LEBANON AND EGYPT: THE CONSTRUCTION OF A VITAL SPACE IN WOMEN'S FRANCOPHONE WRITING[1]

Laura Restuccia[*]

Abstract

This contribution outlines the developments of the French-speaking literary production of the Mashriq, from its debut in the last decades of the nineteenth century up to the 1980s, from a gender perspective. Specifically, approaching the female literary universe of Lebanon and Egypt entails referring to cultural contexts in which women have historically suffered forms of exclusion and marginalisation, if not outright oppression, and in which solidly patriarchal and hierarchical family structures have often found in the religious faith a justification facilitating the perpetration and diffusion of such discrimination. In this context, literary writing has played a fundamental role as women are able to express their own points of view. Exploring a variety of narrative genres, they present, at the level of content, the multifaceted nature of their ordeals: war, destruction, social conflicts, the horror of violence, the loss of freedom. The outcome is a female writing characterised by a strong social commitment, one which promotes intellectual survival, serving as a complaint, a protest, a tool for awakening the conscience of their fellow countrymen about their own destinies and for making their voices heard by those outside their countries, regions and cultures as well.

Keywords: Mashriq, Lebanon, Egypt, gender literature, French-speaking literature.

The Mashriq designates the Arab East however its geographical limits vary considerably depending on the sources or theories. In its most widely accepted geographical sense, the Mashriq includes Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Palestine and Kuwait although, for the cultural aspect, Israel would remain excluded. For obvious reasons of space, I am going to present in this article only a selection from the women's Francophone writing of Lebanon and Egypt which are, without a doubt, the countries in which the Francophone literary heritage is richer and more varied.

* Università di Palermo

1 This article was translated by Richard E. Burcket.

I will specifically include Andrée Chedid, Amy Kher, Jeanne Arcache and Yasmine Khlat, among others. I am going to argue how the simple nationality has not a specific meaning to the literary production of these writers, indeed some of them can be seen as belonging to both Lebanese and Egyptian literature according to the perspective of the topic analysed.

Trying to outline the developments of the literary production of the Mashriq, departing from a gender perspective, inevitably involves a double risk: on the one hand, as it happens when approaching any other literary universe, there is the risk of 'ghettoising' women's writing within a category of its own by assuming a separation from its male counterpart; on the other, moving within a universe crossed by profound linguistic, historical, political, cultural and religious differences whose boundaries we do not deeply understand, there is the risk that we may formulate simplistic and reductive approaches. Indeed, approaching the female literary universe of Lebanon and Egypt certainly entails referring to cultural contexts in which women have historically suffered forms of exclusion and marginalisation, if not outright oppression, and in which solid patriarchal and hierarchical family structures have often found in religious faith an alibi which, while not deriving directly from it, justifies and facilitates the perpetration and diffusion of certain sexist behaviours. In this context, as in other similar ones, literary writing, which has been long described and interpreted by the male literary world, serves as a crucial form of expression for women's points of view.[2] Since the appearance of women writing, between the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, women in this region have used literature as a tool for defining their role in society and within the family, undermining from within, with different levels of supremacy and political activism, the deeply rooted patriarchal system. In short, writing has emerged as a strategic practice for overcoming the strict role assigned to them by the society determined by gender belonging and, at the same time, for redefining the women as active part of the same society which marginalised them.[3]

2 For an overview of this topic, see: M. Bradan, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and Making of Modern Egypt*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995; M. Takieddine Amyuni «A Panorama of Lebanese Women Writers, 1975-1995», in L. Rustum Shehadeh *Women and War in Lebanon*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1999, pp. 89-111; C. Boustani, *Effects du féminin: variations narrratives francophones*, Paris, Khartala, 2003.

3 See: M. Cooke «Arab Women Writers», in M. M. Badawi, *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Modern Arabic literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 443-462.

Before going into the specific cross-section of women's French-speaking literary production in Lebanon and Egypt, it is useful to note that this literature is, in general, little known to Western readers, for two principal reasons: first, because these authors write in a second language, albeit not a foreign one,[4] in a mostly Arabic-speaking region of the world, they remain, especially in Egypt, mostly marginalised within their own country; second, because even outside this region, they are victims of widespread ignorance about the historical reasons for the presence of the French language in these countries.[5] Nevertheless, it should also be remembered that, although Lebanese and Egyptian Francophone literatures continue to proliferate today, their authors, who now live in French-speaking countries, direct their works to an audience of French-speaking readers and publish them in their adopted countries. This is why I have chosen to limit my examples only to the period up to the 1980s.

