

# MOBILITY AND IDENTITY IN THE ART AND LITERATURE OF ETEL ADNAN

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## ABSTRACT

### Mobility and Identity in the Art and Literature of Etel Adnan

This article is based on a literary reading of two books by Etel Adnan: *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* and *Of Cities & Women (Letters to Fawwaz)*, and on an interview that the author personally conducted with her in 2018. It examines Adnan's sense of nomadism in her art and literature. She is born into a nomadic culture and moves as an intellectual nomad from Lebanon to Paris, and then to California, and finally returns to Lebanon before having to escape due to the civil war. Her nomadism gives her an inspiring openness, creating a state of *béance* – the freedom from borders postulated by Bouraoui.

KEY WORDS: nomadism, mobility, identity, art, literature

## IZVLEČEK

### Mobilnost in identiteta v umetnosti in literaturi Etel Adnan

Članek temelji na literarni analizi dveh knjig Etel Adnan, in sicer *V srcu srca druge države (In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country)* in *Mesta in ženske (Pisma Fawwazu) (Cities&Women, Letters to Fawwaz)* ter osebnem intervjuju z umetnico iz leta 2018. Osrednja tema članka je preučevanje vpliva nomadstva v umetnosti in literaturi Etel Adnan. Umetnica izhaja iz nomadske kulture in se je kot intelektualna nomadka iz Libanona najprej preselila v Pariz, nato v Kalifornijo, ko pa se je končno vrnila v Libanon, je morala državo zaradi državljanske vojne znova zapustiti. Njena navdihujoča odprtost izhaja iz nomadskega načina življenja, ki ustvarja stanje *béance*, kar, kot predvideva Bouraoui, pomeni »svobodo od meja«.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: nomadstvo, mobilnost, identiteta, umetnost, literatura

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## INTRODUCTION

Born in Beirut in 1925, Etel Adnan is a prominent writer and artist in both the Arabic and Western worlds. A writer in a variety of literary genres, she is a novelist, essayist, short story writer, poet, playwright, and documentary writer, as well as a visual artist: painter, ceramic maker, tapestry designer, and artist's book maker. Born and raised in Lebanon, her parents came from different origins: her mother was a Greek Christian from Smyrna and her father was a Muslim born in Damascus. After studying in a French school, Adnan enrolled at the *École de lettres* from 1945 to 1949, later obtaining a scholarship to travel to Paris to study philosophy at the Sorbonne. She then moved to the United States to study philosophy as a doctoral student at the University of California in Berkeley and at Harvard University (1955–1957). From 1958 to 1972, Adnan taught philosophy at Dominican College in San Rafael, California. From 1972 until 1976, she returned to Beirut and worked as cultural editor for two daily newspapers – *Al Safa* and *l'Orient-Le Jour* – but was forced to leave because of the civil war (Adnan 2015: 122). Since 1977, Adnan has continued to move between Paris, France and Sausalito, California.

What becomes immediately clear in the interview<sup>1</sup> with Adnan, as well as in her two books, is that growing up as a child with a Muslim father and an Orthodox Christian mother from different cultures and countries accustomed her to fight against historically imposed social barriers, specifically roles regarding language, religion, gender, and politics. This article will focus on the aspect of mobility in nomadism and its relationship to identity. Although Adnan is a well-known feminist, and has been studied extensively by Evelyne Accad,<sup>2</sup> there are many other facets of her writing and art which deserve to be analysed. I will briefly summarize the connection between Braidotti's nomadic feminist philosophy and Etel Adnan's work, to then move on to other aspects, including Bouraoui's theory of *béance* and its relationship to Adnan's writing and art. Using the comparative method to analyse the similarity of recurring themes found in Adnan's work, this article will take a close literary and philosophical look at two of Adnan's books which are closely related to the topic of mobility and identity. In addition, some analysis of her visual art - presented in the catalogue to her exhibition *Etel Adnan la joie de vivre* (2015) – will provide a more well-rounded picture of the viewpoint of this important artist and writer.

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1 Etel Adnan consented to do an interview with me in her apartment in Paris, on 6 September 2018, generously donating some of her books and a catalogue. This interview was made possible through the Erasmus exchange program and internship between the University of Nova Gorica and the *Galerie du Buisson*. The encounter was arranged by Italian architect and videographer Morena Campani.

2 Evelyne Accad is a Lebanese-born American Professor, writer and expert in Women's Studies and Comparative Literature. She wrote about Adnan in her book *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East*, published in 1990.

## ETEL ADNAN AS A NOMADIC FEMINIST

Feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti is noted for her book *Nuovi soggetti nomadi* (2002) (English title *Nomadic Subjects*). In defining who is considered a “nomadic subject”, she bases her theory on creative diversity, influenced by the works of Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Luce Irigaray, among others (Braidotti 2002: 10).

