¹³ She puts a package on the table but the package was bigger than the spot. It spread over its edges and threw down a small statue of a Greek god. The statue fell but did not break. She quickly removed the package and took it to the bedroom muttering apologies (p. 220).

In the bathroom, she is confronted by another foe, 'armies of bottles' that refuse to give way and allow her any space (p. 220). How is she to survive without a home as a grudgingly tolerated stranger? However unbearable such a situation may appear, for a woman it is still preferable to leaving. The staying has to be negotiated and a home found, for although the 'whole world may be one's homeland yet one needs a very tiny space in which to sink one's roots. . .' (p. 16).

These women protagonists constantly affirm the need to belong as also the need for and the difficulty of communication. The narrator of *A True Story* is searching for an audience for a story she wishes to tell. Although there are many words in Arabic for story, the one that Nasrallah uses is *hikaya*, or narration as a spoken event. The narrator takes her story to her son and then to her daughter. But before they agree to listen, they ask: "Is it a true story", "What do you consider the truth to be?" (pp. 173 and 174). Communication is suspended in favour of speculations about its nature. The narrator recognises the futility of convincing her children of the importance of the communication for its own sake. She sets off in search of a better, i.e. more passive, audience. She chooses a neighbour. But this neighbour also has demands: "Who's the story about?", "Who told it to you?" (p. 175). When she learns that it is a 'true' story—a personal

¹³ Compare with Ghada al-Samman's novel on the war *Beirut Nightmares (Kawabīs Bairūt)*, Beirut: Mansurat Ghada al-Samman 1980, where the protagonist describes in minute detail her alienation from her surroundings, pp. 34–35.

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witness—she is not convinced that such a story is really a story. In their concern that the story correspond to their needs and expectations, no one has allowed the narrator to mention the subject of her story. The narrator adamantly refuses such conditions. She has to tell the story her way, the audience must remain as passive as the reader of a written text. She pursues her quest outside where she finds the ideal audience: a man staring at the ground, his head in his hands. Her vain attempts to attract his attention reveal that this apparently ideal audience is dead (p. 177). Her first reaction is to run away lest she be accused of his murder. Her next reaction is to go to the police to tell them this story. Finally she will have an audience for a story, even though it is another story. The policeman asks her if the story is true, to which she replies:

‘I don’t know the truth.’

‘Which truth? The first or the second?’

‘The girl told me that the truth was different’

‘But the girl wasn’t with you when you were in the street.’

‘Right.’

‘So there was no witness.’

‘To what?’

‘To the truth. So you must be cross-examined under oath.’

‘Officer, you’ve got to hear the story. I’ve added absolutely nothing to it.’

‘Tomorrow in the courthouse you’ll tell it right from the beginning.’ (p. 180)

The only kind of story she can tell is one that others demand: the story of the witness in the dock. But what is this story that she so wants to tell? Is it true? Is it fictive? Is it literate? Is it oral? Is its purpose to communicate certain facts? Or does it have another function? To speak the *hikaya* of the war, the narrator must take others into consideration and engage the expectations of collective remembrance so as to be heard. She wants to speak her story, because the fictional reader as audience cannot satisfy her need for aggregation. Yet, when she has corralled a potential audience she refuses to release the reins of authorial control. She wants orality on her own terms. She rejects the conditions that others make because she needs to impose herself as only the written text can. Her story is to be

what Ong calls 'autonomous' discourse that is context-free and not subject to question. She wants to tell her story, separated from its 'living moment'. She refuses to be answerable for any of it.¹⁴ She is forced to writing.

In *A Simple Equation*, the narrator tries to delude herself that writing and speech are interchangeable so that writing may be regarded as the execution of the intention to speak. The narrator wants to tell a widow the true story of her husband's murder. When her courage fails, she writes the story down. Yet she knows that writing is not the second element of an equation whose first part is speech. Writing is an independent form of discourse that hardens language and assumes a role for the writer. What of the writer who has not defined her role? She must speak so as to maintain the momentum of disorder.

She must speak, and to preclude rejoinders, she must write. Yet she can do neither. Hers is an oral text that happens to be written. Rejecting normal modes of communication, she searches for a language that will play on the edge of silence.