The historical events that have occurred in the Middle East have resulted in the mixing of populations from places outside the region as well as an ineluctable migration, both between countries of the region and beyond the region's borders, by many people forced to flee in search of safety. The pursuit of economic power for the assertion of hegemony over the region – first by the Ottoman Empire, then France and Great Britain – also led, at least until the early decades of the twentieth century, to a continuous movement of people among nations.[6] Today, to attribute many writers and their works to one specific country or another becomes particularly problematic and it is precisely for this reason that certain authors are cited as belonging to the literary heritage of more than one country, while others, though officially citizens of one nation, have ended up rooting their literary and intellectual activity in an adopted state. The first of the problems that we have to face while navigating within the literary panorama of this region is, in fact, the very definition of *belonging* to a geographical area.[7] Although the

4 See C. Majdalani *Petit traité des mélanges*, Beirut, Layali, 2002, p. 29.

5 See: J. Ascar-Nahas *Les amis de la culture française en Egypte (1925-1945)*, Le Caire, Éditions Horus, 1945; J. Ascar-Nahas, Égypte et culture française, Le Caire, Éd. de la Société Orientale de Publicité, 1953; S. Abou *Le bilinguisme arabe-français au Liban*, Paris, PUF, 1962; N. Gueunier *Le français du Liban: cent portraits linguistiques*, Paris, Didier Érudition, 1993.

6 See: S. S. Friedman, *A History of the Middle East*, Jefferson (NC), McFarland, 2006.

7 For a more complete overview of this literature, see: Z. Ramy *Dictionnaire de la littérature libanaise de langue française*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1998; M. Kober, I. Fenoglio & D. Lancon (eds.), *Entre Nil et Sable, écrivains d'Egypte d'expression française*, preface by R. Sole, Paris, Publication du Centre National de Documentation Pédagogique, 1999.

problem of belonging to a religion or cultural community still seems very important today, nationality is increasingly becoming an essential point of reference for the affirmation of identity.[8]

Lebanon, an unavoidable crossing point between the West and the Arab world, is also a point of intersection among three cultures due to its geo-political position. France's presence in the area began with the Crusades, but the use of the French language became important only from the sixteenth century when Francis I signed an agreement (1535) with Suleiman the Magnificent granting missionaries and merchants entry to the territory. In 1860, after the conflicts in Damascus and Mount Lebanon, France sent an expedition with the excuse of protecting Christian minorities from the Ottoman Empire. This circumstance accelerated the progressive and increasingly widespread use of the French language, which was finally affirmed after 1920 with the establishment of the League of Nations mandate which would last until 1943, when Lebanon obtained its independence. The use of the French language started in Egypt with Napoleon Bonaparte's expedition (1798-1801) and spread thanks to the admiration that the aristocracy and bourgeois families had, right from the start, for the culture of *l'Hexagone*, so much so that they entrusted their children's education to French missionaries who introduced their language in schools. It soon became a language of political and commercial mediation thanks also to the birth of numerous "*Sociétés savants*" [learned societies] and "*Cercles littéraires et Artistiques*" [literary and artistic circles].[9]

Moreover Egypt received a strong French influence and even if after 1802, it was no longer officially under French military occupation but the two countries maintained cultural relations – even though not always peaceful – until the 1970s. Starting from the 1860s, the use of French in Egypt had grown stronger with successive waves of Lebanese and Syrian Christian immigration as they tried to escape the repeated religious massacres that were occurring in their homelands. During this period, in

8 See: Z. Darwiche Jabbour, *Littératures francophones du Moyen-Orient: Egypte, Liban, Syrie*, Aix-en-Provence, Édisud, 2007; J.-Fr. Durand & M. Del Fiol (eds.), «Regards sur les littératures francophones du Moyen-Orient. Egypte, Liban», *Interculturel-Francophonies*, n. 14, November 2008.

9 See: D. Gérard, «Le choix de la langue en Égypte. La langue française en Égypte dans l'entre-deux-guerres», *Les Langues en* Egypte, series I, n. 27-28, 1996, pp. 253-284; J.-J. Luthi, *La littérature d'expression française en Egypte: 1798-1998*, foreword by B. Boutros-Ghali, introduction by M. Genevoix, Paris-Montréal, L'Harmattan, 2000, especially pp. 25-30 [the first edition appeared as J.-J. Luthii, *Introduction à la littérature d'expression française en Egypte (1798-1945)*, Paris, Éditions de l'École, 1974].

fact, Egypt guaranteed a certain level of freedom to those dwelling on its soil, this same freedom would not be guaranteed in the future countries of Lebanon and Syria.These are the historical reasons that make it difficult to attribute a nationality to some Middle Eastern writers. In many cases, they were French people temporarily or permanently settled in Egypt; in other cases, they were individuals who began their literary careers on the banks of the Nile and were then forced to live abroad. Still others, born in Lebanon, ended up residing in Egypt.

