Writing as a Women's Archive of the Civil War

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I was born on the fifth anniversary of the start of the Lebanese Civil War, in a Beqaa region where the war carried a different face than it did elsewhere. We came to know of the Syrian army through the checkpoints scattered at the crossroads of our villages, and through the stories within our small family that lived through that era. The whip marks still visible on my grandfather's back remain a living testimony of that time.

Because we were far from the capital, the war reached me in fragments, disjointed and scattered like a broken puzzle. I pieced it together from stray words and muffled voices, later reconstructing it in my memory when I was first asked what year the war began. I denied knowing with my lips pressed together and my eyebrows lifted.. Perhaps those who lived the war hold its shock vividly, but for my generation, the postwar generation, the shock lies hidden. We inherited it in a hazy way, through genes, through rumors, implanted in us without consent, buried deep within both our collective and personal histories.

And because of it, we still live miniature civil wars today: between the self and the other, between likeness and difference, trapped in the snares of ideology, in the body's endless war against itself.

When Memory is Reconstructed Along the Frontlines

My parents never once used the term "civil war." They called it "the events," especially when we passed the abandoned houses in Housh Barada and Majdaloun, where broken doors and looted rooms revealed the violations that had taken place. They would simply say: "People here were displaced during the events," and leave it at that.

There is no photo of my parents' wedding in our family album. My mother says they married during the week of strikes in 1987, strikes that symbolized Lebanese insistence on unity, and served as a prelude to the symbolic end of sectarian wars.

She recalls that when she was five years old, she had a nightmare that terrified her: the shrine of the Virgin in Zahle and the Kaaba

both burning, with children's fingers falling to the ground. The nightmare became reality when her school and the church of St. Roch in Riyaq were encircled and demolished by an armed militia.

The first time I ever heard the phrase "civil war" was from a friend who took me to Beirut for the first time, and we visited the former frontlines between Chiyah and Ain al-Rummaneh. With great passion, she told me about the importance of oral history in documenting the crimes she encountered in her work. She shared story after story, and I often had to close my eyes and ears while we walked, to avoid imagining the faces of women and children, their screams, or the gunmen's heads peeking from behind barricades.

The absence of detail left me full of questions about the past. My first real confrontation with violence came during the brief clashes at the Tayouneh roundabout in 2021, when I was living on the edge of Furn al-Shebbak. That experience taught me direct fear, fear of shells and bullets that claimed lives around me. My feelings deepened later with the Kahaleh truck incident in 2023, when I found myself taking a clear personal stance: a rejection of all forms of weaponry, no matter who carried it.

Another time, when a relative was driving me home to Ashrafieh, his fourteen-year-old son asked "How can you live in the East? Do you feel safe there?" I was startled by how "East Beirut" and "West Beirut" had turned in the minds of children from mere geographical markers into sectarian and territorial divisions.

I also wondered: how could a woman like me, coming from the margins, still fleeing gender-based violence in her own environment, ever feel safe? It was then that I realized, for the first time, how women's stories in war are inseparable from their everyday struggles under patriarchal and sectarian systems.

I stood before the bullet-riddled building at the Tayouneh roundabout, scanning for fresh bullet marks not yet framed by politicized media. In my mind appeared one of Alawiya Sobeh's heroines, terrified of crossing Tayouneh because of the shelling. I too feared walking through Old Saida Road. I wanted, once again, to escape the structural violence that constantly besieges us.

A Feminine Language and Our Deferred Memory

I have always felt that violence is the engine of history, and my only escape from it was through

language. In language I found a meeting place with many women, through their feminist and female writings. What do we have left in this country but words? Language is our only tool for documentation against forgetting. Through it we carry stories that expose the forms of violence we endure, and sometimes even participate in, knowingly or not, under social or political labels.

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In women's writings I found war and patriarchy laid bare: fear, anger, desire, and the unraveling of the structures that produced such violence. I learned how some women lived the war not only as fighters, but as activists, and as mothers forced to perform their caregiving roles.

I read Layla Baalbaki, who announced the coming of war before it erupted in her novel "A Spaceship of Tenderness to the Moon." "Why doesn't war break out?" she asked, rejecting modernity, class inequality, and masculine violence, and declaring: "I do not belong to any side, and I hate them all, all the fanatics." Like her, I belonged to no side.

Then I discovered Jean Makdisi, Najah al-Qadi, and Dalal al-Bizri; women who wrote their war experiences, unveiling the many faces of patriarchy and violence.

Through Makdisi, I understood how the question of "Who is responsible?" collapses ethically when sectarianism engulfs everything. Yet she refused silence, writing of women who "learned the geography of the country from shelling." Is it not still true for us today? She also revealed how women became the final line of defense, "managing households" and running crises within their private spaces.

Najah al-Qadi, in her memoirs as a war journalist, made me realize how caregiving work extends beyond the private sphere to become a political act, as in the story of Umm Shafiq, who cooked for her entire neighborhood. Yet the male

fighters dismissed her because she was “a girl who didn’t understand battles.” But is it not we who fight them with our bodies every day? Is there not a blind complicity with violence against these bodies, as in the massacres of al-Maslakh and Karantina?

Dalal al-Bizri, meanwhile, drew attention to the gender disparity within progressive factions themselves, where women had to double their efforts to earn recognition, where female students were recruited through the charm of the “comrades,” and where caregiving tasks were still assigned to women, even in the most open party environments. It reminded me of the jokes we still hear today: “Come over and I’ll explain class struggle to you at my place.”

Etel Adnan, from an exile not far from us, whispered that women are the true witnesses of devastation. We are the keepers of domestic memory, the ones who recount war in its details, and carry the burden of protection. I cannot forget the image she drew: a mother receiving her son’s corpse in silence so as not to frighten his siblings. How many of us have swallowed the same scream? Adnan also pointed to what I had always felt: the city closes itself off to me and streets that once echoed my footsteps become monopolized by men. We are excluded from the scene; no public space welcomes us.

Then I read Iman Humaydan, and I found myself. Her women resemble those of my generation: daily losses, love torn apart, motherhood under fire. From her I understood that violence is not only in war—it is in the stares, in the words, in the alleys, in the broken conversations. In “Songs for the Darkness,” I discovered how the city disintegrates, how war unravels our last bonds, pushing us toward the unknown, burdened with the weight of memory.

Amid this patriarchal and sectarian violence, their writings gave me room to understand, to dismantle, to breathe. Women’s deferred memory rescues what remains of history—before bias buries it for good.