

Transnational Perspectives: War, Power, and Violence in the Work of Etel Adnan

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Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate how national literature transcends local borders and interconnects with images and realities of war, power, and violence in a transnational context. The current study attempts to position the contemporary Arab-American writer and poet, Etel Adnan (1925), within a transitional milieu that engages questions regarding what type of associations may be made among the themes under study and how dialogue between nationalism and literature does meet from the lens of a transnational perspective. Drawing upon a wide range of transnational theories and criticism, borderland theory, and Anglophone Arab feminist writing, I attempt to examine how Adnan questions, mediates, and reflects upon her transnational experience in light of what scholars such as Pries (2001), Ramazani (2009), Parker and Young (2013), Smith and Guarnizo (1998), and Jakubowicz (2012) have negotiated in this field. Through a selection of Adnan's genres and literary styles, the paper focuses on how issues of transnational ethnicity, culture, race, history, politics and multiple belongings intersect in the transnational landscapes that signify the vitality of contemporary Arab-American women's writing and give voice to the peculiarities of female subjectivity beyond borderlands. In this sense, the paper will bring to light the emerging transnational literary discourse and variations of its expressions and forms that resist the confines of national spaces and state borders.

Key words: Etel Adnan; Arab-American poetry; Transnationalism; Lebanon; War; Violence; Power

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INTRODUCTION

How can I write about Beirut? How can I collect it all in one volume: the years of pain; of watching a world collapse while trying to stave off that collapse; the layers of memories and hopes, of tragedy and even sometimes comedy, of violence and kindness, of courage and fear? (Makdisi, 1990, p.19)

How intricate can writing becomes without losing sight of realities, especially devastating and shocking realities? How perplexing is a narrator's struggle to voice his characters' ordeals and identify with their morbid fate? Moreover, how challenging is it to resolve the complexities of crossing different cultures, languages, and locations in order to create layers and layers of meanings and insights? When Makdisi (1990) wrote her memoir, *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir*, during the fifteen-year Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), she negotiated similar provocative questions regarding how to constitute and configure the complexity of writing a text about Beirut where emotions contradict or rather betray each other while recording the absurdity of the war.

On being an Anglophone writer herself, Makdisi conjures in these introductory lines of her memoir the predicament many other Anglophone Arab-American writers and poets face. In fact, Makdisi found herself confounded by multiple dilemmas, including giving the fragmentation of a war-torn city a coherent structure, sustaining a Lebanese voice, and especially reclaiming the

female struggle during and after war in a city about which Makdisi later described; “a lingering magic [. . .] that has kept me and so many others clinging to its wreckage, refusing to let go, refusing to abandon it?” More poignant is the case of other authors who have been forced to leave their homelands and who, like Makdisi, not only equate themselves with Beirut, its “wreckage,” violence, and trauma, but also explore paths of rational cosmopolitan synthesis of the city without sacrificing the specificity of the experience or remain aligned “to the linearity of the narrations of national identities and the implied violence inscribed in those very national borders that have led to the war in Lebanon[.]” as Cariello M. observes (n. p.). Transnationalism is therefore a mode of expression that enables these wandering authors to adopt a new dialect into which to reinterpret the self and venture beyond visible borders that divide the world into contradictory territories—of white and black, rich and poor, colonizer and colonized, privileged and less privileged—and at the same time transmits its narratives to a global audience.

1. TRANSNATIONALISM: BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Several influential studies that draw on transnationalism have been produced in modern culture (Bhabha, 1990; Clifford, 1992; Buell, 1994), but a few propose diverse critical visions that have paved the way for a significant corpus of cultural scholarship investigating the peculiarities of transnationalism, its processes, and practices. In her article “Transnationalism, Migration, Integration,” Jakubowicz (2012) discusses the theory of transnationalism as “a sub-field of migration theory, which in turn has evolved as a field of international relations” (p. 1). She goes on to elucidate in more detail how the former differs from the latter:

The 1990s saw an increasing shift from a view of migration that took the ideology of the nation state as its starting point towards a “transnational” perspective. Traditional migration research focuses/ focused chiefly on the various reasons for migration movements. The theoretical concept of transnationalism, by contrast, deals with the question of “how”. The emphasis is not on migration in itself, but rather on the cross-border actions of migrants and their descendants (p. 5).

