

Etel Adnan's "There" : A Meditation on Conflict
by Aftim Saba

Aftim Saba: A few days ago I attended a public reading of your poems from your latest book of poems "THERE," and I noticed the audience's emotional reaction. To whom was the book addressed?

Etel Adnan: It was addressed immediately to the Arabs or the Americans or the Jewish Americans. But the poems are really a meditation on "conflict," particularly us-the Arab East-who live in a conflict since World War I, a whole century of conflict, a century of resistance. It is exhausting. We are exhausted, we lost a whole century. But we are still building, in spite of our good or bad (Arab) governments, the people are courageous. They never give up. Every Arab country this century has experienced internal or external wars; instead of advancing we are always returning to point zero. It is not totally our fault, because the balance of power works against us. So, lately I thought we should not give up but change the nature of our struggle; that really is the book's aim. It is through a self-questioning and a dialogue with the West, with the enemy-with Israel-that a positive battle occurs, not with arms, but on an economic and cultural level.

Saba: You mention that your book "There" had its beginnings with the start of the war against Bosnian people. Was Bosnia the main inspiration for the poems or just its beginnings?

Adnan: Under the guise of being neutral, the Europeans and the West in general applied an arms embargo that affected the Muslims of Bosnia and not the Christian Serbs. That is exactly what the British did in Palestine, who facilitated in the beginning the arming of the Jewish underground and actively prevented the Palestinians from arming themselves. I saw the repetition of Palestine there in Bosnia, a nightmare coming back again. Preventing a people from defending themselves against a massacre, why? Because they were Muslims. There was no other reason to what happened in Bosnia. Under our own eyes a new holocaust, genocide, the raping of women, the destruction of livelihoods, libraries and mosques, a whole culture just because they do not want Muslims in Europe. Simple. They want, however, the rich Muslim who buys a villa or comes to gamble his money but they do not want a Muslim population.

I said here we go again. What is conflict. What is this "other". This Europe that refuses the other, the different and why? I wanted to go into the other and see that the other is really us. If you have an enemy, and you are so obsessed by it, that enemy will occupy your head. It becomes you. it is a difficult situation. And the fear is to sell out, and not to resist anymore. But I am asking to fight where it matters. There are victories in history that are worse than defeats. Annihilation. Can atomic bombs solve problems? There will not be a tree alive. We do not want that kind of victory. We need a positive, real, cultural and economic competition. It is very difficult because some of us have justified hatred. How can I ask a Muslim Bosnian or a Palestinian to make space for the same enemy who does not make space for them? Why should the victims be asked to be kind and

understanding? It is a very difficult situation, but I think we should do it for survival. We should have the imagination and the courage not to avoid the problem but to set it differently. Like the example set by Tolstoy and Ghandi.

Saba: You dedicated your book to Khalil Hawi, the Lebanese poet. Why? Was he a friend?

Adnan: I knew Hawi on a personal level very little. He committed suicide when the Israelis invaded Lebanon in 1982. That is why I dedicated the book, because we have done nothing for his memory. When European writers committed suicide during the Nazi period, they were considered heroes and examples of supreme sensitivity and of a desperate rejection of horror. Khalil Hawi could not live conflict. Acute conflict killed him. He must have felt so helpless and desperate. Perhaps he thought that Lebanon was going the way Palestine went. He is the absolute victim of conflict. I dedicated the book to him because he understood the problem to the bitter end and could not take it. We should not in desperation commit suicide. This is the greatest victory to the enemy. We should resist with life not death. It is asking a lot in a way it is psychologically easier to sacrifice oneself than to build patiently bit by bit, but we have to. There is no other way, otherwise we may win and disappear. For me, ten Palestinian children ending up with PhDs is much better than ten less Israelis.

Saba: A lot of critics and readers wrote about your voice in your different writings. Some said it is the voice of exile. Some said it represents a postmodern, postcolonial situation and others aid that it is a situation beyond exile and oppression, a paradoxical state that has both universal and individual dimensions at the same time. What is the source of your voice?

