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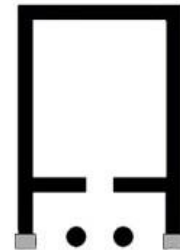
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Weaving A Descriptive Tapestry of War, a Language Composed of Two Fragile and Precious Threads: A Review of the Works of Zeina Abirached

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Beirut, an immensely historically and culturally rich city, can be described as a city of birth, destruction, and rebirth. Using comparative literature, I will be discussing how the works of Zeina Abirached use words and images to describe the people, places, and events of the civil war which occurred there in the 1970s and 80s. I will start by briefly describing each book. As this review progresses, I will focus on the individual as well as universal human behavior through graphic narration and storytelling. This is essential to the understanding of the totality of the situation in the text. The question to be analysed is how she—as an author of comic books—writes about the Mediterranean (in particular, Beirut) through the study of its characters as well as their stories and origins.

Zeina Abirached was born in Beirut, in 1981, when the civil war had already begun; she was already 10 years old by the time it ended in 1990, and her childhood memories were shaped by living through its horrific events. Going on to study graphic arts and commercial design at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA), she was awarded the top prize at the International Comic Book Festival in Beirut in 2002 for her first graphic novel *Beyrouth-Catharsis*. She moved to Paris in 2004, where she attended the National School of Decorative Arts. From among her illustrated books, I chose three: *A Game for Swallows: To Die, To Leave, To Return*, *I Remember Beirut*, and *Le piano oriental*.

A Game for Swallows: To Die, To Leave, To Return

The illustrated book *A Game for Swallows (GS)* describes the division of Beirut into East and West—otherwise known as the green line. The main focus is the description of the author's childhood building and its residents.

The inspiration for this book came in 1980, as she was looking inside the archive of the INA (National Institute for Audio-Visual) where she discovered a documentary which was made in Beirut in 1984. Watching this, she recognised the street of her childhood home in the film; the documentarians had even interviewed her grandmother, who had told them about the safe space created within the building by the residents. Living with only the basic means for survival, this scenario became the starting point for this book and its description of the divided city of Beirut, one divided both literally as well as politically and culturally.

In this work, Zeina is living in the area of East Beirut on Youssef Semaany street in the Tabaris quarter. Through her narration, Zeina communicates the anxiety as well as the beauty that can emerge through living collectively in a protected space. In the foyer of her home, Zeina and

her brother pass an anxious evening in which their parents, who had gone to visit their grandmother Annie, do not return (*GS*, 15). Even though their grandmother lived just a few blocks away, the short distance was very dangerous because of snipers and gunfire. Zeina's mission in writing this illustrated work, then, is to recount the intimacies of the dramatic events of daily life which her grandmother refused to speak of due to their horrific nature.

The recollection of this particular evening focuses on the actions of the community living inside the building where she and her brother awaited their parents' return. The specific characters and their attempts to help the children, along with their personal stories, paint a picture of the solidarity that forms among people living through this tragic and horrifying civil war in the 1980s. Each of them provides an example of the ways in which war changes the realities of people, and the ramifications it has on their personal journeys.

While some would like to stay and work to try and help each other, others would like to escape. Anhala, for example, was a former nanny who had raised three generations of a family in Beirut (*GS*, 62). She did not want to leave her beloved Beirut to emigrate with the family to Canada, but had followed the last child she raised, Farah, now married and pregnant, to this apartment building. She becomes a sort of mother to the community. When she discovers the children are alone, she stays with them and makes them coffee and cakes. On the other hand, Chucri, the son of a taxi driver who had disappeared, was left to take care of his mother and sister. While they fled for the mountains, he stayed and took care of the building. For example, he found a generator for electricity and brought fruit and vegetables, and with his father's car he would find freedom by driving through the deserted streets at the cease fire (*GS*, 69). Farah and Rami, her husband, on the other hand, would like to emigrate with their family to Canada. They were waiting desperately for news of their visas. Farah is described as always having a small bag containing passports and ready cash on hand—in case of news. One wall of the foyer itself was covered by a picture of Moses and the Hebrews fleeing from Egypt, which is present in all of the illustrations (*GS*, 39).

