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Representations of the Lebanese Civil War and Peace in two Short Stories by Mai Ghoussoub

Abstract I: Questo saggio intende esplorare prose brevi di Mai Ghoussoub dalla raccolta *Leaving Beirut* (2007) che trattano della città di Beirut al tempo della guerra civile, negli anni settanta e fino al novanta. I suoi racconti e saggi brevi verranno analizzati alla luce delle teorie critiche della 'psicogeografia', e della 'geopolitica delle emozioni'. La difficoltà di riconciliare il proprio Sé con il proprio Paese e con la propria gente, dopo una guerra, è quindi particolarmente rilevante. Nei suoi racconti Mai Ghoussoub ritrae la normalità del tempo di pace e l'improvvisa metamorfosi indotta dalla guerra sui singoli individui, dal giorno alla notte. Le sue narrazioni, tra molte altre, affrontano l'esilio, la dislocazione e una visione della madrepatria vista da altrove, poiché molti intellettuali e artisti sono emigrati durante o dopo la guerra.

Abstract II: The present essay intends to explore some short stories by Mai Ghoussoub, from the collection *Leaving Beirut* (2007) which focus on the city of Beirut at the time of the civil war in the '70s and up to the '90s. Her works will be discussed taking into consideration 'psychogeography', and the 'geopolitics of emotions' as theoretical frameworks. The difficulty to reconcile one-self to one's nation and one's people, after a war, is particularly relevant here. In her stories, Mai Ghoussoub depicts the normality of a time of peace and the abrupt metamorphosis forced onto people by war, almost overnight. Her narratives confront, amongst other themes, exile, displacement and a vision of the motherland from abroad, since numerous intellectuals and artists migrated during or right after the war.

In this essay I would like to explore short narratives that epitomize – almost in the way moral parables do – representations of war and peace with protagonists who are teenagers or young adults. The two short stories and the short prose pieces taken into consideration belong to the collection by Mai Ghoussoub, *Leaving Beirut* (1998) about the Lebanese civil war that lasted fifteen years, from 1975 to 1990. These texts question the individual's and

the community's relation to a specific place in terms of his/their private and public engagement with it. Moreover, they pose questions of personal and collective agency, responsibility and memory. Finally they prefigure, study and define the precise positioning of the subject in our contemporary troubled world. Because of this they are best understood within the critical framework of Guy Debord's theory of psychogeography and of Dominique Moïsi's study on *The Geopolitics of Emotion* (2009). Psychogeography which examines the relationship between the city and the behaviour of its inhabitants and Dominique Moïsi's view of a 'negative culture of humiliation' appear particularly relevant for the present study. Humiliation, argues Moïsi, ends up nourishing vengeance and violence, just as is illustrated by Ghoussoub's tales: the concept of 'positive humiliation' that triggers healthy competition and aspirations is instead put forward in her essays.

Together, Debord's relationship between the individual and the city and Moïsi's 'negative humiliation' constitute the frameworks of Mai Ghoussuoub's representations of war in Beirut as seen from the vantage point of the expatriate, for she left Lebanon for London in 1979. Her detachment, or 'outsideness', is only apparent, for the characters she selects are vividly portrayed and known to her.

In the short story "The Heroism of Umm Ali", for instance, the protagonist is a nine-year-old girl who is sold by her parents to a bourgeois Muslim family to work as house-maid in Beirut. Her drunkard father and her evidently weak mother never go back to reclaim her, and she lives a life of humble tasks and constant humiliations, even rape by the mistress's son, in the house where she lives almost like a slave. But one day, war

> sprang upon the country [and] very soon engulfed the neighbourhood. […] The cosy routines of its inhabitants were so abruptly disrupted, and their streets turned so easily into an apocalyptic battlefield, that it was as if it had all happened under the spell of some magician's wand (Ghoussoub 1998: 71).

On one of her errands, while going shopping at the outbreak of the civil war, Latifa sees the soldiers who have established their headquarters in the bakery down the street. She is immediately mesmerised by them and starts savouring her chance of freedom:

> Every morning she stayed a bit longer at the baker's shop. She began to chat with the militiamen as they relaxed at the door of their headquarters. […] she loved the way the fighters spoke to Mrs Saniya: casually, and with no special respect. Latifa needed passionately to be like them, to become one of them (Ghoussoub 1998: 73).

