

**The Aesthetics of Healing in Jad El Hage's *The Myrtle Tree* (London Banipal, 2007)
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Jad El Hage likes to allude to this Novel by the acronym “*TMT*” – perhaps for reasons of economy in his email correspondence, you might say. (I shall deploy the same strategy here). But why include the first *T*?). Looking at the three letters *TMT*, I couldn't help conjuring up its cousin “TNT”, and thus the inherent implication of explosiveness in *The Myrtle Tree*. This novel is not just another book or another work of fiction about Lebanon's Civil War! Sure enough, *The Myrtle Tree* relates to that war: but in a very unusual way. I shall focus on two aspects of this novel: the aesthetics of presentation, including the title, *The Myrtle Tree*; and the dynamics of moments of contest and irony in relation to war-torn Lebanon of the 1970s (and after).

The publisher's blurb accurately describes it as “A novel of love and dreams in war-torn Lebanon”. *The Myrtle Tree* is certainly not simply a narrative of or about the civil war. Rather, it is about human beings and their lives, loves, dreams and worries in the uncertainties of difficult unfathomable dilemmas. It is a creative, aesthetic and optimistic representation of human frailties, human folly, human cruelty, but also human strength and resilience in the face of adversity. In a true humanist sense, it is an aesthetic antidote (the artist's *tiryaq*) against the depressingly negative “stuff” associated with that terrible episode in Lebanon's recent history, and with all irrational wars, for that matter. The civil war has done great damage and caused many upheavals to Lebanon as a country and a society and to the lives of ordinary people in Lebanon and in the Lebanese Diaspora. It has also, in one way or another, touched the lives of all those who know, love and admire Lebanon and its people.

It is from this perspective that I approach this novel. It is also in this context that I can justify spending some moments, at the outset, to reflect on the aesthetics of the title (I shall return later to another aesthetic aspect). Why the *Myrtle* in the title? Botany, history and myth tell us that there is a strong ‘family connection’ between the Myrtle, the Laurel and the Daphne (It is OK if I use the upper case, since all three have also become personal female names in English, and other Western languages). More important, the *Myrtle*, like the other two, is connected with mysteries of celebration: of life, fertility, victory, and death. In Arabic, the attributes of the three plants: *Aas*, *Rand*, *Ghar* (Myrtle, Daphne, Laurel,) often overlap. (We also have *Aasia* and *Randa* as female proper names in Arabic). The berries (*habb*) of the Myrtle have produced the popular name *Habb al-Aas*, more affectionately pronounced *Hinblaas* in Lebanon. (I prefer the spelling “*Aas*” with double ‘a’ rather than double ‘s’!.)

The connection between the Myrtle and celebrating life and joy can occasionally reach curious heights. There is an enchanting tradition that occurs in the Arabic *materia medica* literature - a tradition most probably going back to Oriental-Greek lore, in which we read (dare I say apocryphally?): “If you place a fresh Myrtle leaf (or perhaps Daphne or Laurel?) behind your ear at the outset of a drinking spree, you could drink as much wine as you like without the danger of getting drunk!” (Presumably no hangover either!) There is no guarantee, of course, that the surviving types of common Myrtle (or Daphne, or Laurel) can still do the old heavenly trick! I suspect that old Adonis - Dionysius – Bacchus –& co. must have long ago used up that special sobering variety, leaving us with just ordinary myrtles, etc. Or have the

triumphs of monotheistic religions in the East long suppressed the effect of the magical antidote?! (In any case, the Australian variety of Myrtle or even the wild aromatic Aniseed Myrtle is guaranteed not to work at all at that level!).

I shall not say much about the medicinal properties of the Myrtle and its leaves and berries (my task is to talk about the novel!) But I can say that even today among Arabs and Greeks, for example, Myrtle (and Daphne) trees are still associated with other mysteries and omens of all kind: good luck and bad luck, health and sickness, life and death. Myrtle branches still occasionally appear in funerals and are placed on graves, for example in parts of Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Cyprus. Is this to keep the souls of the dead at peace or to maintain their mysterious bond with the world of the living? Or is the reason for this meant to be shrouded in mystery? Even in British lore, Myrtle has some interesting manifestations. As the young at heart among you would perhaps recall, there is a Myrtle in the *Harry Potter* series of novels (and films): she is the “dead-alive” Moaning Myrtle, who helps Harry and his friend Ron out of some tricky near-death situations.