Etel Adnan is clearly a mobile individual. Throughout her many travels, creative writing helps Adnan cross cultural boundaries; through the use of different languages (French and English) in her writing, Arabic script in her art, as well as her personal cultural experiences, Adnan creates bridges between the various places she encounters. Her nomadism also extends to her means of self-expression, as Adnan is a noted author, poet and artist.

In the article *The Romance of Nomadism: A Series of Reflections*, published in 1999, Carol Becker writes: “Unfortunately, the world now seems divided between what Jacques Attali calls the poor and rich nomads: the nomadic elite who travel at will, expanding their world, [...]” (Becker 1999: 27). Adnan, however, stands apart from the intellectual nomad, as her nomadic education has made her (ibid.: 27).

Adnan seems to fit Braidotti’s paradigm, as she goes beyond the traditional patriarchal system to defend the rights of women. Through her reflections on the women she encounters and their societal roles, she comments on the freedom they enjoy or exploitation they suffer; in her book *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* Adnan comments on education, “Children are taught that little boys are superior to little girls [...]” (Adnan 2005: 58). Braidotti has defined feminism “as a movement which fights for changes in the values which are traditionally attributed to women [...] throughout patriarchal history” (Braidotti 2002: 112, (translated by Laure Zarif Keyrouz)). For Braidotti, “a feminist is defined as a critical thinker who questions the dynamics of power and domination” (ibid.: 74, (translated by LZK)) which is exactly the sort of criticism found throughout Adnan’s writings.

Braidotti goes on to describe the nomad’s identity as the incarnation “of a map of the various travels” of the individual; each location is embodied in the nomad, which she defines as “diversity in movement and an inventory of travels’ traces” (ibid.: 31). Whether through the letters in *Of Cities & Women* or in her landscape painting, Adnan’s work in an ever-evolving collection of traces, experiences and perspectives given in relation to place and time, making her a clear representation of the concept of feminist nomad. An example can be seen in the book *Of Cities & Women (Letters to Fawwaz)*, as she moves from Barcelona to Aix-En-Provence, to Skopelos, to Murcia, to Amsterdam, to Berlin, to Beirut, to Rome and again to Beirut.

Braidotti’s concept of the feminist nomad underlines the importance of mobility for women, as freedom to move and interact. Through her courageous travels and writings, Adnan takes the responsibility to show her readers her critical perspective as a nomadic woman; she compares her experience to the realities of the women she encounters throughout her journey. From the free women of Barcelona and Rome

to the prostitutes on the streets of Amsterdam, the veiled women of Marrakesh and the Arabic women that had been kept far from the public eye, and the women of Beirut as memory keepers, Adnan creates an image of what a “free” woman should ultimately possess.

## NOMADISM – THE CONCEPT OF NOMADISM IN LITERATURE AND ART

### Nomadism as Defined by Bouraoui

Tunisian-Canadian poet, novelist, philosopher and expert on transculturalism and nomadism Hédi Bouraoui defines the concept of *béance*<sup>3</sup> – a critical term describing the positive experience of nomadic people who are forced to reckon with and be open to the differences they encounter through their mobility. In the introduction to the book *Transpoétique, Éloge du nomadisme*, published in 2005, Bouraoui describes the term nomadism; he states that in today’s global village people have the illusion of being free when they are instead constantly under observation and can move only within the well-defined areas dictated by the contemporary global society. Therefore he asserts that: “The traditional economic frontiers were demolished [...] the strongest multinationals of countries attempt to dominate the global market. The market values invade the planet in almost total freedom, regulated only by competition and profit” (Bouraoui 2005: 7 (translated by LZK)).

The original significance of the word *nomade*<sup>4</sup> is tied to its etymology; the concept of nomadism traditionally refers to wandering in the desert in search of food, water and shelter, while carrying along one’s belongings, memories and a deep sense of one’s original culture. This may lead to a tendency to romanticize the ideal of freedom. Etel Adnan, however, considers the desert as a place of emptiness, pain, self-destruction, and apocalypse: “There’s nothing in the desert save the desert itself

3 In this article, the words in italics are used because they are coined by the author and appear many times in his work.

4 Marwan M. Kraidy, in his book *Hybridity or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*, published in 2005, wrote on page 139: “Etymologically, the term ‘nomad’ stems from the Greek *nomos*, meaning ‘an occupied space without limits’, and the Greek *nemo*, which means ‘to pasture’” (Laroche 1947, cited in Deleuze, 1994: 306). Thus, a nomad is someone who lives in an open space, without restrictions. Furthermore, “pasture” connotes a temporary sojourn in a particular location, which the nomad leaves after having used what that place had to offer. The term “nomad” does not necessarily imply physical movement from one place to another. In *Nomadology: The War Machine* (1986), French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari define the differences between nomads and migrants: “The nomad is not at all the same as the migrant; for the migrant goes principally from one point to another, even if the second point is uncertain, unforeseen and not very well localized. But the nomad only goes from point to point as a consequence and as a factual necessity: in principle, points for him are relays along the trajectory” (p. 50).

and this is true of the passing of Time. [...] Betrayal carries love into pain's darkest regions and is never redeemed [...] The story comes into a void" (Adnan 2005: 64).