Adnan: I think most writers see the threads in their works only mid-course, I mean after a few books. Writing is a meeting point between a historical moment and the private identity. For example, I wrote one time that if the Palestinian tragedy did not exist, my work would have been totally different. Obviously. Some writers do not care about the historical moment. I could not avoid it. An American writer, for example, does not see the United States in danger of disappearing, but a Palestinian, a Lebanese, a Syrian writer has genuine fear that his or her culture or geography would disappear, especially when you see the dogma of the Greater Israel put in practice and defended by the West. How can I avoid the writing about the Lebanese Civil War when I lived it? For the Arabs, the 20th century was an apocalyptic century. How can we turn our back on that? It becomes the substance of one's writing to a great degree. We also have intimate lives and losses. We have lost people we love. So there is a combination of the outer apocalypse and the inner apocalypse and my work reflects that along with issues of evil.

Saba: In an article you wrote in 1995 titled "Voyage, War, Exile," you mention that in the beginning it was a voyage of adventures, and you wrote "I was a bird then who flew out of her cage and was desirous to go further away." Tell me more about the voyage and how did it turn into exile?

Adnan: When I first came to America, it was a liberation not exile. Although I was not in jail, life in Beirut at that time for a woman was limiting. There is no need to explain that, nor to explain the desire for adventure. Some people, like birds and fish, have an inner drive to travel and explore more than others. Don't get me wrong; there was a certain amount of freedom as well as chances for woman in Lebanon, but I wanted to go beyond, so I came here.

Saba: You wrote also that you felt "exile" when you saw that your country, Lebanon, would not grow normally, and most of the people you knew had also left.

Adnan: I used to be the cultural editor of the French language Beirut daily, "*l'orient le Jour*," I found myself without cultural news or events to write about. I admire the people who stayed (during the civil war). I do not consider myself a desperate exile like other people. Some in Lebanon had to leave—I was among those. In my case, I returned to the United States, a country I know. I was then an American citizen. Personally, to be in exile is not my major concern. There are exiles in one's own country, like the native Americans here who live in concentration camps called Reservations who have little rights, and can't even learn their own language. Also, some black people are in exile here. Likewise the Palestinians are in exile on their own lands under Israeli occupation.

Saba: You consider yourself an Arab-American. You are an Arab who writes mainly in English. You have also wrote and published in French, and lived in France. If you were staying in France, would you have considered yourself an Arab-French?

Adnan: Not at all. When I arrived here, America in my childhood had not existed. I had no knowledge of America. With the French I had a love-hate relationship because I knew its culture through the French schooling in Beirut. It is a conflict. If I hated them only I would have committed suicide, because I would have hated a part of me. How can I erase a language which I knew best? I was intellectually French. Still I was aware of the price I paid for knowing French so well: I did not know Arabic because French schools in Beirut hardly taught any Arabic. I could not write to my family, my half brother and sisters who lived in Damascus and who only knew Arabic. So I was cut off from my family because of it. I may be resentful. America, on the other hand, was virgin land for me. I did not see it as a colonizing power. Of course, now, I can see its economic and political hegemony, but I did not grow up with that.

Saba: But an earthquake happened in 1967 as you describe it.

Adnan: It was a difficult time here in America, when it was helping Israel in an absolute manner against the Arabs. So for a while I had an intense personal conflict. My American friends were not involved in what I felt. It was for them a remote problem. I was emotionally alone. Therefore I felt in exile. I felt that things I cared for were not shared by them. In fact it was from there on that I started to think to return to Lebanon. In California, I was teaching. I was a philosophy professor; my immediate environment was not hostile. I personally never experienced discrimination in the college I was teaching at. I was adopted, so to speak, and was happy. But 1967 was a break; a little gap developed.

I gave up a good job, tenure, a pension plan and went back to start from zero. I returned to Lebanon in 1972 with the hope that I will share our experience learned in America. The experiment did not last and failed for many reasons, among them the Lebanese Civil War, and I returned to America in 1979.