In terms of transnationalism, transnational subjects, and “multifaceted” and fluid spaces, many studies call into question its most prominent features and practices. Smith and Guarnizo (1998), for instance, reflect on the nature of the condition of transnational subjects, which they conceive of as “free-floating people represented by the now popular academic adage ‘neither here nor there’ and deserves closer scrutiny” (p. 11). Furthermore, in “From immigrant to transmigrant: Theorizing transnational migration,” Schiller, Basch, and Blanc (1995) define transnationalism, as the “process by

which immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (p. 48). Likewise, Pries (2001), redefines transnational social spaces as “pluri-local frames of reference that structure everyday practices, social positions, biographical employment prospects and human identities and simultaneously exist above and beyond the social contexts of national societies” (p. 34).

Moreover, in their introduction to *Global/local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, Wilson and Dissanayaka (1996) probe the “new world-space of cultural production and national representation” and claim that cultural construction “is simultaneously becoming globalized (unified around dynamics of [...] crossing borders) and more localized (fragmented into contestatory enclaves of difference, coalition, and resistance) in everyday texture and composition” (p. 1). By a similar token, in the introduction to their notable book, *Transnationalism and Resistance: Experience and Experiment in Women’s Writing*, Parker and Young (2013) state that transnationalism replaces “the old model of center and periphery” in the sense that, while it emerges from local sites, transnationalism transcends geographical boundaries and locates itself within a global narrative (p. 1). More significantly, their book, *Transnationalism from Below*, is primarily concerned with how transnationalism “affects power relations, cultural constructions” and other related issues. The argument Smith and Guarnizo (1998) make further considers the shapes of interconnections between what is “below” and “above” in the transnational space, which, in turn, involves “a subversive popular resistance ‘from below.’ Cultural hybridity, multi-positional identities, border-crossing by marginal ‘others,’ are depicted as conscious and successful efforts by ordinary people to escape control and domination ‘from above’ by capital and the state” (pp. 5-6).

Situating poetics within a transnational framework, Ramazani’s book, *A Transitional Poetics* (2009), seeks to promote “an aesthetically attuned transnational literary criticism” through the analysis of a cluster of modern and contemporary poets (p. xi). The author acknowledges the fact that most narratives of English poetry rely on national perspectives; however, through remapping the field, he manages to show how border-crossing, migration, travel, genres, and globalization, among other aspects, have been reimagined by the poets he discusses. Ramazani’s notable study attempts to unveil the transnational implications that have remained unexplored in the target poems in relation to the poetics of transnationalism. He argues that the analysis of themes, literary forms, and aesthetics particulars can transcend national borders and reconstruct some sort of poetic dialogue that simultaneously merge cultural, geographical, and political boundaries together and recreate a transnational identity and experience (p. x-xi). The author concludes his argument hoping that “these

broad-based syntheses, groupings, and narratives, may encourage future examination of individual works and poets in a global frame” (p. xiii).

2. TRANSNATIONAL SPACES AND WOMEN'S WRITING

Across different regions of the world, transnational women's writing and its roles, practices, and innovations are beginning to take up significant positions in current debates on transnationalism. In light of arguments that transnationalism is at “a crossroads” that enables authors “to identify and celebrate local identity,” culture, tradition, and religion “without losing the unique specificities,” transnational women writers are often seen as “engaged in a dialectic of opposition and resistance” (Parker & Young, 2013, p. 4). However, “although there has been a rise in the number of studies published on women's world literature, women's role in transnational literature remains a neglected domain of research” (p. 5). In a similar vein, Majaj and Amireh (2002) claim in the introduction to their book, *Etel Adnan: Critical Essays on the Arab-American Writer and Artist*, that “this lack of attention is striking,” especially in the case of contemporary Arab women's transitional writing (p. 2-3). They further assert that it is crucial to “remedy this lack” that results from prevalent misconceptions in the west, which tend to exemplify Arab women as victims of “oppression, exploitation and violation by Arab men” (p. 3). Their book celebrates, meditates, and analyses the work of Etel Adnan, an Anglophone Lebanese author who has resided in the United States since 1925.

Through a collection of critical essays aiming to bring to light Adnan's literary stature, they attempt to perhaps bridge that gap and center stage Adnan's work that “brings Arab cultural production into the space of American and European literature” as being at the forefront of contemporary Arab women's writing (p. 1). They write, “Paradoxically, however, Adnan's body of work remains understudied, and her stature as a writer and an artist remains under-recognized in a wider sphere” in both the Arab and Western worlds (p. 1). The more critical discussions about Arab women writing that occur, they assert, the more readers, specifically Western ones, can become familiar with the Arab literary canon and its “immensely varied, accomplished and engaged creative work” (p. 8).