Bouraoui defines "literary nomadism" as having the freedom to move from one place to another, creating new cultures with poetry and art. The idea of "literary nomadism" is based on two fundamental concepts. First, Bouraoui postulates that there is a constant movement from one place to another and a sense of freedom that comes from this wandering. Secondly, Bouraoui underlines the nomad's motivation for his or her movement. There is always an element of surprise in the discovery of new places and adapting to them, and each move provides for a new adventure and a new departure. This notion in the creative process leads to *béance* (ibid.: 8–9).

### Béance and its Use in Bouraoui's Writing

*Béance* is a French term used in philosophy (by Lacan, Freud, Foucault, Sartre),<sup>5</sup> that describes an infinite openness which fills an empty space. *Béance* "refers to the state of that which is widely and deeply open; it denotes a gaping hole that is synonymous with a void in need of replenishment" (Beggar 2009). *Béance* is a kind of richness, "a hole to be filled up for the purpose of establishing sites of belonging, identity and cultural communication, elements that prove to be central for migrants, itinerants, and "trans-citizens" i.e. citizens of the world" (Beggar 2009).<sup>6</sup> The liberty of wandering comes from *béance*. For Bouraoui, *béance* constitutes the basic philosophy of writing. He links the concept of *béance* to "nomadism", and through this creative process, he frees the work from the collective imagery. Similarly, another way to achieve and apply *béance* is via neologism. Neologism, or inventing new words, is a unique way for the poet to overcome semantic and semiotic frontiers, as he is free to write in different genres and touch many subjects in different ways given by a language (Léon 2009).

According to Bouraoui, the writer's homeland is the blank page which represents the emptiness of the desert. Her literary work is what takes her back to her origins while linking her with the present. By defining this creative space as "trans-cultural", the writer creates a space of comprehension, tolerance and peace between the reader and their relation to the world (Bouraoui 2005: 9–10).

5 In Christian Fierens' review of the book *Existence et Psychanalyse* by Guy-Félix Duportail we find the concept of *béance*, which originates in the studies of psychology mentioned by Freud and Lacan. Lacan makes reference to the inner void within each human being, whereas for Freud it is the desire or the desire for death inherent in human nature. Foucault is mentioned in a lecture by Gilles Deleuze (19 Novembre 1985). For him *béance* is at the midpoint between seeing and speaking, it stands in place of language. In the article "Du texte philosophique au texte littéraire. D'un double sujet de l'énonciation chez Sartre" written by Sara Vassallo in 2005, we find *béance*; For Sartre "[...] writing originates from *béance* which separates existence from the being".

6 Abderraham Beggar published an essay in French titled *L'Épreuve de la Béance: L'écriture nomade chez Hédi Bouraoui*.

This blank page of *béance* described by Bouraoui is reflected in Etel Adnan's wanderings through different spaces, places and subject matters. Throughout her work, she opposes "the sad part" (wars, political conflicts, death, wires) to the "happy part" (love, art). While finding the "happy part" through drawing and openly wandering through the world, the sad side of Adnan's work is perhaps the most frequently found in her writings, such as in the book *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*, which narrates the story of the war in Baghdad in the last chapter, *To Be in a Time of War*. We once again find her sadness in the novel *Sitt Marie Rose*<sup>7</sup> (1977) which mostly discusses the wars in Lebanon and the impact they have had on her reflection of life.

Adnan's great richness comes from her wanderings. As the literary nomad (mentioned in the same book by Bouraoui) moves from one place to another, he does not lose his identity – which will remain forever his – but rather enriches it through the new cultural forms he encounters. As the nomad migrates, he learns to comprehend what at first seems incomprehensible (Bouraoui 2005: 9).

Bouraoui proposes the notion of nomadic *transculturalism*, *transpoetics* and *transcreation*, founded on the deep knowledge of the original culture and the openness to other cultures encountered. *Transpoetic* culture sees humans in constant movement in a cosmic dimension. Literary nomadism is a modern-day exodus from the traps of contemporary society as it crosses the boundaries of culture and language without limits and accepts difference with tolerance (Bouraoui 2005: 10). "Nomadism [...] sees the deconstruction of the majority in opposition to the minority, the omnipotence in opposition to the marginal, the exterior world in opposition to the interior one" (ibid.: 12–13 (translated by L. Z. K.)).