Many of the authors that will be discussed here, in fact, claim a sense of belonging to both of these two countries. Andrée Chedid herself and, to limit ourselves to just a few other examples, Amy Kher – who held a literary salon in Alexandria called "*Le petit Rambouillet*" – Jeanne Arcache and Yasmine Khlat, can be seen as belonging to both Lebanese and Egyptian literature, depending on the topic addressed in their works. Despite the circularity of national belonging and the fact that there are common traits and ideas in the women's writing of these countries, the diversity of historical and political events behind the spread of the French language does not allow us, indeed, to talk about women's literary production as a single entity since the texts of the writers considered are profoundly marked by the cultural domination of Western powers which have contributed to different layers of the struggle against the political and cultural penetration and to the hegemony exercised by the colonising countries.[10] There is no doubt, that, Lebanese and Egyptian literatures, although addressing different issues are closely intertwined by certain common historical traits that these countries faced (and still do) such as exile and emigration.[11]

Since the first decade of the twentieth century in Lebanon and Egypt, women have felt the need to speak up in order to free themselves from the role attributed to them due to their gender while, at the same time, claiming precisely a specificity based on their gender.[12] Among the pi-

10 See: «Introduction», in L. Suhair Majaj, P.W. Sunderman, & T. Saliba (eds.), *Intersections, Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2002, pp. XX-XXI.

11 See: J.-J. Luthi, *La littérature d'expression française en Egypte: 1798-1998*, *op. cit.*; S. Khalaf (ed.), *Littérature libanaise de langue français*, Ottawa, Naaman, 1981; M. Kober, I. Fenoglio & D. Lançon (eds.), *Entre Nil et sable: Écrivains d'Egypte d'expression française (1920-1960)*, *op. cit.*; N. Mansour Zakka *Littérature libanaise contemporaine: aspects thématiques*, Holy Spirit University of Kaslik, 2000.

12 See: M. Cooke, «Arab Women Writers», in M. M. Badawi, *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Modern Arabic literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 443-462.

oneers, I should certainly mention May Ziyadah: a lively scholar who attended the religious school of Antoma. She stood out, above all, for her ability to learn languages. With a perfect knowledge of Arabic and French, along with fluency in German, English, Italian, Greek and Latin, she was able to read works by different authors and from different eras directly in their original language. In 1908, she moved to Cairo where her father directed the magazine *Al-Mahroussa* and where she began her university career in literature. A courageous and strong-willed woman, she is still remembered today for her feverish activity in favour of female emancipation from ignorance and the yoke of out-dated traditions. In 1911, under the pseudonym Isis Copia, she self-published the poetry collection *Fleurs de rêves* in which her verses speak of an ephemeral happiness capable of transporting her, in the magic of a dream, beyond the limits of a monotonous existence. Her militancy in support of women's causes blossomed at a time when the feminist movement was still taking its first timid steps, but her message already anticipated demands that are perhaps still far from being realised and shared today. Her idea of female emancipation, in fact, was that of a woman who manages to be free from male control without sacrificing her femininity. Just as a man tries to claim and affirm his virility, a woman must exalt her nature, contrasting the male's virile strength and arrogance with the female's tenderness, grace and feeling.[13]

In the years of the French Mandate (formally in force between 1923 and 1943, though the presence of French troops until 1946), the political climate changed and intellectuals were divided between the defenders and opponents of "Greater Syria." In this phase, a large group of young intellectuals gave life to the "Libanisme phénicien" movement. These young people, of a Francophile nature and with an ideology contrary to the nascent Arab nationalism, saw in the jurisdiction of France on Lebanese territory a possible way out. The members of the movement gathered around *La Revue Phénicienne* (the Phoenicians review) with the aim of bringing out French-speaking literature. Poems or short texts were published in the magazine that traced the poetic works of Symbolism and Parnassianism. Parallel to this civil commitment, feminist movements were also developing. In 1942, Victoria Khozami created the foundations of a women's social organisation that would be established in 1943 with the name "Social

13 See: M. Booth, «Biography and Feminist Rhetoric in Early Twentieth Century Egypt: Mayy Zyada's Studies of Three Women's Lives», *Journal of Women's History*, 3, n. 1, 1991, pp. 38-64; A. Ziegler, «'Al-Haraka Baraka! The Late Rediscovery of Mayy Zyada's Works», *Die Welt des Islams*, 39, n. 1, 1999, pp. 103-115.

Democratic Women's League," open to all women without religious distinction. Among the main objectives of the League were the fight against poverty and inequality.

A flourishing literary production, primarily by female authors, emerged to enrich the Francophone literary panorama in the decade from 1960-1970. These writers present a new figure of a woman who approaches creative writing not as a form of compensation for the frustrations she has suffered, but as an instrument for overcoming them. These are women who, freed from any feelings of narcissism, question the world that opens up to their gaze as a place to explore and discover. Among them, Nadia Tuéni was perhaps one of the most interesting poets of this period. Daughter of a Lebanese father and a Franco-Algerian mother, she always felt her dual cultural belonging was a precious heritage to be defended. She published her first collection of poetry, *Les textes blonds*,[14] at the age of twenty-eight, but the history of her people comes out with particular force in *Poèmes pour une histoire*,[15] which combines the themes of exile and the search for roots. But we must also mention Nohad Salameh who, though the daughter of a poet who wrote in Arabic, was secure in her double identity and chose French as the language of creation and expression. Since her first collection, *Les enfants d'avril*,[16] the themes that would populate her subsequent poetry were immediately evident: exile, love, double identity and belonging. Particularly interesting within the substantial fictional production by women in this period are also the works of Éveline Bustros who, in *Sous la baguette du coudrier*,[17] in telling a story of adultery and a consequent "honour killing," denounces archaic customs of the mountains, and those of Andrée Chedid, of Lebanese origin but born in Cairo and naturalised French, who was also the author of numerous poetry collections.