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In this light, the present study seeks to situate Adnan's literary oeuvre within a transitional context. My main concern is to examine a selection of Adnan's literary texts that have not yet been adequately investigated from a transnational perspective. The paper will shed

more light on how transnationalism intersects with the undertaken themes of war, power, and violence, and to what extent other notable issues and peculiarities regarding female subjectivity, including citizenship, ethnicity, culture, race, history, politics and multiple belongings beyond borderlands have been manipulated to foster the transnational experience of Adnan's work. Drawing on Adnan's multiple literary texts—such as her memoir, *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* (2005), volumes of poetry, including *Sea and Fog* (2012), *Seasons* (2008), and, her novel, *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978), *Of Cities & Women: Letters to Fawwaz* (1993), and other interviews, I examine how Adnan questions, mediates, and reflects on her transnational experience. I also consider what scholars in this field, such as Pries (2001), Ramazani (2009), Parker and Young, Smith and Guarnizo, and Jakubowicz (2012), and Anglophone Arab feminist writings have thus far discussed. In addition, the study endeavors to contribute to the work Parker and Young, Majaj and Amireh, and Ramazani have done to fill the void in critical investigation of transnational writing in general and contemporary Arab women's writing in particular.

4. BEIRUT: THE VISAGE OF WAR

During the nineteenth century, “Beirut grew demographically but also strategically to become the major commercial, banking, political and intellectual center of the whole Arab world” (Cooke, 1987, p. 15). Over the course of a senseless fifteen-year civil war, known as *Al-Harb al-Ahliyyah* or The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), the country became the stage for constant savage conflicts, political disintegration, and violent acts. Beside minority groups—including Sunnis, Christians, Jews, Shia, and Druze—Lebanon's multicultural visage also includes several migrant minorities, among them the Armenians, Palestinians, Syrians, and Kurdish. Bearing in mind this fusion of different nationalities, Shehadeh (1999), like other scholars, has described the war in Lebanon as follows:

[A] communal war between Christians and Muslims, a continuation of the 1854, 1860, and 1958 clashes, a class war between the rich and the poor, a struggle for leadership, and a war over the identity of Lebanon, whether Mediterranean or Arab (p. 11).

In Lebanese war literature, Beirut is a prevalent theme; it serves as muse and victim, a place of belonging and refuge, a paradoxical city that neither surrenders itself to resignation nor defeat. As Malti-Douglas (1991) puts it, Beirut perhaps “more than other twentieth century capitals, can pride itself on having the most blood and the most ink spilled over it” (p. 135). Massacres and kidnappings, car bombs and explosions were the daily, fatal scenarios of a war that “turned the Lebanese into

migrants, refugees, and displaced persons in their own country” (Shehadeh, 1999, p. 23-24).

Apart from the real causes leading to war in Lebanon, the literary landscape has become immersed in grotesque allusions to war. The corpus of these literary works span across diverse languages, from Arabic to English, French, or Armenian, and comprise different genres, including novels, poetry, drama, short stories, and literary essays. Prominent Lebanese women writers include Etel Adnan, Naomi Shihab Nye, Elmaz Abinader, Daisy al-Amir, Claire Gebeyli, Laila Usairan, Emily Nasrallah, Ghada al-Samman, Huda Barakat, Hanan Al-Shaykh, and Nazik Yared, whose vibrant bodies of work have become integral components of the country’s cultural history, serving as luminous testimonies to the fragmentation caused by its civil war. “The urgency and the violence of the war drove them to portray some of their most intense, traumatic experiences,” Cooke asserts (p. 2). Through their literary texts, they interweave nonviolent struggles into the fabric of various writing modes that dictate the agonies of war, as Moghadam (2007) points out when she describes “writing in a shelter, or while waiting to cross the demarcation line, or kept in a basement as a hostage” (p. 300).

5. TRANSNATIONAL CONFIGURATIONS: ADNAN AT THE CROSSROADS

Having lived in multiple locations across three different continents, Etel Adnan has found inspiration in her transnational experience, which has inspired her to produce a matrix of notable literary works that have been translated into many languages. She was born in Beirut, Lebanon in 1925 to a Greek Christian mother and Syrian Muslim father, grew up in Lebanon, and was educated in Beirut, Paris, and Berkeley. Adnan, who is at once a poet, novelist, philosophy professor, cultural activist, and painter, is widely considered one of the most versatile Anglophone Arab-American writers residing in the United States. Over the course of forty years, she has produced an array of poetry volumes, novels, memoirs, and critical essays mostly in English but also occasionally in French. Though they belong to diverse genres, languages, and opposing cultures, Adnan’s myriad narratives fuse the internal and external, the local and the foreign, memory and place, and exile and belonging, recreating a paradoxical synthesis that invites many evocative interpretations.

