

***The Myrtle Tree* by Jad El Hage**

Launched @ Gleebooks, Sydney,
Monday 12 March 2007

A Reading of The Myrtle Tree. But! Where is The Myrtle Tree?

Dr. Nijmeh Hajjar, The University of Sydney

When I spoke to Jad a week ago, I told him I had mixed feelings about *The Myrtle Tree*. I couldn't explain why.

I have known Jad as a writer of short stories, a novelist, a poet, and of course, above all a friend. I have always loved his creative writings. *The Myrtle Tree*? I couldn't make up my mind, until I began writing for tonight's launch.

I began reading it immediately when I received the copy Jad had sent to me. It was last January, I was on a short trip to Lebanon to visit my family and publish a book in Beirut. After she survived a most destructive war in July, Beirut was again "on a demon's palm", "akaff 'afreet as we say in Arabic. Strikes, demonstrations, blockades, boycott, clashes! In short it was very tense, a ticking bomb! People didn't know what was going on. Many didn't know what to do. Those who could afford it just packed and left. Some were happy at least their children were away! Somewhere in the vast world! Far away from them, no matter! As long as they were away from everything that was happening in Lebanon. After years of senseless conflicts, people had hoped the war had finished with no return. They resumed the reconstruction. They began building again! They had dreams of love and life. But now, all they could see is shattered hopes. It was very sad really! I could actually read the sadness in people's eyes. How could I read a "novel of love and dreams in war-torn Lebanon"? Again?! I said to myself. I too once had a dream in Lebanon. I've lived the war. I know it all!

But *The Myrtle Tree* has its roots deep into Lebanon's soil. And if you were from this country you couldn't help but hope. The first leaf, Jad borrows from the novelist and poet, Laurence Durrell (1912-1990): "It had come so softly towards us over the waters; this war; . . . But as yet it had not broken. Only the rumour of it gripped the heart with conflicting hopes and fears." (p. 5) This opening has appealed to me. Just before leaving to Lebanon, I had submitted a paper for a book on 'hope'. I am interested in 'hope' in the Arabic novel, more specifically in the dynamics of fear and hope in the Lebanese feminist Hanan al-Shaykh's *Story of Zahra*, a story of a woman's resistance to power, set against the background of the civil war in Lebanon.

With the title in hot red against black and grey background, a feature *The Myrtle Tree* has inherited from her 19 years old Arabic mother *al-Akhdar wal-Yabis* (*The Green and the Dry*), the cover design may inspire a gloomy ambiance of war and death. But *The Myrtle Tree* lends itself to a more hopeful reading. This is the story of a young man fearing the spread of civil war, which had started in Beirut six months ago, and hoping for his small village, Wahdeh, to continue life as normal. His life dream is

to work the olive grove and revive his father's olive press. Adam has hoped that his pacifist approach could defeat those blowing the trumpets of war. What was he to do with the officer Murshed Effendi who came to preach war? Interesting this name of Murshed! An Arabic word that means advisor and guide to the right way!

“ . . . The more I listened to Murshed the wider the gap between us opened,” says Adam. “What I see beneath his strategy of ‘defence’ was burning the green and the dry, firing cannons at fleeing olive trees. Shall I take him on a tour of the old olive press, Father? Pretend to be showing him a small piece of recent history and then casually, very casually, tell him about you, about your devotion to Ghandi and your conviction – which became my conviction – that non-violence can defeat a whole empire?” (p. 17)

Adam is the central character and the principal narrator of the novel. *The Myrtle Tree* is actually his life story narrated by his own self, and complemented, mainly, through the letters, diary and journal of his next-door neighbour and junior pupil Faour. I like this novelist technique of narrating from different perspectives. It gives some sense of immediacy, accuracy and realism. Arab novelists have used it with a certain degree of success, and let's remember, Jad is first an Arab novelist.

Does the author identify with any of his characters? This shouldn't concern us. But I could sense some sympathy with Adam and with Faour, the aspiring young writer whose journal provides the only record of events and impressions for five out of the novel's 39 chapters.