In Chedid's narrative works,[18] the idea of a journey, be it dreamlike, poetic, interior or of initiation, is constantly present, expressing the reality of a people made nomadic by necessity. Simply put, it was precisely in the 1960s that women imposed a new face on literature. It was a nationalist literature, no longer limited to the simple imitation of European models but

14 Beirut, Dar an-nahar, 1963.
15 Paris, Seghers, 1973.
16 Paris, Les Temps Parallèles, 1980.
17 Beirut, self-published collection, later in *Romans et écrits divers*, Beirut, Éditions Dar An-Nahar, 1988.
18 Her notable early novels include *Le sommeil délivré* (Paris, Stock, 1952), *Jonathan* (Paris, Seuil, 1955), *Le sixième jour* (Paris, Julliard, 1960), and *La maison sans racines* (Paris, Flammarion, 1985) stands out among her more recent works.

expressing an authentic literary inventiveness by adopting new genres to that field, such as drama or the non-fiction essay. Towards 1960, in fact, the theatrical genre developed thanks to the creation of a university centre for drama studies in Beirut and the foundation of a theatre by the young author, Gabriel Boustany, who would inaugurate the new institution by putting on stage a play he had composed himself.[19] Women made their presence felt in this field as well: just think of the dramaturgical activity of Andrée Chedid, whose success in this area was based primarily on three plays: *Les nombres*,[20] *Bérénice d'Egypte*[21] and *Le montreur*.[22] The first, written immediately after the Israeli-Palestinian war, was inspired by the Bible; the second, also rooted in antiquity, addresses the problem of power by setting the story in the age of the Pharoahs – a subject that would also be taken up in her next novel, *Néfertiti et le rêve d'Akhnaton*[23] – while the third stands out for its originality and the lyricism that creeps into the action, giving a particular charm to it.

In Lebanon, starting from the civil war that broke out on April 13, 1975 and which lasted for fifteen years, literature was oriented towards existential questions. One of the central themes of that period was, of course, war. Indeed, the civil war was followed, first in 1978 and then in 1882, by the invasion of the southern part of the country by Israeli troops, resulting in numerous casualties and deaths and the destruction of entire villages. Although the West tends to forget the war in Lebanon, and the postwar governments have tried to erase its memory, such oblivion was impossible for the Lebanese, and their literature, in its various genres, certainly represents it. In terms of poetic production, collections of poems increased exponentially, and, once again, the most sensitive writers paying attention to events were women.[24] Among others, it is worth mentioning Vénus Khoury-Ghata, who expresses the anguish of death which people suffering a war must confront. The collections *Au sud du silence*[25] and *Les ombres et leurs cris*[26] are closely tied to the Lebanese tragedy, which memory continued to linger, like an indelible nightmare, in the subsequent collections *Fables pour*

19 *Le retour d'Adonis*, 1963.
20 Paris, Seuil, 1968.
21 Paris, Seuil, 1968.
22 Paris, Seuil, 1969.
23 Paris, Flammarion, 1974.
24 See: M. Takieddine Amyuni, «A Panorama of Lebanese Women Writers, 1975-1995», *op. cit.*, pp. 89-111.
25 Paris, Librairie Saint-Germain-des-Près, 1975.
26 Paris, Belfond, 1979.

un peuple d'argile[27] and *Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits*.[28] The poet rebels against the absurdity of war and considers it unthinkable that fighters, from whatever side they are on, would establish relationships of complicity with foreign powers against their own fellow citizens. Therefore, in her view, it is not a real civil war but rather a war of "others" fought on Lebanese soil and with the blood of its own children. In this context, another name to remember is undoubtedly that of Claire Gebeyli, whose poetic collections, such as *Mémorial d'exil*[29] et *Mise à jour*,[30] insist on the theme of war. In her verses, with a Baudelairian flavour, the battered and wounded city of Beirut emerges in all its dramatic physicality.

