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Re-thinking Literary Space in Huda Barakat's the Stone of Laughter

Moulfi Leila
University of Oran1 Ahmed Ben Bella-Algeria
elaiharl@hotmail.fr
Sarnou Dalal
University of Mostaganem Abdelhamid Ibn Badis –Algeria
sar_dalal@yahoo.fr

Abstract: *The Arab woman not only has contributed to the changing of the contemporary Arab literature but also has used her pen in times of wars and conflicts as a kind of resistance. Nawal Saadawi says: "does anything more than danger stimulate our creativity? And does anything threaten our creativity more than danger?" (N. Saadawi, 1996:157). In her article "Mapping Peace", the literary critic Miriam Cooke claims that women have a stake in interpreting their war experiences.*
In fact, writing during war time is an experience that is part of war itself, an experience that informs the socio-political roles that precede it. The Lebanese, the Palestinian, and most recently the Iraqi women writers are vivid, genuine representatives of what a woman can create during times of war, how she can re-shape her experience of war and which portrait she can give to this experience. Hanane Sheikh, Sahar Khalifah, Mai Ghoussoub and Huda Barakat's writings are instances of the Arab woman's creativity in moments of conflicts, of wars and of danger.
Women's war literature allows the intolerable to be written because women do not take part in wars with arms but rather with their pens, their voices and their intellects. In fact, women writers subvert time, space and thus history to create their own world and their own records. This trend of Arab literature is viewed as an authoritative tool against the violence of war and as a passive resistance. It is also authoritative in terms of representing space and time as reshaped by wars. Contemporary Arab women writers have shown a big interest of creativity in writing novels, poems and short stories that lucidly portray the transformations war brings, and they have also shown a genuine capacity of subverting moments of war and transforming war time into moments of creation and metamorphosis. The present paper unveils Arab women writers' genuine ability in creating a narrative space and a narrative time that is proper to moments of wars through their literary writings. Huda Barakat's The Stone of Laughter is going to be our corpus as it represents a vivid depiction of the Lebanese Civil War, and "the best novel written about the Lebanese civil war."
Key words: *Translation, interpretation, competences, sub-competences, dictionary.*
Résumé : *La femme arabe a non seulement contribué à l'évolution de la littérature arabe contemporaine, mais a également utilisé sa plume en temps de guerres et de conflits comme une sorte de résistance. Nawal Saadawi dit : « Est-ce que autre chose que le danger stimule notre créativité ? Et y a-t-il quelque chose qui menace davantage notre créativité que le danger ? » (N. Saadawi, 1996 : 157). Dans son article « Mapping Peace », la critique littéraire Miriam Cooke affirme que les femmes ont intérêt à interpréter leurs expériences de guerre.*
En fait, écrire en temps de guerre est une expérience qui fait partie de la guerre elle-même, une expérience qui informe les rôles sociopolitiques qui la précèdent. Les écrivains libanais, palestiniens et, plus récemment, irakiens sont des représentants vivants et authentiques de ce qu'une femme peut créer en temps de guerre, comment elle peut remodeler son expérience de la guerre et quel portrait elle peut donner à cette expérience. Les écrits de Hanane Sheikh, Sahar Khalifah, Mai Ghoussoub et Huda Barakat sont des exemples de la créativité de la femme arabe dans les moments de conflits, de guerres et de danger.

La littérature de guerre des femmes permet d'écrire l'intolérable parce que les femmes ne participent pas aux guerres avec les armes mais plutôt avec leur plume, leur voix et leur intelligence. En fait, les femmes écrivains subvertissent le temps, l'espace et donc l'histoire pour créer leur propre monde et leurs propres disques. Cette tendance de la littérature arabe est considérée comme un outil faisant autorité contre la violence de la guerre et comme une résistance passive. Il fait également autorité en termes de représentation de l'espace et du temps remodelés par les guerres. Les écrivaines arabes contemporaines ont montré un grand intérêt pour la créativité dans l'écriture de romans, de poèmes et de nouvelles qui dépeignent avec lucidité les transformations qu'apporte la guerre, et elles ont également montré une véritable capacité à subvertir les moments de guerre et à transformer le temps de la guerre en moments de création et de métamorphose.
Le présent article dévoile la véritable capacité des écrivaines arabes à créer un espace narratif et un temps narratif propres aux moments de guerre à travers leurs écrits littéraires. La pierre du rire de Huda Barakat sera notre corpus car il représente une représentation vivante de la guerre civile libanaise et « le meilleur roman écrit sur la guerre civile libanaise ».
Mots clés : *Traduction, interprétation, compétences, sous-compétences, dictionnaire.*