To add to the mysteries of the healing powers of the Myrtle, I am tempted to suggest that there is an inherent strong link between the Arabic for Myrtle (*Aas*) and the noun *Aasi*, often occurring in Arabic poetry and song (both ancient and modern) to denote a physician or healer. Even if the derivation path might appear complex, I can still sense a genuine connection (hence the name *Asia* for a girl). Does this originate from the physicians’ use of *Myrtle* – particularly in healing wounds? Or are the concepts of healing, and also of consoling (*muwasah*), and its opposite *Asaa* (“*Asaa* cannot be forgotten”, as an Arabic proverb asserts!) all paradoxically linked to the Myrtle (*Aas*)?

I assure you that I haven’t gone through the above discourse out of philological interest, or to impress you with curious details! For me, the interplay of life and death, sickness and healing is strongly associated with the Myrtle. And so it is with Jad El Hage’s *The Myrtle Tree*.

This interplay of life and death, sickness and healing is an important theme in this novel. The narrator’s and main protagonist’s uncle, Adam’s uncle, is a healer of sorts, a dentist. He is the *Hakim* (the popular designation *par excellence* for a physician). But he is also the usually wise, ever optimistic, at times even utopian, healer of social and political toothaches in his community. Of course, the author would have his own reasons for using the *Myrtle* rather than other trees, more or less equally dear to him (the Olive, Oak, Pine, or Cedar). His reasons may or may not relate to my ideas. In any case, there is a real *Hinblass* tree which is ever present with its generous shade in the author’s narrative, and perhaps also - as Marcel Proust would put it - its persistent scent in the author’s memory.

Let me now focus on the theme of the civil war in Jad El Hage’s *TMT*. What this novel offers is an attempt to understand the intellectual and emotional contexts, contests and conflicts associated with the war, from the perspectives of ordinary, and sometimes extra-ordinary, human beings. It certainly helps us to rightly question the quasi ‘popular wisdom’ about the role of sectarianism in Lebanon’s civil war (and Lebanese politics in general). Lebanon’s civil war, and Lebanon’s current problems and dilemmas, cannot simply be explained away by religious or sectarian factors.

The village of *Wahdeh*, the main locale for the Novel's characters and events, is a microcosm of Lebanon (perhaps of our global village too!) And what happens there is a contest, at different levels, between a number of existential dualities, a number of sets of opposing factors, actors and views. Thus we sense a running contest between those trying, for their own political and selfish reasons, to "bring out the killer extinct" in people in the most literal sense; and those, like Adam - the main hero and narrator of the novel – who grew up believing in Mahatma Gandhi's peaceful approach to problem solving. Adam "can't see the plot of a war about beliefs, or ethnic groups".

The contest is also between those who say: "The simple man will be taught simple things . . . yes we can afford to lose many of these, whereas the skilled are rare and precious"; and those who say: "every life is precious". It is between those who think that "... foreign hands have played a foul game to divide our motherland"; and "Others [who] believe it is the plea of the poor so long ignored" (59). The author gets his characters to argue, discuss and articulate, sometimes in passing. On occasion, we have a dose of the observer-participant's analytical summing up of contrasting views, expressed intellectually, sometimes with a journalist's touch. Thus there is the contrast between those who see "the proliferation of different factions and militias as a manifestation of fragmentation of sectarianism; and the more analytical view that there were just two sides in the war: those fighting to change the power structure and those hanging on to their power".

The contest and contrast is also reflected in the way a certain character questions Lebanon's recent history and sees two irreconcilable views. For example: the popular notion that looks back - with nostalgia – to "the golden age of Beirut as Mediterranean metropolis"; and the other conviction that would rather look back, in anger and with irony, only to find that "this was no more than a façade of cool and hype at all levels". The contest between aspirations and reality is one of *TMT*'s running themes. Often this is embedded into an absorbing and dynamic narrative that is replete with lively imagery and irony. Thus on the one hand we see "the traffic of expectations bumper to bumper" in someone's eyes; and on the other, we come face to face with the social, emotional and physical barriers and checkpoints, including "flying checkpoints". In a society torn by civil war imposed by warlords, militias and mysterious and not so mysterious foreigners, the vast majority of the people feel deeply confused. Everybody seems torn apart and hesitant. Even the sky is occasionally undecided: at one moment "the weather is trying to make up its mind"; at another, we see "the clouds ready to burst as soon as the wind drops". (p.40)