During the 1980s, writers – once again, predominantly spearheaded by women – continued to interrogate the subject of war, with some seeking answers to the causes of the tragedy in the past. It was as if the passive victimhood which had been forced upon them elicited their screams as they tried to process their deep wounds, and in the face of a spectacle of violence perpetrated by men, women reacted by using writing not only to express their dissent towards an absurd war but to challenge the values of the patriarchal society that wanted them to be subjected to men. The first voice of this large group was that of Etel Adnan who, in 1977 and still during the war, published her *Sitt Marie-Rose*,[31] a novel inspired by a true story of a woman involved in the Palestinian resistance who, during the civil war, was tortured and subsequently murdered by a childhood friend. But it is also the case of Évelyne Accad who, with *L'Excisée*,[32] reacted vehemently against the brutality of the war in Lebanon, with the same force with which the Surrealists reacted in the face of the inhumanity of the First World War. Her *Coquelicot du massacre*[33] is also a denunciation of the violence of war and the power imbalance between the sexes imposed by the extremist traditions of the Maronites whose separatist ideas, in Accad's view, had contributed to the explosion of the conflict. Andrée Chedid, in *La maison sans racine* from 1985, describes how, in 1975, Lebanon suddenly found itself plunged into despair,[34] while in the subsequent *L'Enfant multiple*, a

27 Paris, Belfond, 1992.
28 Paris, Mercure de France, 2004.
29 Paris, Librairie Saint-Germain-des-Prés, 1975.
30 Paris, Agence de cooperation Culturelle et technique, 1982.
31 Paris, Éditions des Femmes, 1977.
32 Paris, L'Harmattan,1982.
33 Paris, L'Harmattan, 1988.
34 34. See A. M. Miraglia, « Le temps et ses reflets dans *La maison sans racine* d'Andrée Chedid », *Francofonia*, XVIII, n. 35, Autumn 1998, pp. 17-33.

feeling of faith in a better future seems to mark a victory over war. Even Dominique Eddé, despite having left the country, felt the need to recount those atrocious moments. In her epistolary novel *Lettre posthume*[35] from 1989, she describes the nostalgic thoughts of an old man forced to witness the destruction of his own country; His memories alternate, turbulent images with peaceful ones of the Lebanon of another time.

If Chedid and Eddé evoke Lebanon with nostalgic tones, Vénus Khoury-Ghata chooses cynicism to describe the horrors in her country. In *Vacarme pour une lune morte*,[36] the writer, exiled to Paris, describes the war in tones of biting irony: Lebanon is represented under the allegorical guise of Nabilia, which suffers cruel violence that leads to collective suicide. In *Une maison au bord des larmes*[37] and *La Maîtresse du notable*,[38] the war is background canvas upon which two family tragedies play out, and continues to be represented as a grotesque scenario in which the only feelings that seem to emerge are bitterness and hatred. As we can see, through their works, these authors stand as promoters and protagonists of a political, social and intellectual movement.

If, over the course of the nineteenth century, French-language literary expression flourished in Egypt, it was due, above all, to the work of French authors transplanted to the banks of the Nile. Notable among the female writers of this group is Niya Salîma (pseudonym of Eugénie Brun), French by birth but relocated to Cairo following her Egyptian husband. But the first real shift towards a more genuinely Middle Eastern literature was marked by the writer Jeanne Arcache who was born in Alexandria to a Lebanese father and a French mother, wrote two collections of poetry and a romantically toned novel. In the poetic genre, the works published between 1928 and 1938 were clearly affected by the French poets of Parnassianism, Symbolism and, above all, Surrealism.[39] One of the first representatives of Symbolist poetry in Egypt was Valentine de Saint-Point, great-grandniece of Alphonse de Lamartine. After having disturbed the souls of many Parisian intellectuals fascinated by her dazzling beauty, she decided to move

35 Both books were published by Gallimard, 1989.
36 Paris, Flammarion, 1983.
37 Paris, Balland, 1988.
38 Paris, Seghers, 1992.
39 See: M. A. Caws, R. Kuezli, G. Raaberg (eds.), *Surrealism and Women*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996; K. Conley, *Automatic Woman: The Representation of Woman in Surrealism*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1996; W. Chadwick (ed.), *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism and Self-Representation*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1998.

to Egypt where she converted to Islam and dedicated herself to writing mystical-religious verses. Joyce Mansour, for her part, began her poetic journey by flirting with the Surrealist movement[40] with her first collection of poetry called *Cris*.[41] From her verses – up to her last collection *Trous noir*[42] – emerge a personal, as well as collective, pain from the wound inflicted on a people by Nazism. However, although her work seemed to be destined to remain in the shadows when not outright misunderstood, has been re-evaluated by contemporary critics.

The narrative production of the novel is quite varied and can be divided into four major trends, the first of which is constituted by the pioneers of the genre who conceived the novel as a sociological document on Egyptian customs. This phase spanned two decades, from approximately 1930 to 1950. Among the writers of this generation, Out-El-Kouloub (pseudonym of Madame Demerdarch) stands out, a brave woman who made her debut on the literary scene in 1934. She was a Muslim who wore the veil, yet she was also divorced and the daughter of an aristocratic family; she led a very active intellectual life that included hosting a literary salon in her home, frequented by personalities of the calibre of Jules Romains and Georges Duhamel.