Women's war literature often allows the intolerable to be written, and because women do not take part in wars with arms but rather with their pens, their voices and their intellects in such a way that they stand at a margin position and may vividly and impartially depict war events. Arab women literature dealing with wars and conflicts is viewed as an authoritative tool against the violence of war and as a passive resistance.

The effects of traumatic war experience have been recorded throughout history, particularly through literature (Nigel C. Hunt, 2010:14) and contemporary Arab women writers have shown a big interest of creativity in writing novels, poems and short stories that lucidly portray the transformations war brings.

The Lebanese and the Palestinian women authors have managed to develop war writings that incorporate both writing as resistance, and writing of methods of resistance, i.e. for these authors, though writing about the conditions of war may be viewed as an act of resistance itself, there is always another dimension of resisting against the internal oriental views and perceptions regarding the Arab woman; their writings are a twofold resistance; resisting war-makers, and resisting patriarchy creators.

War experience, although it may initially seek to confirm established gender roles, ends up blurring and even annihilating the definiteness of just these roles. War in this instance provides the arena for actions to be detached from their supposedly feminine or masculine matrices and observed differently. (A. Valassopoulos, 2007: 56)

When reading novels by Lebanese women authors, we may perceive, instead of a depiction of war events, an embodiment of a struggle with the norms of gender uncovered through circumstances of war. We, indeed, perceive a big challenge to fear because it is the fear of dying voiceless that stimulates women creativity. Nawal Saadawi says: "does anything more than danger stimulate our creativity? And does anything threaten our creativity more than danger?" (N. Saadawi, 157).

In her article "Mapping Peace", the literary critic Miriam Cooke claims that women have a stake in interpreting their war experiences. Huda Barakat's The Stone of Laughter (حجر الضحك), is a typical war novel we are examining in this paper to unveil some specificities of Arab women war writings and how these writings do re-create the history of their countries.

Huda Barakat is among those talented Arab women writers who have changed the cliché about weak and narrow-minded Arab women. Barakat is an admired Lebanese novelist who lived much of her life in Beirut and later moved to Paris, where she now resides. Her works, written in Arabic, have been translated into many languages, including English, French, Italian, Turkish, Dutch, Greek and German. This novel was a great success as much as her late novels أهل الهوى , Lovers (1993), حارث المياه The Tiller of Waters (1998) and سيدي و حبيبي My Master, My Lover (2005). The Stone of Laughter, written in Lebanon under the striking echoes of the bombing and the explosions, has stimulated her literary talent.

The Stone of Laughter is a novel of war, i.e. a genre of novels that relies on the events of a given war; a war novel is a literary production in which the primary action takes place in a field of armed combat or in a domestic setting where the characters are preoccupied with the preparations for, or recovery from, war. It recounts an original extraordinary experience that an Arab woman writes about war in a work of fiction the way Huda Barakat did in this novel. Huda Barakat says:

> I write of wars because I have no power; no arms or soldiers. I belong to the dark dampness and to the forgetfulness of those making history in the street…Under the boots stepping over my head, I still write as if I am an empress or a dictator. (Faqir, 2005: V)

This novel was described by Edward Kharrat as "the best novel written about the Lebanese civil war." حجر الضحك (transcribed as [ħadzaru əđaħIk]) deals with the struggle of Khalil, the protagonist who embodies the psychological and physical metamorphosis caused by the war, to resist taking part in the fighting and to define his identity in alternative terms. In a complex, but genuinely personal narrative, Barakat represents two figures that are marginal to the war: an androgynous male and heterodiegetic narrator, whose voice is often interwoven with Khalil's, but who shows up at the very end of the novel.