The long-suffered humiliation and Latifa's subaltern class consciousness lead her to join the soldiers, at the age of seventeen. She changes her name into Umm Ali, the sister of men, and decides she wants to turn into a legend. Thus Latifa is quite suddenly

metamorphosed from victim into monster:

> Umm Ali was seen in many places at the same time. Once somebody had seen her in an Israeli jail […] there were also tales of her exploits in the battle of the hotels in downtown Beirut. Umm Ali was neither woman nor man. Latifa was no longer the vulnerable little maid. Umm Ali died. […] Latifa had never had her picture taken. She died as faceless as she had lived. […] Umm Ali was a legend too, and she had no features either (Ghoussoub 1998: 77).

Umm Ali's notoriousness as "ruthless fighter who knew neither fear nor compassion" (Ghoussoub 1998: 66) has nothing to do with the frightened, little girl she once was. Her 'amputated childhood' marks the passage from Latifa to Umm Ali.

This story is only apparently a very simple parable about a sort of modern Cinderella who turns into a child-soldier. Her first life is lived within a culture of humiliation which is then replaced by a culture of violence. This cycle, from humiliation to violence, seen as a form of empowerment and emancipation, is not so much a gender issue, nor an individual destiny. It is, in fact, a stabilized pattern in our own contemporary World, as Dominique Moïsi claims in his essay *The Geopolitics of Emotion* (2009). Well aware of using a vocabulary which is normally associated with soft sciences – that is, feelings, emotions, and the semantic sphere of affect, which clashes with the classical or normative idea of Geopolitics as a rational science, made up of figures, statistics, stock exchange ratings and future calculable possibilities, the author persists in claiming that nowadays 'cultures of emotion' perfectly represent geopolitical realities and cultural clashes.

Dominique Moïsi is one of the major experts in international and political affairs. His accurate and informed analysis of contemporary Geopolitics has nothing to do with a sentimental approach to reality and to international relations. Moïsi rather speaks of emotions as cultural and collective constructs. He claims that the cultures of hope, humiliation and fear characterise our world and, respectively, influence three main geopolitical arenas. To begin with, the culture of hope, according to the author, seems to be peculiar of Asia, particularly of the area now known as Cindia, that is to say China and India, with their young population and demographic and economic never-ceasing expansion. This optimistic perspective excludes Japan, with its aging population, economic stagnation and loss of diplomatic influence. In contrast, humiliation seems to have spread all over the Arab-Islamic composite world, maybe with the exception of the Emirates, which constitute islands of hope and modernisation. Latifa's story is emblematic of this state of negative humiliation that inevitably turns into absolute violence. Lastly, fear is the cultural terrain now obsessively paralysing the Western World (Europe and the US), affected by islamophobia, or, more generally, fear of the 'other', and by demographic and economic crises.

In the final chapters of her work, which are dedicated to war tribunals, instead, Mai Ghoussoub provides an example of 'positive humiliation' when she considers other wars and other countries. She refers to Mandela: "his humiliations and those of his people made him hate the act of humiliation. […] I cling to the example of Nelson Mandela, and I set great store by his decision to pardon and forgive and to turn the ugliest past into a bright future" (Ghoussoub 1998: 160).

According to Dominique Moïsi in spite of the fact that – demographically speaking – Islamism might outnumber other religious groups, both psychologically and emotionally, the Islamic world is now dominated by a sense of cultural and political humiliation, and is desperately asking for recognition of its dignity, even through violence and terror.

Thus, the shift from a culture of negative humiliation to a culture of violence – that Moïsi detects in phenomena such as Al-Qaeda, the creation of a pan-Islamic ever-growing alliance and Islamic terrorism – is similar to Mai Ghoussoub's portrayal of violence, although on a smaller and more private scale. Moreover, it must be said that Ghoussoub, too, sees her people as embodying a precise psychological geo-culture, for she claims: "Remember, we live on the shores of the Mediterranean. Honour, revenge and vendetta are virtues that our menfolk are supposed to have defended throughout their history" (Ghoussoub 1998: 35); or "Honour, revenge and identity are all very intertwined in my country of origin" (Ghoussoub 1998: 49).