The characters described in her works – along with strongly autobiographical notes – present the mosaic of her society, from the conformist bourgeoisie to the world of artists. Her work remains of particular importance for the commitment shown by the writer towards the female cause. Following the thread that unites her novels *Le coffret hindou*[43] and *Ramza*[44] one participates in the achievements of Egyptian women in defending their dignity, and in *La nuit de la destinée*[45] the tendency of women who live in modern cities to turn their eyes to the West is condemned.[46] For

40 In this regard, see: G. Colville, *Scandaleusement d'elles. Trente-quatre femmes surréalistes*, Paris, Jean-Michel Place, 1999, pp. 186-195; M.-L. Missir, *Joyce Mansour, une étrange demoiselle*, Paris, Jean-Michel Place, 2005; S. Caron, *Réinventer le lyrisme. Le surréalisme de Joyce Mansour*, Geneva, Droz, 2007.

41 Paris, Seghers, 1954.

42 Brussels, La Pierre d'Alun, 1986.

43 Paris, Gallimard, 1951.

44 Paris, Gallimard, 1958; regarding this text and the author's poetics, see also: J.-G. Lapacherie, «Le féminisme dans la littérature égyptienne de langue française», *Francofonia*, n. 23, 1992, pp. 21-32; J. Madoeuf, «Féminisme et orientalisme au miroir francophone d'Out-El-Kouloub (1892-1968)», *Egypte/Monde arabe*, series I, n. 29, 1997, pp. 101-114.

45 Preface to É. Domenghem, Paris, Gallimard, 1954.

46 See: J. Madœf, «Féminisme et orientalisme au miroir francophone d'Out-El-Kouloub (1892-1968)», *op. cit*.

her part, Amy Kher adds her voice to the female cause with *Mes sœurs*[47] in which she decries the effects of the breakdown of marriage bonds on a middle-class woman.[48]

Four of Andrée Chedid's novels are entirely set in Egypt, and two of them are rooted in antiquity: *Néfertiti et le rêve d'Akhnaton* and *Les Marches de sable*.[49] In the former, history is just a background on which reinvented famous personalities come to life and become individuals who resemble us with their strengths and weaknesses. The character of Queen Nefertiti, for example, is not only a sovereign but also a woman in love and a devoted bride. *Les Marches de sable* is set, in turn, in the fourth century, a period in which the city of Alexandria was the scene of bloody struggles between pagans and Christians; but here, too, the reading of a historical period becomes a pretext for a lucid critique of the present. Two other novels, *Sommeil délivré* and *Le sixième jour*, are instead set in the contemporary world. The writer describes the problems of a whole society through individual dramas, although the underlying message remains profoundly optimistic.[50]

Still in Egypt, following the new political trauma constituted by the Gulf War that broke out in 1991, there was the birth of a new literary avant-garde, *gil at-tis'inat*, the nineties generation. Breaking with the ideal of merging aesthetic innovation and political commitment, this generation of writers claimed the right to withdraw from addressing the great social issues to return to writing about the self. The commitment of women writers continues to this day, bringing the raw facts of their daily lives to the attention of readers. So, once again we have Dominique Eddé taking the field with *Kamal Jann*[51] to explain the reasons behind the events of the "Arab Spring." The writer invites readers to immerse themselves in a world dominated by violence in which the physical and mental torture perpetrated on individuals by the merciless regimes of the Middle East are exposed, unveiled.

As can be seen from the few examples cited, in these two Middle Eastern countries overlooking the shores of the Mediterranean, the contemporary cultural horizon is characterised by a strong presence of female authors.

47 Le Caire, R. Schindler, 1942.

48 See: E. Accad, *Sexuality, War and Literature in the Middle East*, New York, New York University Press, 1989.

49 Paris, Flammarion, 1981.

50 See: Chapter II: «Andrée Chedid», in M. M. Magill & K. S. Stephenson (eds.), *Dit de femmes. Entretiens d'écrivaines françaises*, Birmingham, Summa Publications, 2003, pp. 27-38.

51 Paris, Albin Michel, 2012.

It is a women's literature which, challenging French-speaking male literature in quality and quantity, established itself on the literary scene, overcoming the weight of political and cultural conflicts to initiate intercultural dialogue, like the Phoenicians, beyond the shores of *Mare nostrum*. These women's writing is an instrument of awareness and a weapon against all forms of discrimination and marginalisation. Contributing to the renewal of the socially engaged novel, they condemn all forms of violence, with particular regard to political and sectarian conflicts. The choice to write in French in countries where this language has always had, even more now, a marginal use, serves as a refuge and a screen against the persecutions suffered, as evidenced by the testimony of many Arabic-speaking writers, including Mona Jabbour, Sahar Khalifé, Layla Baalbaki and Nawal el Saadaou. The French language thus provides refuge and protection, but it also becomes the language for the freedom of expression. An example can be found in two novels that tell of the same family drama written by two sisters: *Une maison au bord des larmes*, published in France by the French-speaking Vénus Khoury-Ghata, and *Awraq min dafater chajarat roummane*,[52] published in Lebanon and written in Arabic by May Ménassa. While the novel written in French presents a raw realism, the story told in Arabic is affected by a socio-cultural conditioning that induces the writer to present, in a more prudent way, a masked reality. Writing in French these women denounce ailments and sufferings and proclaim the will to live, placing emphasis, in particular, on the clash/comparison relationship with what is perceived as a dichotomous *mal*/*mâle* [evil/male] pair, homophonic in French and perceived here as synonymous.