What is peculiar about Adnan’s literary oeuvre is that she is often caught within the frames of a crisscrossing collage where a variety of themes; home, dislocation, identity, politics, conflict, power, war, and violence intersect to deliver multilayered images rendered with different poetic techniques, and diction. In so doing, her literary production, as Shoab (2003) reminds us, “is truly transnational in its scope: Adnan meticulously confronts

the demands of defining place, history, and subjectivity, letting time and space continuously dissolve in her work” (p. 21). In this sense, readers of Adnan’s literary texts can become perplexed by the means that enable her to swiftly revisit distant territories and probe beyond borderlines one after another to build an engaging repertoire of global concerns. The rapid shifts between times and places is another of Adnan’s distinctive peculiarities, one that enables her to capture a transnational experience, articulated with “concrete images, precise words, and regional references,” which in turn interpret “untranslated aspects of reality, the local incidents of war and strife lost in the global context” (p. 23).

As a transnational female subject, Adnan time and again meditates on her mobile condition, constant travels, and the disparate locations she encounters, cities that are either war-torn or in superpower countries. The more she explores the hidden areas of her life, the more surely she arrives at the same conflicting conclusion she once reached in her memoir, *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* (2005): “I moved from city to city, travelled from person to person, and then I tried to define myself through writing, but that doesn’t work, no, not at all, it adds fiction to the fiction I became” (p. 29). Here, Adnan actually confronts the multiplicity of her transnational identity that mirrors the disillusionment of her world, in which imperial domination, political conflicts, and violent wars trouble her, a world she once described as a “disorienting wilderness” (p. 30). From this viewpoint, the relationship between Adnan herself and the outside world dictates the shape and emphasizes the paradoxical nature of the transnationalism she depicts in her book of letters, *Of Cities and Women: Letters to Fawwaz* (1993), when she writes the following lines:

We carry inside our bodies—like explosives—all the deep troubles that befall our countries ...and traveling doesn’t change anything in any way. We are the scribes of a scattered self, living fragments, as if the parts of the self were writing down the bits and ends of a perception never complete (p. 54-55).

Indeed, Adnan’s transnational reality recreates a fragmentary self and disoriented body reflected on her mode of writing, a consciousness, and knowledge that, regardless of being fluid, can still poignantly reveal the profiles of her violent world. She is deeply engaged in interpreting the world, where geographical belonging and alienation are no longer coins of a single national location. On the contrary, her transnational approach enables her to rebuild a mode of feminist resistance capable of blending and layering many representations, metaphors, and experiences in a way that brings to mind what Adnan has said of Picasso’s paintings, in which he “managed to define a place, to capture the spirit that invests a site, and which comes from a mixture of culture and geography, the one never without the other” (p. 7).

A wide range of Adnan's literary texts are replete with scenes of the wars and violence that have afflicted many cities in the modern Arab world, such as the ongoing Palestinian conflict, the Algerian War of Independence, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Beirut siege, the Lebanese Civil War, The Gulf War, and the Iraq War, to name just a few. In the case of Beirut, however, the experience of war is always overwhelming. On the brink of survival, despite the war's atrocities, Adnan declares in an interview with Lynne Tillman (1993), "there is the presence of war in almost everything I write. Beirut's importance is because of War" (p. 8). The Lebanese Civil War hence serves both a source of inspiration and motivation for Adnan to recount bleak episodes of history and resist violence in Beirut and other Arab cities through her writing. Political manifestations, historical events, and familial memories of horror and enormous casualties haunt her texts. In this context, she usually associates with Beirut the wreckage of a brutal conflict: "the misery of the homeless, the gutted streets, [...], the crumbling of the city into rich and poor, Blacks and Whites, the healthy and the sick; all the anguish, the runaway corruption, the cold panic, and the death" (p. 4).