The story reveals the terrible effects and changes a civil war gives birth to and it transgresses many historical records of the Lebanese Civil war. The story focuses more on how people in such circumstances submit to a metamorphosis at different levels: psychological, physical, social and spiritual. What the novel truly carries to the reader is nothing but the moaning and the yelling of people who died twice and in one day out of bombings, fear and hatred rather than revealing false facts about the war itself.

The Stone of Laughter describes the city of Beirut under bombardments and explosions, describes a protagonist lost in his own identity, and describes a population in war. It represents to what extent war can change the inward and the outward stability of people; this is represented in the process of metamorphosis Khalil goes through. By the end of the novel, the narrator puts an end to two confusions: one about herself when she manifests her identity to the reader, and the second when she explains how "her" Khalil has changed from how he was to "a man who laughs."

The novel depicts how the main character Khalil, who is an archetype of many Lebanese people, is sucked into the destructive war machine by the allure of power and by the grim realization that is to survive in a brutal world he must relate to this world, acquiesce to it. By doing so, he gains power and acquires both identity and status. He rationalizes this as a means of self-preservation. Khalil's gentleness is devastated by the bullets and bombs that keep hammering the city, destroying not just its buildings but also its social and moral fabric. Through the use of black humor and subtle irony, Barakat mocks all the players in the strife: warlords, patriarchs, sectarian leaders on both sides of the religious divide, ideologues, social climbers, political leaders cum opium dealers, et cetera. Behind this irony, however, a deep groaning is perceptible.

The narrative in this novel is of a specific nature in the sense that it is not continuous but rather disrupted and interrupted. There are no shifters of time and place:

> Khalil's room was as it had always been. Nothing had changed at all… perhaps it was the body living in it that had changed… it had become heavier, weightier, more firmly attached to what was behind the door… when he knew that Naji was coming, when he expected him to visit, Khalil's joy was mingled with the sense of defeat....." (Barakat, 2006: 22-23).

The Stone of Laughter responds to an elementary morphology, i.e. it goes from an initial state to a final state, from a rising action, to a climax and finally to a dénouement. It traces the life path of Khalil, the young intellectual Lebanese, and it embodies the deep, awkward influence war does have upon people's psyches, bodies and life.

The narrative in this novel relies on war. In fact, narration, whether of a chronological or a logical concatenation, follows a repetitive rhythm that suits the mood and the atmosphere of a bloody war. There is a regular use of expressions like "explosions", "bombing", "bombardments" and "car crashes"; these expressions are repeated all through the sections of the novel as if they are fixed landmarks. Every action, every shifter (of time or of place) and every evolution in the process of the protagonist's metamorphosis are systematically motivated and circumstanced by the war events.

The Stone of Laughter is distinct from different perspectives, and one of these angles is the notion of time. Nothing, in this novel, allows the reader to determine the time period separating the initial state and the final one. All the temporal indications used escape the chronological linearity (as we have seen with Ricoeur and Bakhtin). There are some expressions and signs like: "this season…" (p 23), "this morning…" (p 50), "one month later after the death of Naji …" (p 76), "after two days..." … etc; such references to time do not draw a well-determined temporal framework. All they do is to inform the reader that the narrative stretches over several months, and that the story takes place while the country has been going through a bloody war for several years.

Therefore, there is a narrative anachronism that evokes past events; the latter helps instruct the psychological formation of the protagonist, Khalil. There are also flashback scenes that describe Khalil's relationship with Naji, Nayef, Yusuf and the bride. All these scenes seem to be ordinary, but what mostly grabs our attention is the acting time that is modulated and identified by war events, and is contributing to the organization of the repetitive rhythm of the novel.