A significant theme in *The Myrtle Tree* is the tension and contrast between city and countryside, between the people of coastal ports (*ahl al-Sahel*) and those of the mountain, between the alluring decadence of the Lebanese Metropolis and the beauty of nature, generosity of spirit and strong sense of community in the Lebanese village or small town (which is not as vanishing a civilization as you might think!). This is a theme that is also strongly present in the antecedent or earlier incarnation of this novel, Jad El Hage's Arabic novel, *al-Akhdar wal-Yabis* (The Green and the Dry). But even in Beirut, Adam's mother, and Adam himself in a brief visit, both speak of experiencing a sense of human community spirit in the bomb-shelters of Beirut,

where differences of religion, or sect, or regional background are far less relevant than some outsiders want to lead us to believe.

Naturally, contrast between opposites or dualities should provide real scope for the author's sharp irony. And sure enough, *TMT* is rich in healing and reassuring irony.

The Myrtle Tree is a novel about real human beings confronting life with all its stark realities. It is a novel where the main characters - certainly the narrator and main protagonist, *Adam Awad*, his wife *Yusra*, his junior friend and alter ego, *Faour* - prefer to see the truth in the sunlight, rather than staying in the dark and pretending that what you see in the cave or the tunnel is the reality. Once, when *Adam* and *Faour* had to go through a complicated tunnel, reminiscent of one of the *1001 Nights* cycles, *Adam* thinks: "Even when playing blind man's bluff, I had always failed to grasp the fun of putting oneself in total darkness". And *Faour* thinks aloud: "I wonder if there is ever been a sect where people stayed blindfolded their whole lives" (63). Plato's Cave allegory comes to mind. To be blind-folded, and not to try to get out of the tunnel into the Sunlight for a shorter or longer period of time, is a dangerously negative state of mind. It can appear as a long term problem in the human condition (no less so in the Arab world). The author, through his main characters, is trying to expose, dramatise and 'myrtlise' this malaise.

The novel is replete not only with snippets of country folk song, but also with gems of popular wisdom. I shall let the readers enjoy finding these for themselves as they read the Novel. But I can't help but pick a small bouquet of the author's own insights: "Nothing will ever shake the will that holds our roots" (66); "a neglected home in a small village suggests despair behind it". (66); "A passion without purpose is a ticket to eccentricity". (Evidently this is deeper than a simple warning to avid readers who don't plan their reading programme!)

Some such nuggets have profound political significance. In one of the several interesting flashbacks, a national leader in the village across the valley from *Wahdeh*, is made to remind a departing French officer at the end of France's twenty five -year Mandate over Lebanon in the mid-1940s: "Good friends don't overstay their welcome; they leave on time from the front door, unlike thieves and intruders." (69)

I read *The Myrtle Tree* while I was re-reading three of Nikos Kazantzakis's Works: *Zorba*, *Freedom and Death* and the autobiographical *Letter to Greco*. Although it didn't occur to me at the time, I can now reflect and see certain parallels of striking human dilemmas and ironic moments in both authors. Both try to get as close as possible to human contradictions, both can tell a gripping tale, each in his own way, where human love, pain, the beauty of nature, and the rhythms of seasons, come out as optimistic, defiant, secular and resilient, amid violence, antagonism, war and death. However, while the religious, sectarian and ethnic nationalist dimension is ever present in Kazantzakis, for obvious historical reasons (Greeks and Turks!), it is virtually absent in El Hage's *TMT*, for equally obvious historical and existential reasons. The people of Lebanon share the same language, culture, and national identity. Thus despite similarities in the human condition, and in the context of the Mediterranean world, we need to remember that, at the national level, neither Kazantzakis's old Crete, nor his actual Iraklion, is Jad El Hage's actual Lebanon or fictional *Wahdeh*! Besides, there is almost a century between the two. Aesthetics and techniques have drastically moved on. Certain things haven't changed in the human

village, but many things have. (I trust no intelligent reader would jump to the crude old-fashion question of direct influence, or even the cruder question of “borrowing”. Nothing is further from what I am saying here! I am simply talking about two different creativities dealing with similar, but also dissimilar, human dilemmas).