With specific reference to Adnan, Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, in the chapter *The Forbidden Paradise, How Etel Adnan Learnt to Paint in Arabic*, in *Arabic Literature, Postmodern Perspectives*, edited by Neuwirth, Pflitsch and Winckler and published in 2010 – also suggests that Adnan's exile continually forces her to cross national and cultural borders, freeing her from "various conventions":

[...] living between three countries, the notion of "home" has acquired transnational and transcultural meaning for Adnan, one that lies beyond an geographical borders. Without diminishing the severity of the loss that every exile entails – be it voluntary or involuntary – Adnan's exile can at the same time be considered an asset. Continually crossing national as well as cultural borders, she has liberated herself from various conventions. Her literary and artistic practice are marked by a highly avant-garde character. They have anticipated developments that have generally come to be described as postmodern and postcolonial. (Neuwirth et al. 2010: 313)

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7 Adnan's novel *Sitt Marie Rose*, first published in Paris in 1977 and later translated into ten languages, was one of the first books to talk about the Lebanese civil war and went on to become a classic of modern war literature.

Therefore, Adnan is a prime example of the notion of nomadism, both in her physical being and in her writing and visual arts.

## **NOMADISM AND MOBILITY BETWEEN DIFFERENT PLACES AND NON-PLACES**

### **Places and Non-Places**

In his book *Non-Places, Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Marc Augé defines the difference between the notion of place and non-place from an anthropological point of view. A *non-place* is a place that sees the movement of masses with no other intent than to transfer from one place to another for some specific reason (travel, shopping etc.), in contrast to anthropological places that create personal identities and memories and are places of emotions (Augé 1995: 94). The non-place is governed by well-defined functions (shopping malls, airports, etc.) that are universally accepted and clarified by signs and headings. Moving through a non-place creates solitude and similitude (ibid.: 103). There are only rare opportunities to regain one's individual identity when entering or leaving a non-place, for example using a cashpoint card or showing an ID card (ibid.: 111).

In the non-space, "space" seems trapped by time; there is no history, just an eternal present (ibid.: 104). However, there can be no place without a non-place, and so the two co-exist: where there is transit, there is dwelling, where there is interchange there is a crossroad, where there is a passenger there will also be a traveller (ibid.: 107). For Augé, the world is slowly becoming a non-place, and he suggests that the time will soon come when we will search for solitude in order to rediscover our true selves. This brings us back to the idea of nomadism, which is always present in the works of Etel Adnan as she wanders through time and space, constantly losing and then rediscovering herself. "The thing that is so worrying and fascinating about the character of the immigrant is the emigrant" (ibid.: 119). Adnan is constantly travelling through non-spaces to find new spaces. This is the main difference between what Augé calls *supermodernity* and its *non-places*.

In the situation of supermodernity, part of this exterior is made of non-places, and parts of the non-places are made of images. Frequentation of non-places today provides an experience – without real historical precedent – of solitary individuality combined with non-human mediation [...] between the individual and the public authority. (Augé 1995: 117–118)

In contrast to the concept of non-space, home is a *space*. For Etel Adnan, it is initially equated with her return to Lebanon. However, her concept of home takes on a new

meaning as her nomadic lifestyle forces her to stretch her boundaries. “The character is at home when he is at ease in the rhetoric of the people with whom he shares life. The sign of being at home is the ability to make oneself understood without too much difficulty, and to follow the reasoning of others without any need for long explanations” (Augé 1995: 108).

This concept of home will be further discussed below. Contrastingly, Adnan’s personal definition of home cannot be contained within one single place, as it is nearly impossible for others to grasp the reality of her world, which has expanded beyond the borders and experiences of her homeland.

## LITERARY AND ARTISTIC NOMADISM AS FOUND IN THE WORKS OF ETEL ADNAN

In her books *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* and *Of Cities & Women (Letters to Fawwaz)*, the author uniquely documents her constant moving back and forth from California to Beirut for study and work. She walks along the borders, constantly discovering different identities and themes along her travels. The different landscapes that she encounters are reproduced in her visual art.

In the interview, Adnan revealed that she wrote the book *Of Cities & Women (Letters to Fawwaz)* while she was travelling on planes flying to different places. This book is, therefore, a collection of letters with specific dates, months and years, written to *Fawwaz*,<sup>8</sup> with the intention of putting together a publication on feminism to be published in his magazine *Zawaya*. Piecing together what attracted her most, Adnan’s writings use words, colours and sounds to create a vivid description of the events going on around her.

Adnan’s inspiration for the book *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* came from a book by William H. Gass called *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*, a collection of short stories depicting the state of the American Midwest. In Adnan’s *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*, the author visits many different places, where she is always leaving behind *something* and *somewhere* only to discover *something* and *somewhere* new (Adnan 2005: xii, xiii).