Life in Lebanon and in Beirut has been affected by the search for balance between a composite mosaic of religious confessions, sometimes driven and manipulated by foreign powers. The Druze, the Maronite Christians, the Shi'ites, the Sunnis, and the Palestinians co-habit on a strip of land, which has turned from Eden into Hell. The translation of the Israelo-Palestinian war into central Beirut, where Palestinians had their headquarters, and the indirect interference of Syria and Iran in the war has facilitated the prominence of one group over others. That is why words such as humiliation, frustration and revenge become recurrent as refrains in Mai Ghoussoub's work, providing grounding for Guy Debord's theory of psychogeography as the study of "the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals" (Debord 1981: 5) while at the same time demonstrating Dominique Moïsi's theories. The Lebanese war is mainly a war on a city, on Beirut's city centre, as many authors claim:

> Everything began and ended in the city centre. That was why it was the civil war's primordial theatre. A country shatters when its capital is wounded, like a point and a circumference; a capital disintegrates when its city centre is destroyed, the two concentric circles make a nation. Or unmake it.
> We had to walk across the Green Line to reach West Beirut, a zone which was to become a battlefield a few years later (Boulad 2004: 31-34).

Civil war in Beirut is depicted by Mai Ghoussoub, as well as by other intellectuals and historians, as a silent and abrupt transformation, which affects not only communities, political or religious parties, but single individuals, too.

> The spark went out on Sunday, April 13 1975, at 'Ayn al-Rummaneh, a densely populated Christian neighbourhood where a Church was being inaugurated in the presence of Pierre Gemayel. After one of his body guards had been killed by a round of bullets, a bus carrying a group of Palestinians back to Chatila, following a commemoration at the camp of Tall al-Za'tar, was the victim of an ambush and twenty-seven people died. Immediately, warfare broke out between 'Ayn al-Rummaneh and the opposite Shi'ite neighbourhood of Chiyah, one of the mostly densely populated quarter of the belt of misery. In every neighbourhood, men with weapons appeared.
> The night of that April 13 Lebanon entered war. […] "Fronts" did not appear outside of the urban centre. […] War was fought borough against borough … (Kassir 2009: 617-619, *my translation*).

This metamorphosis, translated into East Beirut against West Beirut along the so-called Green Line, takes place almost overnight and changes individuals to the point of rendering them unrecognizable. Another testimony confirms this view:

> I decided to leave my city to the invaders and those who wanted to fight them and move to East Beirut with my small family. We were among huge numbers of people who also moved eastwards. […] The checkpoints shocked me even before my move to the East. […] While in the west, there were daily, armed clashes, in the east we could go for long periods without gun battles. […] Still, in 1982, I felt a bit out of place in East Beirut as I watched, from Beit Meri, the Israelis destroy the west side (Saghie 2004: 112-113).

Significantly, Mai Ghoussoub calls one of her short stories "The Metamorphosis of Said". Said is the smiling greengrocer's son, who helps his father after school in his corner-shop and delivers people's shopping in huge brown paper bags. He attends secondary school and seems a promising student. His father foresees a prosperous future for him at the *Ecole Hôtelière*, for hotel and catering businesses were flourishing in Lebanon. This simple, linear movement from present to future, made of educational opportunities, of upward social mobility, is suddenly interrupted. Linguistically, the text emphasises that abrupt change through a short statement: "But things changed" (Ghoussoub 1998: 81).

"Just a few weeks after the war broke out Said was no longer to be seen near his father", who had to admit: "Said has joined the fighters" (Ghoussoub 1998: 81). From that moment on, rumours spread about Said being a sniper, about Said organizing young men, about Said stealing cars and getting rich by stealing, about Said as a terrible torturer.

At this point the voice of the author is heard, out of the neighbours' chorus, in contrast with it because of the common sense it voices:

> The young and smiling Said was now never seen. Instead he was now imagined in the most frightening terms. Said had been turned by the war into a small monster. He should have been suavely and efficiently managing a little hotel by now, somewhere in one of the famous tourist and holiday resorts that the Lebanese were once so proud of. Both these Saids are real. I have seen many of them. Too many of them. Both before and after the civil war. I have seen their bright hopeful faces, and I have seen them ready to kill and torture. […] Who is to decide, now, who the real Said is – the Said who might be judged, now that everything is settling back into 'normality'? Where did Said create and store all the cruelty that made him so feared and famous? (Ghoussoub 1998: 82).