5.1 Folding Worlds and Virtual Power

In fact, Adnan's transnational experience, which comprises her life in Lebanon, France, and America, has become a glaring site from which she can condemn violent struggles deeply rooted in what Ludescher (2003) calls "numerous episodes of wrenching personal and political turmoil during a series of catastrophic events in the Arab world" (p. 230). In different literary texts, Adnan positions her narratives within a political space, questioning the politics of war, the interrelations between imperial powers and the rest of the world, and the violent acts these powers generate. At times, she expresses bewilderment, wondering, "who committed the crimes, the massacres, the horrors? And if one was merely a pawn, is one not responsible for having accepted to play the role?" (1993, p. 77). On other occasions, when she reflects upon the desolation caused by a merciless war, her voice conveys the insanity of war while arriving at a morbid conclusion: "[m]aimed landscapes, raped women, overflowing garbage, trees dying of thirst in a breeze loaded with cement dust; it's all part of the whole, and the whole is reduced to the waste" (p. 33).

In this light, Adnan's transnational poetics particularly convey what Smith and Guarnizo (1998) earlier explained regarding power relations between the "below" and "above" (p. 5-6). In her significant volume of poetry, *Seasons* (2008), Adnan translates these relations through theme, language, and metaphor, which overlap in the evocative political dialogue that unfolds in the volume:

As Earth doesn't expand, power does, and may get out of hand.
By consuming itself it will consume this turbulent planet,
including its volcanoes. Does one leave in one's room a shape

emptied of its body? Its mind? Is mind more ubiquitous than flesh? If so, they're not homogenous, but alien to each other, though interdependent. Is reality to be trusted? There are gaps into which we either fall to die or to start living (p. 2).

These lines grapple with a murky prophesy that dominant powers, whether political, imperial, or economic, will rise to diminish "this turbulent planet." Adnan negotiates the dual strategies behind these different kinds of global expansion that dominate, alienate, and separate people from themselves and from the world they inhabit. In this sense, this text invites contemplation on the relation between power, body, and the homogenization of experience. She compares the crisis of alienation through various places, cultures, and races to "alien" fragments of body, mind, and flesh. Furthermore, a strong air of suspicion constitutes the lines, emerging through the rapid series of questions the speaker uses to express the futility of life and the "gaps into which we either fall to die or to start living."

In her influential poem, "It was Beirut, All Over Again" (1990), Adnan opens another chapter in her exploration of trauma, chaos, and death in order to reflect the complexity of war in Beirut, a world of fluctuating boundaries:

And it is Beirut all over again
because people are running
to keep their belly and their brain
in line,
carrying their honor as their sole
piece of luggage
and counting the dead
among themselves
the way we count pennies
in the cities of Power (p. 21)

While still inhabiting her transnational space and positioning herself at the margins of a patriarchal society, Adnan delves into national concerns. The above lines do not serve as strands of memories or personal thoughts. Instead, they reflect traumatic segments of a social reality that the Beiruters themselves were destined to endure. Adnan's transnational images capture the loss and violence that Beirut denotes and expose the minute specificities of Lebanese culture and history, describing the Lebanese as "carrying their honor as their sole piece of luggage," and, more significantly, rethink power relations between two opposing territories. Adnan, who conceives of exaggerated power as "a rape of the other, a humiliation" and a sign of "the powerlessness of the others," deliberately uses patriarchal language to enrich her transnational dialogue (Weaver, 1986, n. p.). The use of "they" and "we" not only widens the distance between the two locations the people in the above passage occupy—those who are "counting the dead among themselves" and those who "count pennies/ in the cities of Power"—but also equates Adnan's voice of struggle with Lebanon itself.

5.2 War and Violence: Images and Realities

Adnan's preoccupation with Beirut's civil war is not confined to this particular city; instead, her attempts to make sense of the personal implications of war and violence throughout the world, especially in the Middle East, shape her transnational experiences (Shoaib, 2003, p. 21). She describes nightmarish conflicts between Iraqis during the Gulf War, the dispossession of the Palestinians, the tragedy of the siege of Tell El Zaatar, and the Israeli invasions through her poetic personas as well as fictional narrators who are never romantic nor imaginative but rather realistic and rooted in a transnational context. She uses this technique in her war novel, *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978), based on a real incident, the kidnapping of Marie Rose Boulos, a Syrian immigrant who taught deaf-mute children in Palestinian camps. In narrating the murder of Marie by Christian militia during the conflict, the novel harshly critiques war, hegemony, and political oppression, all of which had long been practiced in powerless world states, including Lebanon.