She moves, “[...] from ocean shore to ocean shore. From Beirut to the Red Sea. From Aden to Algiers, from Oregon to La Paz” (ibid.: 11). She is in constant exile – demolishing, constructing and reconstructing the places she visits, feeling the need to keep moving as the earth beneath her feet becomes an ocean, driving her onward (ibid.: 10). Her every move takes her back and forth from places that are always the

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8 Fawwaz Traboulsi is a Lebanese writer living in Paris and the editor of *Zawaya*, a political magazine. Instead of remaining within the walls of her studio to write the pages of the book, the author decided to write this collection of letters while travelling on planes from destination to destination, using first-hand observations, explorations, voyages, and visits to cities and panoramic landscapes.



same but never “the same”. This idea of destruction and reconstruction is taken up again in the second chapter. Twenty five years later, we find the use of metaphors that indicate the author’s sense of loss and disorientation, as she remarks, “I’m in a disorienting wilderness” (Adnan 2005: 30).

### The Notion of “*Béance*” for Etel Adnan

Adnan’s works demonstrate the concept of *béance* most vividly when she describes her motivations for traveling for artistic pleasure. The vast and rich artistic world she discovers is borderless and inspires her to explore her artistic identity. Adnan frequently travelled around to visit exhibitions by her favourite artists: “[...] I adored Paul Klee, Kandinsky, Malevich, they were more my friends than the people I knew. And when I saw their work I was convulsed with pleasure, I really was. I traveled from San Francisco to New York to see shows by Paul Klee and the like” (Adnan 2015: 40).

In the interview, she explained how Picasso was an example for her of migration between the realms of art, philosophy, politics and literature. For Adnan, Picasso – like all great painters – was a great thinker, and, similar to her, his paintings showed the happy side of his philosophy:

When we think about art and literature, we think of two completely different worlds, we impose a border between the two, but the mind doesn’t have borders. Borders are tools for teaching. We say art, we say literature, for reasons of clarification, but in themselves, if they come from the same person they reflect the same person, the same sensitivity. We are constantly dealing with everything we are, we know, so even a thought can be emotional, too, and even an emotion can carry an intellectual idea. Emotion and intellect come from the same energy, from the same life experience. When we communicate, we use different tools; words, colors [...] but very often literature and art express the same concept, especially when they come from the same person [...]

The intersection between text and images is like visual art and poetry. They are different languages and you can mix them, but even if you mix them, an image is an image and a text is a text. So you see they may reflect each other, like when you illustrate a poem. I call the illustration the reading of that poem. I read this poem but instead of telling you what I read in words, I say it in visions.

## Nomadism and Béance in Adnan's Paintings

Even the very act of becoming a painter was generated by Adnan's nomadic lifestyle, which only took shape after she moved to California to teach philosophy and aesthetics at Dominican College in San Rafael. A fellow professor and head of the art department, Ann O'Hanlon, encouraged her to discover her artistic side, first with small crayons and later with her own workspace (Adnan 2015: 22–24).

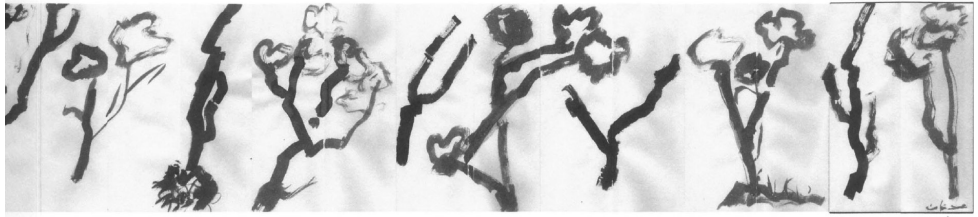
In the preface to the catalogue to her exhibition *La joie de vivre*, we read that just as Adnan moves throughout her books from one place to another, she also embodies these same concepts of moving from space to space in her paintings. By painting geometric abstractions of various landscapes familiar to her in a flow of activity, "without interruption and without subsequent corrections," she emulates the act of writing "between figurativism and abstraction, her paintings develop a high degree of emotional strength, combining the expressed with the unsaid, and leaving room for individual feelings" (Adnan 2015: 6).

Adnan's poetry has influenced both the dimensions and techniques involved in her work. Her works are often small, which allows her to finish them in one sitting, as if writing a poem (ibid.: 24). She uses a palette knife to apply colour to the canvas, rather than a brush (ibid.: 22), so that she can create geometric forms that are reminiscent of the artists which she would so often travel to visit (ibid.: 6).