By declaring a revelatory power, female literary expression does not simply aim to "express their place" but rather insists on constructing it by progressively representing much more than a literary echo of gender issues. Many authors, especially those belonging to the more recent generation, firmly refuse to be relegated to a female or feminist context, claiming rather a gender perspective. Their writings, while returning, as a starting point, to the contours of local and individual specificities inextricably linked to different socio-political and cultural contexts, betray the urgency to overcome narrow geographical and cultural boundaries and transmit more universal messages.

Thus, exploring a variety of narrative genres, we find that these authors recount the multifaceted nature of their ordeals: war, destruction, social conflicts, the horror of violence, the loss of freedom in some cases, to fulfil

52 Beirut, Dar-an-Nahar, 1999.

the need to affirm and defend their people. The result is a writing characterised by a strong social commitment, a writing which, in most cases, provides intellectual survival, becoming a complaint, a protest, a tool for awakening the conscience of their fellow countrymen about their own destinies, and for making their voices heard by those outside their countries, regions and cultures.

Bibliography

Abou, Sélim. *Le bilinguisme arabe-français au Liban*. Paris: PUF, 1962.

Accad, Evelyne. *L'Excisée*. Paris: L'Harmattan,1982.

Accad, Evelyne. *Coquelicot du massacre*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1988.

Accad, Evelyne. *Sexuality, War and Literature in the Middle East*. New York: New York University Press, 1989.

Adnan, Etel. *Sitt Marie-Rose*. Paris: Éditions des Femmes, 1977.

Ascar-Nahas, Joseph. *Les amis de la culture française en Egypte (1925-1945)*, documents présentés par M. Brin et précédés d'une conférence sur les conférences par A.-Nahas J. Le Caire: Éditions Horus, 1945.

Ascar-Nahas, Joseph. Égypte et culture française. Le Caire: Éd. de la Société Orientale de Publicité, 1953.

Booth, Marilyn. «Biography and Feminist Rhetoric in Early Twentieth Century Egypt: Mayy Zyada's Studies of Three Women's Lives» in *Journal of Women's History*, 3, n. 1, 1991. 38-64.

Bradan, Margot. *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and Making of Modern Egypt*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Boustani,Carmen. *Effects du féminin: variations narrratives francophones*. Paris: Khartala, 2003.

Boustany, Gabriel. *Le Retour d'Adonis*. Beyrouth, 1963.

Bustros, Eveline. *Sous la baguette du coudrier*, Beirut, self-published collection; later in *Romans et écrits divers*. Beirut: Éditions Dar An-Nahar, 1988.

Caron, Stéphanie. *Réinventer le lyrisme. Le surréalisme de Joyce Mansour*. Geneva: Droz, 2007.

Caws, Mary Ann, Rudolf Kuezli, Gwen Raaberg. (eds.). *Surrealism and Women*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

Chadwick, Whitney. (ed.). *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism and Self-Representation*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.

Chedid, Andrée. *Sommeil délivré*. Paris: Stock-Delamain et Boutelleau, 1952.

Chedid, Andrée. *Jonathan*. Paris: Seuil, 1955.

Chedid, Andrée. *Le sixième jour.* Paris: Julliard, 1960.

Chedid, Andrée. *Les Nombres*. Paris: Seuil, 1968.

Chedid, Andrée. *Bérénice d'Egypte*. Paris: Seuil, 1968.

Chedid, Andrée. *Le Montreur*. Paris: Seuil, 1969.