The war theme of the novel intersects with another vital theme of displacement and wandering when, adopting an autobiographical tone, the narrator speaks of Adnan's personal experiences and how she was forced to abandon her homeland, her family, and cultural roots because of Lebanon's Civil War. Adnan, whose exile spans decades, foregrounds her narrative text by adopting a fierce stance of resistance against the hierarchical powers that participated in the genocide in her country. In graphic detail, she illustrates how her war-torn city has brought

the flaws and vengeance, the guilt and debauchery of the whole world into her own belly. Now she has thrown it all up, and that vomit fills all her spaces. . . . This city is like a great suffering being, too mad, too overcharged, broken now, gutted, and raped (p. 20).

The passage obviously serves as an allegorical manifestation of Adnan's transnational concerns, modes of resistance, and efforts to escape violent domination. From the perspective of a female narrator, she explores a feminist dialect of opposition while at the same time formulating new paths of meanings by relocating transnational subjectivities. The lines recreate a boundless space where Beirut is akin to an unfortunate woman whose life has been associated with disgrace, madness, and subordination. The fusion of language and emotions conjures depressing memories, numerous instances, and other people's stories of war, particularly women. Moreover, these components are only parts of the whole, the whole that Adnan and her female personas/narrators constantly negotiate and confront. That is how Adnan and other women living through war, the unspeakable violence, trauma, and perhaps absurdity of the war experience, as the following lines suggest:

People have all sorts of stories to tell me. They insist on praising the heroic feats of war that shouldn't inspire any pride. But for the stories of women, it's something else. The women have kept contact with the earth, if I may say, in the ancient roles of witnesses and memory keepers. . . . It is women who speak of war (Shehadeh, 1999, p.74).

As in *Sitt Marie Rose*, other telling texts including Adnan's memoir, *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*, translate women's war testimonies and, in doing so, call to mind what Makdisi (1990) said earlier about witnessing war in Beirut. Adnan questions the validity of war and what sort of triumphs, if any, this city had gained from its fifteen-year conflict: "we were foolish and paid for it dearly. People were being assassinated as if they were flies and we went on dreaming, thinking that each defeat would lead to victory" (2005, p. 30). After fleeing Beirut in 1975 and living in eternal exile in California ever since, Adnan is searching for meaning behind the violence that has dissolved across multiple spaces within her postwar city. Downtown, the Hamra streets, the southern suburbs of Beirut, Ain el-Rummaneh, East Beirut, the Karantina slum, and Damour are only ruined sites of the bloody massacres her memoir often depicts:

Meanwhile Beirut moans and burns. But not a single voice is to be heard on behalf of the torn muscles, blinded eyes, cigarette-burned faces, vertebrae broken with an axe. . . . It is as if Beirut has become an anatomy treatise that one reads in some dark corner of hell (p. 14).

These facades of urban violence go hand in hand with the Arab-American milieu. In the same memoir, Adnan captures the sense of emptiness and meaninglessness that she experiences in California, her second world. She meditates on her problematic position of being lost between two worlds as she reflects in these lines:

My references belonged to two worlds, and were forcing me to shift gears, so to speak, to be mobile, edgy, and, most of all, vulnerable. I was used to a world now remote and, at the same time, getting used to a new one that was also my old world, and somewhere, deep inside, I was alien to both (p. xii).

On the thematic level, the two worlds she describes here are two creative sources of the dominant themes that intersect in her border space. Alternatively, these worlds generate layers of transnational expressions that hover between the heart of the war and the heart of empires and outside political powers. The worlds also morbidly complement each other, the Lebanese war leading to Adnan's exile thus fostering her transnationalism as much as her rootlessness does. This condition enables Adnan to speak in various voices and articulate a matrix of issues that reveal her political awareness and poetic sensibility. This acute sense of the parallelism between her two worlds nurtures her transnational awareness, as Raja-e Busailah (1986) explains, writing that "by any standard she is a rebel. Arab society—especially Lebanese—and Western society—especially American—are not only a disillusionment to her, but also objects of

strong, often harsh criticism motivated by frustration and compassion” (p. 304).

As a transitional subject, Adnan explicitly inhabits these conflicting worlds, shifting rapidly from one into another, and reimagining different spatial identities. In her volume of poetry, *Sea and Fog* (Adnan, 2012), we hear an alienated voice identifying itself with fog when she writes:

I return to the
fog because
it is me,
it has a magnitude
that humans
lack, it covers
spaces (p. 107).