I am not going to tell you much about Adam. This would be the third narrative, and in the third person. You would rather see for yourself what the “I” says, and how his junior twin, Faour, sees him. To me this Adam, son of Awad, as he is often referred to in the village, is too *ādamī* (in Arabic that is a good person, a true and genuine human being). I find this young humanist educated villager too idealistic in the context of his time and space. He is too idealistic in his pacifism and his hope, in his love and life. Most idealistic of all is his love of the land and stubbornness to stay in the country. Here is one of his conversations with his wife Yousra:

“If war is coming to our doorstep, we're out of here, I'm not going to waste my time fretting and begging a living in my own country. I'd rather clean toilets somewhere else that still has peace and dignity.” Yousra spoke slowly but with carved precision. Like someone reading a will.

I was stunned. Staying in Wahdeh was the challenge we'd long ago chosen. We were a rare species: young, educated professionals who'd opted out of city life. We had sealed our love beneath the vaults of the olive press we'd vowed to revive. But one look at my wife's face told me she was dead serious. It was obvious she'd been fermenting this brew of thoughts to herself for a while. Sure we both objected to the war, but we had never considered leaving the country.” (p. 39)

Adam may be too idealistic, but not unreal. Reading *The Myrtle Tree* I couldn't resist making parallels between Adam and a very close person to me: my own brother. After finishing his medical studies and specialization in Europe, and despite all the risks,

he returned to Lebanon and stayed there to serve his country, in his own way, and safeguard the land we all loved but had to leave for one reason or another. He's perhaps one of the best surgeons of his generation in Lebanon. Although he has dual Lebanese-French citizenship, and was offered several professional opportunities outside Lebanon, he refused to leave the country. Jad met him recently! I wish he could see him tending the olive trees! See how he sprays them with water so they don't break under the heavy snow! See how he speaks and sings to the trees, and how he teaches his small children to cherish and love them as he does.

My brother is full of hope, not unlike Adam. And he's still holding on, we don't know for how long. For Adam, things don't look too bright. He had to exit Wahdeh for a safer place, with his two friends, the young lovers Faour and Sana. But something happened and their "exit had become flight." In Adam's words, "[their] hopeful expectations had disappeared." (p. 286). Did his hope completely vanish?

In my opinion, despite the tragedies of *The Myrtle Tree*, Jad's narrative permeates a powerful sense of hope. This can be also said about his other work in English, *The Last Migration: A Novel of Diaspora and Love*, and about his Arabic writings in general. In *The Myrtle Tree*, the author's hope is so strong that the conflict between hope and despair, and hope and fear, lingers on after the end of the novel. Or perhaps there is no "end" in *The Myrtle Tree*?!

Adam's closing words in the last chapter read: "Faour aimed straight at the roadblock that had suddenly appeared. The oak tree engulfed us. Then a huge wave rose and swallowed the great oak. The boat behind my eyes capsized and drowned in the wide and endless light." (p. 286).

What happened? Did they die? The author doesn't tell. In the *Epilogue*, a paragraph length section added at the end of the novel, Adam, his father, his uncle, his grandmother, and Sana, are sitting "by the myrtle tree", all doing what they loved most. So, where is the "myrtle tree"? Here is how the *Epilogue* closes:

"Then from within the big light comes Sana with a clay pitcher and gives it to me. "You must be thirsty," she says. "Yes," I say, and look around. "Where are the boys?"
"Playing."
"Faour?"
"Writing," Sana says, and sits down with us to eat." (p. 287)

I couldn't dismiss the symbolism in the *Epilogue*. To me, *The End of The Myrtle Tree* is just another beginning. Could it be a new story of love, creativity and hope? Could it be another *Myrtle Tree* in the making?