Abirached uses humour to soften the heavy subject matter of the book, mixing comic descriptions among the tragic tales of the characters. Even in the more dramatic moments, ironic scenes are presented of how people passed the time. Ernest Chalita, who lived on the fourth floor of the building, would perform *Cyrano De Bergerac* by heart every night for the children (*GS*, 78), despite the tragic situation of having just lost his brother due to sniper fire between the neighborhood buildings.

Madame Linda is another example of tragedy described through irony. She was a former Miss Lebanon in the 1960s, whose husband had moved from Texas to Lebanon 'for the beauty of her eyes', this because she desperately wanted to be near her sister who lived in the building. Even in this tragic turn of events, comedy is used to tone down seriousness. Mr Khaled, Madame Linda's husband, who had opened a popular restaurant and nightclub (now closed during the war), would bring mixed drinks to the safe foyer for the residents, who otherwise had little food (*GS*, 101). His wife, Madame Linda, would ask Farah about her wedding pictures, although Farah and her husband were married in the midst of battle, running from the church to the house while dodging snipers (*GS*, 134).

Although Abirached uses humor, she does not spare the reader from the realities of war. She talks about how crossing from one demarcation line to the other could mean risking one's life, as people were often killed or kidnapped based on the religion presented on their identity card. The characters listened to the news on the radio, reporting 81 dead and 221 wounded in various locations (*GS*, 83). One of the character's brothers was killed by sniper fire, and many people were missing or had lost friends and relatives.

Nevertheless, life continued, which is here utilised a metaphor for hope within the darkest moments war. *A Game For Swallows* ends with the return of Zeina's parents, who gather a few things and leave with the children the next day. Upon returning a few weeks later, they find the building completely empty. The reader discovers that Farah and Rami moved to Canada, where the baby was then born, and Anhala remained with Farah's aunt in Beirut. The book ends with Zeina learning to write her name and an illustration of a boat with the inscription: "to leave" (*GS*, 188).

I Remember Beirut

I Remember Beirut (IRB) is another illustrated book by Zeina Abirached, which mixes flashbacks from her childhood with the emotions and images from the places in which she once lived. The book begins with a map of Beirut, showing the street where she lived and the green line (*IRB*, 8). Her memories of growing up on the East side of Beirut before the end of the war are a mix of drama and humour. She describes her mother's, full of bullet holes, and the constant requirement of windshield repair due to the force of the bombardment which regularly cracked it, until she gave up trying to repair it and wore sunglasses instead (*IRB*, 9). She recalled Mr George, the taxi driver, with his long fingernails, and his car—affectionately called "the boat"—which he used to drive them to the Ward's bus stop as well as teach her to drive on the streets of Beirut (*IRB*, 13).

At times Zeina's descriptions of her childhood seem almost normal. She recalls cartoons and the story of Little Red Riding Hood (*IRB*, 24). She remembers buying coca-cola in glass bottles and buying kerosene by lowering a basket by a chord over the balcony to both pay for the delivery and bring it up (*IRB*, 22, 20). She remembers the sound when shaking cassette tapes, and dancing with her cousin while listening to Sabah, a famous singer, and wanting to cut her hair the same year as getting braces (*IRB*, 27, 63). Recalling her father, she tells of how he would crank up the music of Wagner and Berlioz to drown out the sound of traffic so loud that the neighbors complained, eventually forcing him to buy headphones (*IRB*, 31-32).

Nevertheless, the war was always in the background. Her father's music-listening is depicted through a picture of him wearing his headphones while bombers flew overhead outside the window (*IRB*, 29). While going to school one day, fighting broke out and she and 200 other children were taken to the gym. The teachers were frightened, but the soldiers next door lent them their sleeping bags for the night (*IRB*, 35). When she complained, she was locked up in the bathroom, and so had no more memories of the event (*IRB*, 37). She remembered her brother collecting shrapnel and her thinking about what to put in her backpack for an eventual

escape (*IRB*, 42, 44). Her memories also include a long list of places where they took refuge; for example, the boat to Cyprus was so large that she had to take a raft to get to it (*IRB*, 48, 59). She even remembers when they could still smoke in planes, recalling how every other bit of sustenance was missing (bread, water, and so on) but never cigarettes (*IRB*, 62).