In *The Window*, Rana, who is as old as the war, has lost her faculty of speech. One morning, the family awakens in the shelter and finds a window. It is a miracle. They are no longer holed up underground. However, they soon realise that Rana has painted it. She has tried to turn that subterranean cell into a balcony on life: 'she dove into the depths of human nature and extracted its best.' She 'gave the war a period with wondrous colours' (p. 237). Nasrallah reifies punctuation so that the apparatus of discourse, and not discourse with the orality/literacy dialectic, scripts the story. The only way to end the war is in art, not in a written nor in a spoken but in a painted story.

In *All Of Them Are His Mother*, feeling/empathy is offered as an alternative mode of communication. The narrator finds herself in a 'theatre'. To preclude illusion a Brechtian device is introduced.

This is not part of a Greek tragedy, but is the introduction to my story. This story happened yesterday, it's going on today, and will repeat tomorrow. Even if the

¹⁴ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*, London & NY: Methuen 1982, pp. 35, 78 and 82.

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time and place change the events will not. Heroes will be replaced as soon as they fall. The play must go on. The audience lives in anxious anticipation. (p. 195)

The action is in front of her, the only member of the audience. She assumes that the actors are acting for her since there is no one else present. Yet the masked players, who do not speak but only shout, 'seem oblivious' of her presence. Her role as audience/interlocutor is being ignored. Like the potential interlocutors in *A True Story*, she loses interest and wishes to leave. But it is not so simple. The 'theatre' has no exits: she has to stay, compelled to passive observation. She is trapped! Then, one of the players raises his mask. How long has she been there? 'Since the curtain went up.' Briefly, the line between stage and audience, between fiction and fact is sketched. So, she is in a real theatre. 'What did you see?' he asks. 'What I see now.' 'What did you understand?' She is relieved: maybe the anonymous masked players were just shouting and there was nothing more to understand? However, her relief is short-lived since she had understood nothing, why had she stayed? There were no exits. He pulls down his mask, plunging her back into her confusion and frustration. Her illusions of communication and understanding—that the shouts were shouts—are quickly shattered (pp. 197-198).

Next, a woman separates herself from the human mass. How, she asks herself, did she know that it was a woman?

From the voice. Yes. It was a wounding voice erupting out of the depths of creation and fluttering off into space spreading fear and pain.

'She's weeping for her son.'

A voice from nowhere reaches me. (p. 198)

The woman's voice is distinctive. Even if it does not utter words, it imparts meaning by creating spontaneous empathy.

The father, (inexplicably recognised as such) joins the mother and they scream together. At this point, when the parents melt into a single scream, the narrator feels the foggy barriers surrounding her understanding, dissipate. She begins to weep, to share the feelings of those people with whom she could not otherwise communicate. To communicate is not necessarily to speak, nor is it to write, but to feel and thus to belong. However, at that moment of identification with a

grief, the same disembodied voice tells her that she is not, like the rest of the players, his mother. The protagonist insists: 'But I am his mother!' (p. 199). The voice answers:

'Your tears are outside the theatre. Remember, you're the audience.'

'But I'm the participating audience.'

I was delighted with my courage. The voice was silent, or maybe it had left me to watch the scenes. Then I saw the mother's shape separate for the second, third and fourth time. Then that recurrent mother began to form a wide circle and the others became a dot to that circle. All of them are his mother (p. 200).

The symbiosis of dot and circles, of mother and mothers, is assured through the maintenance of the *Scream*. The story ends when one of the mothers approaches the narrator with arms like 'ropes of unearthly light' outstretched, beckoning her on to the stage. The narrator is about to react, when the mother turns into a huge tree. The voice explains that the mother has 'taken root in the soil' (p. 203).

It is as mother that she unites with the soil. When the voice leaves, the narrator realises that she is in the 'theatre' become forest. All of the mothers have become trees whose roots strive to reach down to the 'living principle' (p. 204).

This ending, the transformation of a mother into a tree, recalls the feminisation of society evoked in *Those Memories* and *Flight Against Time*. *All Of Them Are His Mother* confirms and extends the feminisation of Lebanon's future. All who wish to consider themselves Lebanese must stay in Lebanon and become organically part of its regenerative soil. But who can plant such roots? Mothers. It is no longer enough to be a woman, or to act as one, to be a citizen of post-invasion Lebanon.