Although Adnan does not know how to write in Arabic, she uses its script in her paintings as yet another form of cultural mobility (Neuwirth et al. 2010: 311). Upon discovering Japanese artist's books, she incorporates their form with the Arabic poetry of important poets, embellishing them with drawings and paintings and without conformity to traditional calligraphic traditions. Simone Fattal<sup>9</sup> describes this relationship between text and images as taking on a new and more emotional quality as it transcends both word and image<sup>10</sup> (Majaj, Amireh 2002: 89).

9 Simone Fattal is a sculptor and the founder and publisher of The Post-Apollo Press. She first met Adnan in Beirut in the 1970s. Fattal is the publisher of Adnan's books *Of Cities & Women (Letters to Fawwaz)* and the novel *Paris, When It's Naked*.

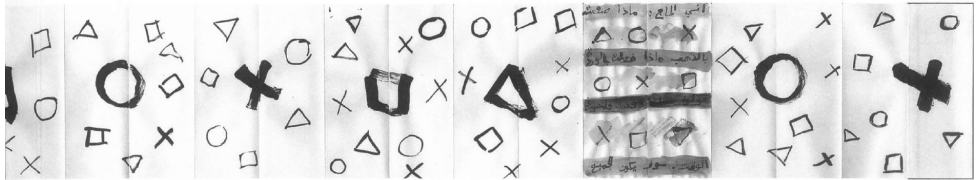
10 In the book *Etel Adnan, Critical Essays on the Arab-American Writer and Artist*, published in 2002, Simone Fattal states: "The poems were brought to life more rapidly than if one followed the words alone. Also, the tenderness of her line brought an immense emotion and empathy to the text and to its reading, so that the moment of this reading became intensely printed in the imagination. The drawings and watercolors added a dimension of poignancy and urgency to the text, which was seen by Adnan twice, once as a text and once as an image. The reader was thus given three interpretations: that of the poet, the transcriber, and the painter."



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Figure 1: Adnan's Leporello 1, *Untitled*, 2009; Adnan's Leporello 2, *In The Forest*, 2009; Adnan's Leporello 3, *Unsi el Hajj*, 2012; Adnan's Leporello 4, *East River Pollution "From Laura's Window"*, New York, April 1979; Adnan's Leporello 5, *Freedom of People, Freedom of Animals, Freedom of Plants*, 2011 (source: Etel Adnan, *La joie de vivre* 2015: 75).

## NOMADISM AS AN ACCUMULATION OF IDENTITIES RATHER THAN THE FRACTURING OF THEM

Adnan's view of the cultural identity of intellectual immigrants writing contemporary literature goes against the common image of nomadic identity as merely fragmented and fractured. She claims in the interview that "It is not a rupture, they are actually accumulation, not a rupture, because your life goes on and there is a continuity of your physical being and these things come on you and become your memory [which] gets richer and it absorbs good and bad things."

Nevertheless, in her book *Of Cities and Women*, Adnan is aware of having plural identities. Fragments of herself have been scattered in all of the different places she has visited and resided in. Just as pieces of a mosaic are pieced together to form a picture, so the identity of a person is a never-ending mosaic of broken fragments. As one of the first authors to embrace the topic of the civil war and the conflicts in the Arabic world, Adnan confronted this truth through her humanistic writings. She was unafraid to use strong symbolic language to describe these fragmented identities (Adnan 1993: 54–55).

Adnan describes herself as a gathering point – as an active participant in the construction of her own identity through the collection of experiences and the courage to continue through difficult times. The metaphor of mirrors, particularly regarding her experience in Spain, is used by Adnan to show the culmination of various aspects of her life – collected into one reflected image in one nomadic object: a mirror.

Spain has been a mirror for me. An enormous mirror in which my reflection is but a small fragment. There are a lot of people in this mirror: people of yesterday and people of today, women, men, children, animals, plants. In the memory of a woman there is always the memory of several others, as if to be a woman and to be memory were one and the same thing. (Adnan 1993: 56)

As a reflection of Arabic culture herself, she feels particularly troubled by the eradication of aspects of ancient Arabic philosophy, especially in Spain, where Arabic culture made a lasting impact upon its arrival in Europe. Her fragmented self is therefore also a simple reflection of what came before, the many years of significant Arabic presence in Spain and the subsequent fall. All that remains today is a mirrored reflection of this fragmented culture. Likewise, Adnan is also a reflection of her shattered parts, pieced together in a single mirrored image; an accumulation of all of her consequent shattered parts in a single mirrored image.

## NOMADISM BETWEEN DIFFERENT HOUSES

In the interview, Adnan defined her home as being in a state of nomadism. She says she has two homes, one in Lebanon and one in California, and she loves both of them and feels a strong attachment to them both.