Chedid, Andrée. *Néfertiti et le rêve d'Akhnaton*. Paris: Flammarion, 1974.
Chedid, Andrée. *Les Marches de sable*. Paris: Flammarion, 1981.
Chedid, Andrée. *La maison sans racines*. Paris: Flammarion, 1985.
Chedid, Andrée. *L'Enfant multiple*. Paris: Flammarion, 1989.
Colville, Georgiana. *Scandaleusement d'elles. Trente-quatre femmes surréalistes*. Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1999.
Conley, Katharine. *Automatic Woman: The Representation of Woman in Surrealism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.
Cooke, Miriam. "Arab Women Writers." Badawi M. M., *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Modern Arabic literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. 443-462.
Darwiche, Jabbour Z. *Littératures francophones du Moyen-Orient: Egypte, Liban, Syrie*. Aix-en-Provence: Édisud, 2007.
Durand, Jean.-François and Maxime Del Fiol. (eds.). "Regards sur les littératures francophones du Moyen-Orient. Egypte, Liban." *Interculturel-Francophonies*, n. 14, novembre 2008.
Edde, Dominique. *Lettre Posthume*. Paris: Gallimard, 1989.
Edde, Dominique. *Kamal Jann*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2012.
Friedman, Saul S. *A History of the Middle East*. Jefferson (NC): McFarland, 2006.
Gebeyli, Claire. *Mémorial d'exil*. Paris: Librairie Saint-Germain-des-Prés, 1975.
Gebeyli, Claire. *La mise à jour*. Paris: Agence de cooperation Culturelle et technique, 1982.
Gerard, Delphine. "Le choix de la langue en Égypte. La langue française en Égypte dans l'entre-deux-guerres" in *Les Langues en Égypte*, I série, nn. 27-28, 1996. 253-284.
Guernier, Nicole. *Le français du Liban: cent portraits linguistiques*. Paris: Didier Érudition, 1993.
Khalaf, Saher. (ed.). *Littérature libanaise de langue français*. Ottawa: Naaman, 1981.
Kher, Amy. *Mes sœurs*. Le Caire: R. Schindler, 1942.
Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. *Au sud du silence*. Paris: Librairie Saint-Germain-des-Près, 1975.
Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. *Les Ombres et leurs cris*. Paris: Belfond, 1979.
Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. *Vacarme pour une lune morte*. Paris: Flammarion, 1983.
Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. *Une maison au bord des larmes.* Paris: Balland, 1988.
Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. *La Maîtresse du Notable*. Paris: Seghers, 1992.
Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. *Fables pour un peuple d'argile*. Paris: Belfond, 1992.
Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. *Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits*. Paris: Mercure de France, 2004.
Kober, Marc, Irene Fenoglio, Daniel Lançon (eds.). *Entre Nil et Sable, écrivains d'Egypte d'expression française*. Paris: Publication du Centre National de Documentation Pédagogique, 1999.
Lapacherie, Jean-Gérard. "Le féminisme dans la littérature égyptienne de langue française" in *Francofonia*, n. 23, 1992, pp. 21-32.

Luthi, Jean-Jacques. *La littérature d'expression française en Egypte: 1798-1998*. Paris- Montréal: L'Harmattan, 2000.
Madœuf, Julia. "Féminisme et orientalisme au miroir francophone d'Out-El-Kouloub (1892- 1968)" in *Egypte/Monde arabe*, series I, n. 29, 1997. 101-114.
Magill, Michèle M. & Katherine S. Stephensn(eds.). Chapter II: "Andrée Chedid" in *Dit de femmes. Entretiens d'écrivaines françaises*. Birmingham: Summa Publications, 2003. 27-38.
Majdalani, Charif. *Petit traité des mélanges*. Beyrouth: éditions Layali, 2002.
Mansour, Joyce. *Cris,* Paris: Seghers, 1954.
Mansour, Joyce. *Trous noir*. Brussels: La Pierre d'Alun, 1986.
Mansour, Zakka N. *Littérature libanaise contemporaine: aspects thématiques*. Holy Spirit: University of Kaslik, 2000.
Méssana, May. *Awraq min dafater chajarat roummane*. Beirut: Dar-an-Nahar, 1999.
Miraglia, Anne-Marie. "Le temps et ses reflets dans "La maison sans racines" d'Andrée Chedid" in *Francofonia*, XVIII, n. 35, Autumn 1998. 17-33.
Missir, Marie-Laure. *Joyce Mansour, une étrange demoiselle*. Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 2005.
Out-El-Kouloub. *Le coffret hindou*. Paris: Gallimard, 1951.
Out-El-Kouloub. *La nuit de la destinée*. Paris: Gallimard, 1954.
Out-El-Kouloub. *Ramza*. Paris: Gallimard, 1958.
Ramy, Zein. *Dictionnaire de la littérature libanaise de langue française*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998.
Salameh, Nohad. *Les Enfants d 'Avril*. Paris: Les temps Parallèles, 1980.
Suhair Majaj, Lisa, Paula W. Sunderman & Therese Saliba (eds.). *Intersections, Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002.
Takieddine Amyuni, Mona. "A Panorama of Lebanese Women Writers, 1975-1995" in Rustum Shehadeh, Lamia, *Women and War in Lebanon*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999. 89-111.
Tueni, Nadia. *Les Textes blonds*. Beyrouth: Dar an-nahar, 1963.
Tueni, Nadia. *Poèmes pour une histoire*. Paris: Seghers, 1973.
Ziegler, Antje. "'Al-Haraka Baraka! The Late Rediscovery of Mayy Zyada's Works" in *Die Welt des Islams*, 39, n. 1, 1999. 103-115.