This passage is all built on the metaphor of a fracture. A fracture in time, before and after the war, and a fracture in personality, for Said has become two persons, exactly as happened to Latifa/Umm Ali. The war itself is that fracture, when time stops and becomes mere present, 'now'; it is a present of uncertainty, between 'what should have been' and 'what has become'.

It is here, in this passage, that the author stands outside her community and voices a kind of judgement: "I have seen many of them" (Ghoussoub 1998: 82). She is both an insider and an outsider, for after witnessing the civil war she emigrated, thus distancing herself from facts and starting to relate them through fictions. Although an expatriate in London, she does go back to Beirut now and then. Once back in Beirut, once the war is over, she happens to walk on that same pavement and to see the fruit and vegetables in their old place. What is lacking, however, is that old feeling of assurance and security. She cannot face Said, in case he be there, in the shop. At this point she asks herself as well as her own people: "Could we all start again, as if we had had a bad night and were leaving its horrible nightmares behind?" (Ghoussoub 1998: 82).

The difficulty of reconciling oneself to one's nation and one's people, even to one's neighbours, after a civil war, in times of peace, could not be expressed in clearer terms. Yet, in a recent film by Canadian director Denis Villeneuve, *Incendies* (2010) a Lebanese Christian woman dies of a stroke, because of the impossibility of coming to terms with History. While in a swimming pool with her daughter in Toronto, she recognises the man who had raped her while she was in prison during the civil war in Lebanon as her abducted first son and in him she also recognises the father of her younger twins. This absurd family matter, only apparently private, is in fact the product of the public, political and religious chaos produced by the civil war. The mother can by no means reconcile herself to her family, her country, her personal and national History, not even in Canada. War tracks her down, so to speak.

Not even a war-crime tribunal might be sufficient to restore a sense of security, Mai Ghoussoub claims. Back in London, safe again in her exile, Mai Ghoussoub realises that it is necessary to face the unacceptable reality: "that the line that separates the criminal from the next-door neighbour, the helpful lad from the torturer, is not as clear as I had always thought before the civil war" (Ghoussoub 1998: 83).

Then the story changes register, with the hero turning into a villain. The author is free to imagine the reasons for his wanting to become a fighter. It is here that Ghoussoub's representation of a somehow typical fighter meets Moïsi's concept of humiliation:

> This infuriates Said, for he has often seen his father bending with humility in front of rich customers" […].
> His hatred for the other side, the enemy across the green line, is becoming unbearable. He wants to silence their shells, to catch their snipers, to frighten them and humiliate them in the same way that they are humiliating his father, destroying his mother, turning her into a hysterical, depressive woman (Ghoussoub 1998: 84).

Humiliation is a key word, here. It is the main reason why Said becomes fascinated with war, with the militiamen, who are young, powerful, self-confident with their Kalashnikovs and with cigarettes hanging from their mouths. They even look beautiful to Said, who "watches them from the balcony of his miserable little apartment" (Ghoussoub 1998: 84). In the next scene, the author imagines Said joining the militiamen. He is now one of them, with plenty of cigarettes and a Kalashnikov, too, and a Jeep:

> Yesterday he noticed how Mr Rafiq, the haughty customer who always prompted big smiles on his father's face whenever he stepped into the shop, moved to one side to allow Said and his fellow fighters to jump the queue at the bakery. Said could see and feel the fear in Mr Rafiq's eyes. […]
> His anger at his father's constant humility is never appeased. Humiliating others and watching how they fear him is endlessly exhilarating (Ghoussoub 1998: 86).

Said has become violent, people weave all sorts of stories about him as a torturer, a killer, a hero. In order to rewind history and meet again the smiling boy in his father's shop, the author says, room must be made for forgiving and forgetting.