In other instances, the voice transforms itself into a furious echo of a postcolonial subject when the persona alludes to: “[a] fractured skull lies on the sidewalk, a victim of imperial power. / Civilization is built on the ability to corrupt” (p. 77). Besides these double voices, Adnan speaks of the fate of other transnational subjects elsewhere, when she says, “[o]ur souls are sinking, / making muffled sounds, / our lives defoliated. / Trees losing their names along their leaves” (*Seasons*, 2008, p. 33). These voices are acts of resistance and restless attempts at identification. The physical and imaginative mobility of Adnan’s transnational personas/characters enables them to explore numerous geocultural spaces—Iraq, Paris, New York, and California—and negotiate the specificities of Mediterranean countries’ political histories. Furthermore, the previously quoted extracts imply what Ramazani (2009) explains regarding poetic dialogue that simultaneously merges several boundaries together. In this sense, Adnan manages to employ her aesthetic particularities to highlight her transnational obsession. The metaphor of the fog signifies the personal experience of alienation that has “a magnitude / That humans / Lack,” a consequence of being a victim of imperial power, a state implied by the image of a “fractured skull.” In addition, Adnan heightens the atmosphere of emptiness when she likens sinking souls to trees “losing their leaves” while speaking of a communal experience.

This discussion leads us to reconsider how Adnan conceives of poetry and the nature of its role in relation to transnationalism. Her perception of poetry reveals what she feels and confronts in her transnational world:

Poetry reaches the unsaid, and leaves it unsaid. It’s familiar, it’s indecently close, overpowering at times, as gray as cloudy skies over melancholy mountain ranges; It’s what it is, and forever the question remains about its nature, and why we’re still looking for an answer (*Sea & Fog*, p.42).

Art and philosophy, intrinsic components of Adnan’s poetics, further foster her individual vision. She deliberately interprets poetry in the same manner in which she defines the self, place, objects, and other elements of

her world. What appears to be even more intricate to her work than the world she lives in is the genre of poetry itself and its verbal power to speak the unspeakable. Adnan’s argument problematizes the genre, its nature, and perhaps the process of poem creation. Ironically, her poetry mirrors this problematization in the way her personas reveal their resistance and opposition, upheaval of history, and dislocation.

Adnan believes exaggerated power to be emblem of violence and conflict, devoting a large portion of her work to bring to light various forms of political violence, including wars, conflicts, and genocides. In her memoir, she reflects on a series of concrete images of barbed wires and what these images might suggest:

[B]arbed wire, emblem of our civilization [...]. Haven’t we seen images of human flesh scattered on their spikes like debris from a shipwreck? Much more, these wires have become models for all the invisible lines that separate people, nations, continents. The longest barbed-wire frontier is the one that runs between rich and poor nations, the politics has turned into the art of keeping this stretched line stretched as long as possible (Heart, 2005, p.77).

There are many allusions to wars and mascaras from Palestine, through Lebanon, Iraq, Bosnia and Vietnam that illustrate how a transnational writer like Adnan narrates the violence of wars in gendered memories and stories. In effect, the use of different acts of political violence lay claim to what Shoaib (2003) explains, observing that “[a]t the core of Adnan’s poetry is the material political world that is coordinated with the inner landscape of thought and memory that poetry originates from” (p. 21). Adnan’s fusion of memory and thought through the use of telling symbols, images, and metaphors is notable. She thinks of barbed wire, which again suggests warfare and bloody battles, as indicative of the state of modern civilization. The picture becomes more dismal as Adnan observes how political violence perpetuates poverty and distorts social texture through discrimination.

5.3 Post-war Beirut and Fading Borders

Through her transnational landscape, Adnan not only explores issues such as the atrocities of war, political conflicts and violence, eternal exile, and the multiplicity of the self, but also acknowledges the aftermath of the Lebanese war and how its impact redefined the contours of her border-crossing journey. In her book, *Of Cities & Women (Letters to Fawwaz)*, Adnan (1993) posted several letters to Fawwaz Traboulsi, an exiled Lebanese writer, from Amsterdam, Barcelona, Aix-en-Provence, Murcia, Skopelos, Berlin, Beirut, and Rome. In her nine letters to Traboulsi, she engages in a virtual tour, identifying the world she traverses, observing composite cultures, and meditating on the war’s nightmarish ravages.