Saba: You live in Lebanon and in California. What has it to do with your duality of writer and painter?

Adnan: I am a Pisces, I feel the duality in me, which is constantly in synthesis. Am I Arab or Greek like my mother? A Muslim or a Christian? I did not make out of the fact that I was born in a Muslim and Christian family a problem, and it was never a cause for personal pain. Some individuals make a lot of problems out of these realities, they may side with one side over the other. Personally I never made it a problem, it is usually the others who make it a problem.

Saba: Why is it that others make it a problem?

Adnan: Because people love simple things. They say what are you a Muslim or a Christian. I say I am both. They say you are not an Arab poet because you write in English. The Americans would say, yes you write well in English but you have so many Arab things in your work. It is painful, but it is not painful in me, they make it painful. Many Arab-American writers also face the same issues. One can be both an American and Arab writer in the same person. Our universities (in the Arab World) don't teach these writers and that is a shame. Similarly is the case of the Arab writers who write in French; they are not considered French by the French and often not considered Arab by Arabs.

Saba: "Sitt Marie Rose" is a book that I loved since I first read several years ago. I remember then that the novel added to my interest in the subject of women's relations toward world events, and how it differs from the male's, especially if we take the Palestinian issue. I noticed that Arab women, in general, were more sensitive and honest in feeling the pain of the Palestinian tragedy in contrast to the Arab male. Can you expand on this issue?

Adnan: It is a good question. Basically are women different from men? This is an open ended question. But as there is globalization, there is feminization of the masculine and of the feminine. Women are entering the army, and men are doing jobs that were mainly women's. I do not know if there are essential differences between men and women, but in the past—my generation—these differences were more acute. Women had different lives, socially and culturally. One important observation is that women pay particular observation to details, more than men. So how does that relate to politics? Men in the Arab East were reacting to politics through political parties, while women were not participant in these parties, and were less literate. Men felt responsible to react to political events, so when the Palestinian events occurred for example, men responded to it through the political allegiances and ideology, if they were affiliated to the Baathist, or Nasserite or Phalangist parties. They unconsciously thought of themselves rather than the problem

or event at hand—what should I do, what should I not do—all through their ideological stand. Women, in contrast, did not have all these set responses. They were left to themselves. They translated tragedy into everyday life terms, which is what tragedy is really all about. For me a Palestinian refugee, man or woman, is a person before anything else, who has everyday problems throughout his or her life. I do not react to the refugee from my ideological point of reference or from my political framework, which, with some people, could change according to the politicians needs. So we see tragedy in its details and in its sufferings in terms of a series of practicalities. A few weeks ago the Israelis blew up a home of a Palestinian activist. My reaction was—where would the six children live? Why did they do that to them? I immediately saw the everyday life of these children and women of the house and how it all changed with the destruction. This is a criminal action, which is banned by international treaties, but Israel does it all the time—one form of collective punishment. Therefore, as women, we have a particular sensitivity toward tragedies and disasters. I do not mean that men lack sensitivity, but they are trained not to react to that. When a house is blown up men say “they blew a house, the house is gone.” But a woman on hearing that news remembers the endless hours she spent on cleaning, cooking or washing. That is why women wrote more anti-war novels than men, especially Lebanese women writers. Women would cry the tragedy while men are expected to fight for the idea that lead to war and perhaps die for it. They are almost like different duties.

Saba: How do you evaluate Arab-Western dialogue?

Adnan: Let me give you an example. After the Gulf war, I was along with other Arab intellectuals invited by the Arab World Institute in Paris to start an Arab-French dialogue. I answered, “What dialogue you are talking about?” There are hundreds of French schools in the Arab school while there is not a single Arab school in France. Arabic is not taught in French schools, not even as a second or third language. Even the large numbers of Arab migrants there are denied the freedom to learn Arabic. Now this is the state of dialogue between the West and the Arabs. Always in one direction. But we also have a culture and a civilization. It happened that after the meeting the same Arab World institute canceled a planned exhibition for my paintings.