When the war had finally moved eastwards, she went to West Beirut and downtown (*IRB*, 77). Life was almost normal again, and for the first time in many years she saw the old lighthouse, the ferris wheel, and the beach (*IRB*, 69). Here, she felt as if she were in a foreign country, but was surprised to hear people speaking her language and to discover that her street on the other side of the wall had the same name: Youssef Semaani (*IRB*, 71, 76). While she could not remember the final day of the war, she could remember the day she finally took a real shower (*IRB*, 73-74). Going downtown, she saw that everything had been reduced to rubble. Her father showed her where the tramstop, the bakery, and her grandfather's shop used to be, among other places, but which were now unrecognisable.

Both *I Remember Beirut* and *A Game for Swallows: To Die, To Leave, To Return* reflect a poignant loss of innocence. Zeina was hidden—trapped in the East side of Beirut—but her discovery of the West as a continuation of the same city broke her vision of what the world was like. What she believed to be a completely different land was one in the same city. They spoke the same language, had the same streets, and shared the same culture, but were, crucially, divided by religion. Her emphasis on the history of the land, the prison state, and her humour—always mixed with fear—allows Zeina's narrative to retain a representation of the reality of war without losing its memories or creating fear through its discussion. In this way, authors like Zeina help to continue an open dialogue about the nature of war and safe areas. Twenty years later, she remembers being alone in Paris in July of 2006, thinking that her biggest fear was losing her family (*IRB*, 89). Now safe in Europe, her mother was constantly texting her to assure her that everything was still fine, and the final memory presented in the book was one of George Perec (*IRB*, 91, 95).

Le piano oriental

This last illustrated book, which was published in French by Casterman in 2015, was realised during her residence in 2013, in occasion of the exposition "France and Lebanon: a journey between archive and illustration", as well as at the Mediatheque Mazé. This book is dedicated to her great-grandfather, and was inspired by Beyrouth of the 1960s. It was based on a dream Abdallah Kamanja had had to invent or adapt the use of the piano to oriental music. This attempt to bring together or create connections between Oriental and Western music is doubled by the telling of this tale, because Zeina returns within the story to recount how she had found this piano at her house along with what was still left from the memories of her actual great-grandfather. In this work, she recounts how she took a box of her grandfather's things with her on her journey back to Paris, and, through Abirached's typical style—that of comic ability and poignant tenderness—the reader is kept entertained but mindful of her approach or relationship with her two mother-tongue languages: Arabic and French.

I became more interested in this book when I came across it as an art installation within the National Museum of the History of Immigration in Paris (Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration), and it was also shown as a large exhibit in the public space in front of the National Conservatory of Arts and Crafts, Museum of Industry and Technology (Musée des arts et métiers).

Conclusion

Due to its strategic location centred in the historically unstable reality of the Mediterranean, Beirut has lived a history of both opulence and ruin. Zeina Abirached's works reflect the innocence of childhood, ultimately demonstrating how divisions in war are more imaginary than real. By taking a neutral, non-politically entrenched stance in her descriptions of characters from different walks of life, all living together peacefully, she reflects the idea that there is a calm within the storm, even in the midst of a terrifying war like that of Beirut's.

As previously mentioned, Abirached's last book introduces an important discussion about bilingualism. Having studied French and Arabic at school, she opens a discussion about maintaining one's identity in a foreign land. Even though now living in France, she has maintained a sense of her origins within her writing and illustrations through the mixing of languages, weaving them together as if they were threads making a completely new fabric. She uses the insertion of Lebanese words in images throughout her book, playing with the language and giving it humorous overtones. The image of the piano which her great-grandfather wanted to literally transform from its original state into an instrument to create oriental sounds becomes a metaphor for every Middle Eastern artist—every young writer like herself—who wishes to follow their dreams and incorporate their oriental roots within a Western context.

The Beirut of Abirached is a Beirut of hope and possibility—of theaters and cafes with people-lined streets and music all around. She describes a sort of Golden Epoque for a region now associated with war and destruction. Through her works she gives the viewer hope that it is still indeed possible to return to a better Beirut—one filled with culture and music—perhaps through the realisation of dreams of artists like herself.

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