I should like to return to the question of the aesthetics of names in the Novel. Is there any significance in the choice of names of characters and certain place names? I think so. My colleague Dr Nijmeh Hajjar, has already commented on the irony in some of the names and nicknames in the novel. For me, there is something about the name *Wahdeh*, for example: a kind of “down hill place”; “a depression”, the “antithesis of a mountain”. Is this a comment on the down-hill direction towards which Mount Lebanon has skidded? The names of characters are universal Arabic Lebanese names. That is to say, none of them is meant to evoke a sectarian identity. But like all serious fiction, each character can compress several real persons, or can only represent one aspect of a real human being. The name *Adam*, evoking the first Man, who presumably brought us down into this messy condition on this Earth, requires no further comment. There is also an Eve (*Hawwa*) in the family! *Adam*’s family name is *Awad* - in Arabic ‘*Awwad*’: “the one who habitually returns”. Is this an allegory for persistence, revival, and rebirth? Or is it just a typical old fashion Arabic name rooted in Lebanon’s identity and character? Then there is *Yusra*, *Adam*’s beloved wife: a beautiful optimistic name for an easy going intelligent young woman. (I must declare my own personal bias towards this beautiful name!) There is *Faour*, a quintessential rural - even Bedouin - Arabic name implying decisiveness and toughness. Then there is *Sana*, a refined ethereal luminous name. All without exception are Arabic names that are equally used by both Christians and Muslims in Lebanon today. But why has the author avoided Western style names, and even old Arabic distinctly ‘Christian’ names? I see a significant message in this deliberate aesthetic strategy. This is a universal human situation in the microcosm that is *Wahdeh*. The name of the village - *Wahdeh* - as well as most of the personal names - also occur in the author’s Arabic novel, *The Green and The Dry*, of which *TMT* is a thorough re-creation and a skilful re-moulding in English.

It is one of the strengths of this novel, and an indication of the author’s insistence on giving us a rational and secular narrative about Lebanon’s Civil war, that we scarcely have any allusion to priests or religious leaders. More striking is the fact that the names of the characters don’t tell us anything about their religious or sectarian affiliations, as I have already indicated. Differences of opinion, attitude, outlook, social, and moral standing are all clearly developed, indeed as well developed as some of the characters themselves. But the religious factors are deliberately left out of the equation. Indeed, only in one place was I able to guess the probable religious affiliation of one of the protagonists. This is where the political leader and MP from the village across the valley would allude in passing to the belief in reincarnation. Does this absencing of religious identity, to the extent of practically leaving it out completely, mean that the author ignores religion and its role in people’s life? I don’t think so! Rather, I think it is because he doesn’t subscribe to a religious or sectarian reading of Lebanon’s civil war. I share this secular outlook and I like this kind of humanist narrative. No doubt some orientalist, cynic, or narrow-minded person would not agree with this. Some might even accuse the author of being unrealistic! Perhaps this monster of sectarianism has been appeased, used and abused enough!

Perhaps it is better confronted in a different medium, a different literary genre, a different artistic production, a different cultural or political discourse.

However, for those used to reading or hearing of religious or sectarian explanations or even definition of Lebanon's civil war, and of Lebanon as a country, this novel is a true revelation. We need talented and seasoned creative writers like Jad El Hage to help us escape from syndromes of media pundits, mediocre 'political analysts', self-styled 'experts', and ideologues posing as historians or social scientists. But above all, this book is to be read and enjoyed as a well crafted piece of creative writing. This in itself should be enough reason for commending it strongly to all intelligent readers.

Jad El Hage is an excellent story teller, who deals skilfully with highly serious existential questions of our 'human condition' with the insight, artistry and irony that they deserve. Do I sense a hint of a circular narrative project in the last scene under the Myrtle Tree? In any case, I perceive in Jad's *TMT* (the third after *The Green and the Dry*, to which it is the youthful energetic reincarnation, and after *The Last Migration*), a new light in the human labyrinth, taking us further towards the mystical centre, towards the *Simurgh*.

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