The two stories are quite similar. The paradigm of negative humiliation as the path to violence is reproduced. The first story immediately departs from the Cinderella type of tales: the protagonist is never rewarded for her services, that is, for silently and obediently putting up with subjugation and injustice on the part of her mistress, and she dies as a martyr at war, after living her whole life as a humiliated victim. She does not look for personal revenge, in the end; she rather fights a lost battle to free herself from her

socially doomed condition. The same sense of economic and social frustration is the cause of Said's metamorphosis. Thus, war does not prevent women from being equal to men, or poor people from humiliating the rich. Said is luckier, anyway; he survives and can go back to his normal life.

Peace-time to Mai Ghoussoub means exile in London, where she worked as an artist, a sculptor, a playwright, a journalist and a writer/activist before her premature death in 2007. In London she co-founded the Saqi publishing house, promoting publications of texts on the Middle East. Peace-time to her means elaborating on the possibilities of reconciliation with 'abnormality' and 'generalised dementia', a never fully attained target:

> Beirut is living its peace now. Like all others who are returning here, and those who still live here, I wanted to believe in this peace. […] But whenever I had a minute to myself I felt a strange malaise taking hold of me. […] But why this malaise? […] This war follows us in our peace (Ghoussoub 1998: 34-36).

War remains, war never ends. Mai Ghoussoub quotes John Steinbeck, who even claims that "one cannot photograph war, for war is mainly emotion" (Ghoussoub 1998: 143). This shows that psychogeography and a geopolitcs of emotion are by no means irrelevant to the discussion of representations of peace and war, and that they are intrinsic ways of inhabiting our human history.

It is in times of peace, in her exile, when she retreats into art, that Mai Ghoussoub most critically and maybe even unwillingly is brought back to reflect on war:

> In Europe I tried to change my skin […]. I went on for years rejecting politics. […] I trawled the art galleries of Paris and London looking for an art that was not concerned with social issues. I praised fun, kitsch and lightness. The intention of my sculptures was that they should be colourful, superficial and useless. [...] I painted them in silver and gold, and I painted my own lips with a striking red. 'Long live escapism' was the slogan by which I lived. But long it could not live. I find myself unable to switch off the TV… (Ghoussoub 1998: 160).

It becomes compulsive for her to compare the Lebanese civil war with civil wars in other countries: Chile, South Africa, Yugoslavia, Mali. Everywhere she detects that most brutal abjection that these lines from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* so powerfully illustrate:

> Caesar
> The time of universal peace is near. […]
> Go charge Agrippa,
> Plant those that have revolted in the van,
> That Antony may seem to spend his fury
> Upon himself (Shakespeare 1995: IV.vi. 4-10).

This image of an individual condemned to fight against his former friends, as if against himself, is the perfect translation of what a civil war is and does. No matter from what point of view one tries to look at it, it is a betrayal. Mai Ghoussoub never moved back to Beirut, in spite of her visits back home:

> She feels at home in London […] Now she is a British national but sees herself more as a citizen of Kensington. When people come to visit from Lebanon or France she is proud to walk them through the park, along the path by the Serpentine […] She always ends her tour in a part of London that has no concern for periods, be they past or future: Portobello Road. There amid a feast of juxtaposed sounds and cultures, she asks her visitors if they have ever witnessed such an exciting mixture of styles and customs in their own countries. She now feels alien in cities that are not confused in their identities, cities with linear and local memories. She needs hybridity and clashes of colours in order to fit (Ghoussoub 1998: 150).

Nostalgia compelled her to go back to Beirut. Significantly the author uses the third person narration in this text, as if she were looking at herself as 'another'. She claims that "Maybe, after all, there should have been some trials, some assessment of responsibility in this terrible war. You can't wipe out ugly memories without also erasing some of your humanity" (Ghoussoub 1998: 153).

Civil wars take away one's humanity. That is why they can never be forgotten, even in times of peace. And if any war is emotion, civil wars are even more emotional. Therefore, Mai Ghoussoub sees the only possible solution for quenching uncontrolled and uncontrollable emotions in this:

> If the need for vengeance is a fact of life, the meaning of civilized coexistence has long been rightly understood as the intervention by legal or social procedures in order to limit the possibility of this vengeance, and to use legal means and compensations in order to re-establish a possible coexistence between the one who caused the injury and the person injured (Ghoussoub 1998: 187).

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