With space, time is the second concept that allows us organizes our perceptions into a representation of the world (Goldstein, 2003). Thus, it is impossible to imagine a shift of places or a mutation of characters outside time. The Lebanese war, in this work, has modified the common space known to all human beings to renovate its own spatial time: "it hashes" (تفرم) the chronological time to have its own as well. It is this time fabricated by war that prevails and rhythms the narrative in this novel. The shifters of time in this novel are replaced by either the three dots of suspension, moments like: "before the bombing", "after the bombardment", "during the explosion" …, so here again lies the impact of the Lebanese civil war on people's life. It hashes the normal tense to produce its own notion of time, and this is how it is implemented in this novel.

The repetitive cycle of the war fragmentizes time into a succession of repetitive durations that deprives the time of its value of evolution; this is why; we notice the absence of chronological landmarks that indicate the evolution of fiction. Whether time or space, all stand under the one landmark that is war and all its signs. Time, in moments of war, is determined, not by hours or minutes and seconds, but by moments preceding the bombing, moments during the bombing and moments following the bombing. Such a peculiarity of perceiving time is specific to people living under violence and bombardments which are experienced as lulls of survival and expectations of death. Hanging between these two states, time is not felt as a progression of life but as moments devoid of meaning.

Akin to time, space is also hashed and altered by war events. Modelled by war, the space, described by the narrator of this novel, exceeds its ornamental role to function as a signifying agent. The actions and the events described in the novel take place in a region in Beirut, notably "the Western area". There is no description of the settings or the landscapes of the city that appears in the fiction. About Beirut, there

is a little passage in which the beautiful city is described as being hypertrophied under the bombing because it contrasts with such a violent war (2006: 20).

This allusion to Beirut has as an immediate objective to pave the way in the fiction to move to a more restraint space, that of the building where Sitt Isabel's apartment is situated as well as Khalil's room. These two spaces, i.e. the building and the city of Beirut, are opposed to one another: a building that is well-identified and described facing a city that is anonymous and strange; this confrontation is symbolic: the well-indentified building represents stability and strength ("**توحي بالإقامة**")[1] while the anonymous city represents the transition and the temporary ("**توحي بالعبور**")[2] . The former symbolizes the shell in which Khalil was long isolated and protected to keep him safe and secure, whereas the latter symbolizes the outer space in which the whole process of Khalil's self-destruction takes place.

Each space and every setting in The Stone of Laughter is described to be invested in the transformational operation and self-destruction process of the protagonist. In the pre-hospital phase, the space limited in Khalil's room is described as tidy, well-organized and neat to reflect the inner state of Khalil who was happy with his world. However, in the post-hospital phase, the same room is described as anarchical, untidy and "as if it were deserted for years" (p 72). The setting, in this novel, metaphorically refers to the physical and psychological mutations Khalil submits to, and it adheres to the rhythm of the narration.

War is not only utilized as a factor of destruction and distortion, but also as a re-determiner of the two elements of history: time and space. War determines its proper laws of time and space according to its circumstances of killing, murdering, bombing and death. This war turns life upside down and allows anarchy to prevail over the normal order of life. This anarchy and disorder contribute to the metamorphosis of Khalil, the protagonist, to his self-identification as being part of the war and to his gender-identification as being no more a womanized, peaceful guy. The following section is devoted to the analysis of Khalil as an androgynous character and why Barakat chose this technique to reinforce the thematic of her novel.

By analysing Huda Barakat's The Stone of Laughter from different angles, in terms of characterization, themes and narration, we allowed ourselves as well as the readers to spotlight the power that the Arab woman writer has shown in vividly representing the horrors of war and its traumatic influence on the history of people living under daily bombardments and explosions. In the case of H. Barakat, we have noticed such peculiarity when having exposed how she has re-conceptualized the two chronotopes of time and space to re-create a new Time, a new Space, hence a new History. She has 'fabricated' an androgyne character who is different from those

[1] The English translation: "It reflects stability (residence)".
[2] The English translation: "It reflects transit" .

androgyne archetypes in the writings of Shakespeare, V. Woolf or of any other Western writer, an androgynous who reflects the dreadfulness of war.

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