But, why *The Myrtle Tree*? And why not? I hear you say. In the *Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, we find, "As symbols of life constantly developing and ever rising to the Heavens", trees "serve to symbolize the cyclical character of cosmic development in death and regeneration." (*Dictionary of Symbols*, p. 1026) I could see now why in the *Epilogue* they all met by the myrtle tree, father passing olive to his son, and woman quenching man's thirst.

But I'm still puzzled why "myrtle"? I am not of course questioning the author's choice, but rather interested in his intention. I'm not fully convinced with Roland

Barthes' "death of the author" theory. And I find it more interesting when reading a text, to consider both, the reader's reception and the author's intention.

Frankly, the first time I heard about Jad's *Myrtle Tree*, I wondered, what did "myrtle" mean? Of course in Lebanon, I grew up on the land. It should've come to me naturally. But English is not my first language. Learning it as an adult in Australia meant that I needed to work harder on my flora, and fauna vocabulary! I turned down the dictionary, my best friend, stubbornly insisting that I should be able to guess the meaning of the word "myrtle" from the context. It so happens that while reading the novel in Lebanon, I ate *hinbllass* berries, direct from the tree for the first time in more than twenty years. It didn't occur to me that myrtle is actually *hinbllass*. I even phoned my sister in Sydney to tell her. We have always longed for *hinbllass*, which we loved in Lebanon, but rarely found in Australia.

So as a reader alone, I couldn't re-create the symbolic meaning of the myrtle tree. Nor could I guess why of all the trees he mentions in the text, even more frequently, the author has chosen the "myrtle tree". Why for example, doesn't Adam leave his father's pail and stick in the shade of the oak tree? Didn't his father carve that stick out of oak? Why not the almond tree, if his precious daughter loved almonds so much? And why not the olive tree, his most cherished tree and the focal point of his own lifetime dream?!

For those of you, who haven't seen it, myrtle or *hinbllass*, is an evergreen shrub with aromatic foliage and white flowers bearing purple-black ovoid berries, which turn yellow-green when ripe. It's common to eat *hinbllass* berries in Lebanon (well at least the Lebanon I grew up in!), but it's an exotic delicacy for many Lebanese in Australia. Of course, I don't think this is enough to interpret the symbolism in Jad's *Myrtle Tree*, especially as the context of this novel is compelling to compare the myrtle shrub to the evergreen olive tree, as a symbol of continuity, and a symbol of peace and reconciliation.

But this is the author's novel, and he wants it to be *The Myrtle Tree*. And if I go on about it, it is to emphasize the role of the reader in the creation of the text. I hope my colleague Prof. Shboul, or you have other keys to the mystery of *The Myrtle Tree*. Or perhaps the author himself wants it to remain a mystery, what makes his text a creative work of art.

I could say a lot about Jad's new work. But there is no room tonight. So I'd like to briefly comment on two more issues that are central in *The Myrtle Tree*: women and language. Both are equally close to my heart, and each deserves a study in its own right. But this is just a launch!

Women of *The Myrtle Tree* appear in a positive image. Their presence is no doubt stronger than in much Arab male literature. Basically all the female characters in this novel are depicted as better humans than most men, well certainly better than all the warlords!

Despite their positive contribution, the author decides to absent the women from the scene. How and why? I'll leave it to the readers to discover for themselves. I personally find very interesting the interrelatedness of the meanings of "masculinity" and "femininity" in *The Myrtle Tree*, and how these meanings interconnect with such concepts as war and peace, reason and insanity, love and hatred, life and death, fear and courage, and hope and despair.

I loved *The Myrtle Tree*. But I still have mixed feelings about it. Remember? Reading Jad in Arabic, I could see him behind the words. Well Jad, while reading your beautiful *Myrtle Tree* I was taken by an inexplicable feeling of joy and sadness. I could speak with your birds and sing your *'ataba* and *mijana*. But I felt like doing all this in our beautiful Arabic tongue. I felt sad. Because I fear that after *the Myrtle Tree* you might decide not to write Arabic novels. I hope this is not the case. I congratulate you on your new English *riwaya*, and hope to see her twin sister in Arabic soon. *Enjoy reading!*