In the book *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard, *space* takes on a new meaning. The author describes the house in all its features and details from the attic to the cellar, and uses the house as a metaphor for humanity. The house accompanies man throughout his lifetime. Childhood memories of our home will always be nostalgic; homes are the place of our dreams and the place where we find ultimate shelter. The house allows us to dream in peace (Bachelard 1958: 3–4). Adnan is very impressed by this book. He was, in fact, her professor in Paris. Bachelard writes that “an entire universe already exists inside a nutshell” (Adnan 2015: 26).

Adnan’s house, however, is not a singular, fixed location, but rather encompasses several different places. Her mobility throughout her long life as an intellectual exile, writer and artist leads her to constantly lose herself, only to find herself again as she lives “in-between spaces”.<sup>11</sup> This term is also mentioned in the title of the chapter written by Mejcher-Atassi, *The Forbidden Paradise, How Etel Adnan Learnt to Paint in Arabic*, published in 2010. In this book, the author recognises Adnan’s nomadic style and her constant search for home “continually crossing national as well as cultural borders” (Neuwirth et al. 2010: 312–313).

Adnan builds her home through the interweaving of her locations and experiences. “I was used to a world now remote, and, at the same time, getting used to a new one that was also my old world, and somewhere, deep inside, I was alien to both” (Adnan 2005: xii). Here Adnan describes how her mobility both creates and deconstructs her sense of home. She is constantly questioning the reality of what is home, asking, “living in different houses doesn’t mean living in one in each season. And does home still mean bed, kitchen and mailbox?” (Adnan 2005: 87). However, travels and mobility have added to the richness of Adnan’s intellectual life, which creates a sense of security for her, as she finds home within the freedom of mobility. She wants to move to different countries; she comments, “when a window has been opened I feel the urge to travel” (ibid.: 70). Contrastingly, the traditional sense of house now seems to be menacing and oppressive: “A house is a cage, a monument, the mausoleum of all travels, an observatory, the belly of one’s mother. Mine is now full of windows, above a harbor (Adnan 2005: 13). Her intellect and experience must construct for her a new sort of home: She writes, “My mind has many houses; it’s drafty in here, and noisy, angels discuss reality and virtuality while I sit” (Adnan 2005: 22).

Adnan speaks of houses repeatedly throughout her writings. In her book *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*, the first house Adnan describes is her father’s house in Beirut. She recounts nostalgically the good memories she had there. The

11 “In-between” spaces is a term used by Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994).

same house is then the place where her ghost wanders after she sells it and returns to California. "Now, my ghost wanders in it, and I try to call it back and it refuses to join me: from now on we will lead separate lives" (Adnan 2005: 21).

As the famous writer Ralph Waldo Emerson says, our minds remember fondly old homes that have been an important part of our lives – "the mind loves its old home: as water to our thirst, so is the rock, the ground, to our eyes and hands and feet. It is firm water; it is cold flame; what health, what affinity" (Emerson 1940: 407). On the other hand, he does not feel that large cities give enough space to our senses, and so the city dweller must go out daily and nightly in search of horizons to inspire him, but which are so hard to find. Where we are too far from nature, he says, we try to reproduce it artificially (e.g. city houses with rural influences) (ibid.: 407).

Adnan begins her wandering from house to house, to 'non-places', as her fondest one has been destroyed. "I reside in cafés: they are my real homes [...] My mind has many houses [...]" (Adnan 2005: 22). Adnan is also fascinated with hotels. She sees them as a fascinating symbol for a life lived day to day (ibid.: 31).

The author describes California as one of her homes, as she spent "half a century in it" (ibid.: 67). In all of her houses, the author sees windows as symbolic, as well as an important element through which to observe nature: "Houses are made of windows held standing by walls. All kinds of things enter not through doors but through windows wide open on a clear sky" (ibid.: 50). Windows provide a sense of freedom, abandoning the idea of a house as a cage and turning it into an observation point of invisible things.

Further on, the theme of the "house" is seen as representative of a sense of impatience, and the "doors and windows" are symbols of void and emptiness. For the author, *walls* tend to *disappear* from the vague memories of the past, only to linger as "wavy surfaces, moving patches of pale colors" (ibid.: 68). When the author returns to visit Beirut, an immediate sense of home invades her. In Lebanon, the memory of war had melded into the eyes of the people. The result of 15 years of war was everywhere in the eyes of homeless children, and the voice of a desperate woman who asks for help (Adnan 1993: 72–73). In all of the physical locations in which Adnan shifts, no house is able to fully be considered her home, because each space is only a fragment of herself, and her true home then cannot be any place other than in her creative outlets – her writing and her art. "... I feel that I haven't settled anywhere, really, that I'm rather living the world, all over, in newspapers, in railway stations, cafes, airports ... The books that I'm writing are houses that I build for myself" (Majaj, Amireh 2002: 67). Even in her visual artistry, Mejcher-Atassi mentions that Adnan finds her home through her artist's books. Her Japanese Leporellos:

[...] embody a sense of a homecoming for Adnan who has lived all her life in "in-between spaces": "These works," she concludes, "represent to me a coming to terms which I would never had expected until it happened with the many threads that make up the tapestry of my life. I integrated myself in the cultural destiny of the Arabs by very indirect ways, and I hope that the search is not over." (Neuwirth et al. 2010: 319)

Adnan finds reconciliation with her shattered and marginalized past through her visual arts. Her use of Arabic calligraphy in her artistic books links her to the “‘forbidden paradise’ of her childhood” (ibid.: 319).