With the invasion, writers acquired a new task. They had to learn to communicate outside the usual, now obsolete channels. Words as signifiers had lost their force in a society that refused to listen. A new language had to be found so that ear, eye, intellect and heart might be simultaneously engaged.¹⁵

¹⁵ According to Steiner, language 'shares, it mediates between, the crucial antinomies of inner and outer, subject and object, past and future, private and public. Language is

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In her seminal essay, 'Maternal thinking', Ruddick suggests a new language derived from what she calls maternal thinking.

. . . Maternal thought identifies priorities, attitudes, and virtues it conceives of achievement. Many women and some men express maternal thinking in various kinds of working and caring with others.¹⁶

Ruddick has identified three elements that characterise maternal thinking: concern for the child's preservation, growth and acceptability. In transposing these concerns to the Lebanese context, a revision of categories becomes possible. With the benefit of hindsight, it will become evident that Nasrallah, as well as others of the Beirut Decentrists, early in the war were already beginning to demonstrate a maternal attachment to Lebanon which they came to consider a child, sick and in need. As the fabric of society came unravelled, and particularly in the aftermath of the invasion, what Ruddick calls 'preservative love', which is not a feeling but rather 'an activity of caring or treasuring creatures whose well-being is at risk'¹⁷ became dominant. If writers could not awaken in others a sense of responsibility for the preservation and ultimate growth of Lebanon as a land and a people, the child already sick would surely die. The need to stay and provide models of endurance and steadfastness became a sacred duty.

Nasrallah's protagonists, as well as those of the Beirut Decentrists, demonstrate two of the characteristics of maternal thinking: concern for the preservation as well as for the growth of a pseudo-child, Lebanon. But what role does 'acceptability' play in the Lebanese context? Ruddick writes that '. . . a mother typically takes as the criterion of her success the production of a young adult acceptable to her group.'¹⁸ It is in connection with the Beirut Decentrists'

far more than communication between speakers. It is the dynamic mediation between those poles of cognition which give human experience its underlying dual and dialectical form.' George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, Oxford: OUP 1975, p. 83.

¹⁶ Sara Ruddick, 'Maternal thinking', in Joyce Trabilcot (ed.), *Motherling: Essays in Feminist Theory*, Totowa: Roman and Allanheld 1984, pp. 214 and 225.

¹⁷ Ruddick, 'Preservative love and military destruction: some reflections on mothering and peace', in Trabilcot, *Mothering*, p. 240.

¹⁸ Ruddick, 'Maternal thinking', p. 215.

dramatisation of the sniper that the last of the three characteristics of maternal thinking may be identified. With the eye of a mother, women protagonists describe snipers that are children and not anonymous personifications of impersonal war machines.¹⁹ The recognition by the women protagonists of the child in the sniper gives a measure of parental power and authority over a usually abstracted element of the war. By extension from this synecdoche, women protagonists who have arrogated to themselves the role of mother to the child sniper can then be said to have a measure of power and authority over the war itself, and over Lebanon, the sick child. The voice that Nasrallah's and the Beirut Decentrists' female protagonists had acquired by the eve of the Israeli invasion is not listed in the political chaos of the 1980s. In *The Lost Mill* it is extended and allows for a revision of behaviour in the 1975-82 period in radical feminist terms. The war has generated new values that transform what had previously been female passive into Lebanese active. In the feminisation of a collapsing society, maternal thinking, which puts the survival of the whole—the child/Lebanon—before the survival of the self, becomes an answer to the chaos of language and communication.

¹⁹ e.g. Daisy al-Amir, *In the Vortex of Love and Hate (Fī dawwāmat al-ḥubb wa 'l-karahīya)*, Beirut: Dār al-Auda n.d. (1979), pp. 69-74. Hanan al-Sheikh, *Ḥikāyat Zahra*, Beirut: Dār al-Naḥar li 'l-Nashr 1980, p. 144 (English transl., *The Story of Zahra*, London: Quartet Books 1986). Lina Makdidi Tabbara, *Survival in Beirut*, London: Onyx 1978, p. 37. See Miriam Cooke, *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* (forthcoming).