In these letters, as in Adnan’s other writing, she revisits historic spaces, such as those of the massacre of indigenous Americans, the Lebanese Civil War, World

War II, the Gulf War, and others. The political tensions she reveals in doing this connect the past and present, the old world and the modern one, and portrayals of war by women and men. Spanning the three years after the close of *Al-Harb al-Ahliyyah*, Adnan's letters, specifically the ones from 1991-1992 on Beirut, are testimonies to the aftermath of war. In her transnational voice, Adnan comments on how these catastrophic events have distorted the profile of the city, its people, and nature, relating this phenomenon to a world canvas full of conflicting powers. The portrait of prewar Beirut dissolves as its deteriorating postwar condition takes over, as Adnan illustrates here:

[I]t was the center of an Orient it had never bothered to know, and now it seems to be outside the interest of the Great Powers. It allows its wounds to show wherever it is unable to conceal them, without recrimination, without tears, without begging (*Cities*, p.75).

Beirut which was the stage of a war without victory, is represented as a woman, as often it has been in Adnan's writing, whose wounds are unlikely to heal. This torn city hovers on the edge of "rotting, burdened with a heavy sorrow" and losing its vigor and glory (p. 74). The Hamra, Ras-Beirut, the Downtown area, and the southern suburbs of Beirut became a heap of slums, blackened buildings, and sidewalks. Whether they are pushcart vendors, mechanics, beggars, bums, or hustlers, Beiruters were born to be the spectators of this violent war. The picture of postwar Beirut is as dismal as its shocking past:

A few beggars can be seen here and there, usually women holding sick or maimed children on their laps, seated on caved-in sidewalks, near the trash bins, as if they felt a secret and powerful kinship between their condition and the ruins (p. 77).

The affinity between women and ruins of the city calls to mind Adnan's deliberate use of women to bring about the paradoxical nature of war. They figure significantly in her stories of war and its aftermath, as she gives living snapshots of these female trauma survivors in a place where the sense of "peace is so fragile that anxiety is quick to rise in one's heart" (p. 77). In this vein, Adnan's journey to postwar Beirut, into the unknown and unpredictable, is only one segment of her metropolitan journeys, which include trips to Rome, Berlin, and Paris, themselves iconic survivors of brutal wars.

Adnan broadly ponders the condition of her postwar city in conjunction with the world at large and its disorder, speculating that "[t]he fact is that the city is not dead, but simply disfigured. Its ruins make you dream, to the point of morbidity, of its former beauty. Everything becomes a subject for meditation" (p. 104). Adnan here voices not only her people's conception of their city but also other Arabs' view of Beirut, once called "the jewel of the Mediterranean" (Cooke, 1987, p. 15). Moreover, her

transnational endeavors enable her to reposition Beirut in relation to other cities, countries, and continents when she concludes, "Beirut is a good place for meditating on the world's condition [...]. One could say that it's an exemplary city, a prototype for the future" (p. 109). What the future holds for the rest of the world is probably what Adnan is either anxious to disclose or reluctant to imagine. She represents postwar Beirut as a fragment and fluid entity, a living model that preserves the grotesque characteristics of other locations.

CONCLUSION

Adnan's Lebanese culture and war play an explicit, key role not only in the formation of her Arab-American identity, but also her transnational experience. Therefore, her thematic concerns with war, power, and violence serve as a series of interconnected transnational sources that maintain sight of how women's writing celebrates national identity while transcending global shifts. Through her poems and novels, memoir and letters, Adnan reflects the observation Parker and Young (2013) make regarding the insights transnationalism offers, noting, "we look to influences of the past and how that past is being reread, but we also look to the future and to the new post-national era and what this era might mean" (p. 6). Adnan's distinctive past and present, her art and philosophy, and her constant moves and travels foreground her transnational perceptions and enable innovative forms of expression. According to Adnan, the future of Lebanon and the rest of the world will remain intimidating as long as political aggression continues and superior powers stay intact.

In her transnational writing, then, Adnan generates a notable sense of urgency, situating herself into a position of resistance against acts of assimilation or integration into models of power and hegemony. Her experience of war and its aftermath is rendered an experiment in illustrating how violence, driven by patriarchal powers, impacts the destinies of nations and alters the modern world order. By portraying multiple variations of transnational sites, she preserves the specificities of her national culture, meditating on the ruins of small towns and districts, celebrating the survivors of war, and reviving their traumatic histories. However, her transnational tools enable her to transcend the restrictions of her Lebanese identity and cross border spaces to transmute alternative visions of self-discovery, war-torn Beirut, and an unsettled world. In this manner, Adnan's literary output and nationalism are two icons from which she initiates, explores, and develops a synthesized, transnational perspective that preserves her distinguished literary stature in contemporary transnational women's writing.

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