## CONCLUSION

Adnan’s works bring together many different themes, memories and emotions. As this nomadic writer and artist continues her wanderings, she scatters fragments of herself in all of the places she has visited and lived in. The sense of stability is perceived only in her writings. The author is in constant search for a place to call home but, at the same time, she needs to feel free and unconstrained. Through her work, she takes us on a journey of “many peregrinations, multiple sunsets and endless sunrises [...]” (Adnan 2005: 83).

Through each of the notions presented as subheadings in *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* (like places, house, people), Adnan describes the state of her nomadism, as she loses touch with the traditional security of houses and identity. She floats from location to location, acquiring aspects of each, while never losing the fear of war which looms over her, no matter where she goes. Her fragmented identity is a collective sum of the experiences and places she has encountered, while remaining almost isolated in that no matter where she goes, no one seems to be able to console her or provide a sense of peace and security. No one seems to understand her fully. Perhaps her message is that war shatters not only the streets with bombs but also its people, whose identity becomes shattered as they are forced to assume new roles and identities in their search for a safe haven from the destruction.

Likewise, through the nine letters in the book *Of Cities & Women (Letters to Fawwaz)*, Adnan takes the reader on a journey to discover the role of women in different contexts, as they move as nomads from one reality to another. The author reflects on how the environment, culture, and people shape and define women’s bodies, minds and liberty. As a nomadic writer, Adnan is free to observe and reflect upon the state of women in each location, and also to criticize the lack of equality and civil rights, sometimes hidden beneath layers of so-called civility. Her writing reflects the life and qualities of each location with clarity and detail. Rather than lose her firm identity, the nomad is enriched by the freedom and liberty that this conveys. She is able to see events and places from a new perspective. Unlike other Lebanese writers, she does not portray herself as an exile, but merely a citizen of the world. A sense of nostalgia prevails as the author carries with her the memories from her childhood, which are present in each city, and the search for her “mother’s voice”, the conduit for her journey. This journey eventually brings her home to Beirut, a city of despair, but with the hope of rebirth.

While her writings often reflect the fragmented and negative side of coping with her nomadic existence, her paintings express her joie de vivre – the positive and

universal aspects of her nomadic “home”, which is her very life and her works. Just as sea-creatures are constantly finding refuge within their own shells, Etel Adnan has constantly found and redefined herself. She is no longer merely a citizen of Beirut, but has become instead a true citizen of the world. The concept of nomadism has accompanied Adnan throughout her life in her travels between the Orient and the Occident, wandering through empty spaces and places of the world into this *béance* – this openness to receive, to observe and to act through her creative writing and art.

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## POVZETEK

### MOBILNOST IN IDENTITETA V UMETNOSTI IN LITERATURI ETEL ADNAN Laure ZARIF KEYROUZ

Leta 1925 v Bejrutu rojena Etel Adnan zase trdi, da izhaja iz nomadske kulture. Iz Libanona se je najprej preselila v Pariz, kjer je diplomirala iz filozofije in estetike, študij pa pozneje nadaljevala najprej na univerzi Berkeley v Kaliforniji, nato pa na univerzi Harvard v Cambridgu. Med letoma 1952 in 1978 je na kolidžu San Rafael Dominican v Kaliforniji poučevala filozofijo umetnosti. Po vrnitvi v Libanon je delala kot novinarka, nato pa je morala zaradi vojne še enkrat zapustiti domovino.

Članek se ukvarja z vprašanjem, kako se »nomadstvo« Etel Adnan odraža v njeni umetnosti in literaturi, zlasti v delih *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* in *Of Cities & Women (Letters to Fawwaz)*. Avtorica v svojih delih prepleta umetnost in literaturo obiskanih krajev, ustvarja presečišče med kulturami in poudarja pomen »trka« različnih vizualnih umetnosti in verbalnega jezika. Nomadstvo, ki je zanjo navdihujoča prednost – pomeni namreč osvoboditev od meja in omejitev stalnega doma – se posledično odraža v njenem delu. Kot otrok muslimanskega očeta in ortodoksne krščanske matere, ki sta izhajala iz različnih kultur in držav, se od nekdaj sooča z družbenozgodovinsko impliciranimi mejami: tako spolnih vlog in jezika kot vere in politike.