

University of Texas at El Paso

From the Selected Works of Jane E. Evans

2006

Widowhood, Motherhood, Selfhood in Latifa Ben
Mansour's *L'année de l'éclipse*

Jane E Evans, *University of Texas at El Paso*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/jane_evans/14/

Widowhood/Motherhood/Selfhood in Latifa Ben Mansour's L'année de l'éclipse

An eclipse of the sun lasts only a few minutes, although animals sense its approach ahead of time and become quiet as the moon moves between the earth and the sun, causing twilight to fall. [Document this.] The term “eclipse” may also refer to a catastrophic life event that darkens one’s horizons, often resulting in depression. Both connotations figure in Latifa Ben Mansour’s L'année de l'éclipse (2001), the story of protagonist Hayba’s cataclysmic year from 1998 to 1999 in which she experiences the loss of her daughter and husband, followed by personal growth and motherhood once more. In this paper, the tumultuous events of Hayba’s life will be examined under psychological, political, and stylistic lenses.

Hayba’s grief at the deaths of her husband Abd el-Wahab and daughter Dounia provides the framework for L'année de l'éclipse: structurally, the novel contains four “livres” [books] titled “Illusions,” [Illusions], “Crépuscule” [Twilight], “Ténèbres” [Darkest Night], and “Renaissance” [Rebirth]. Each of these sections refers to a stage in Hayba’s physical and mental healing, at the end of which she will experience a kind of rebirth.

In Livre Ier, “Illusions,” Hayba mourns her previous life in Ouargla, Algeria as a successful gynecologist, wife, and mother. She grapples with the overwhelming changes in her life. She cannot believe that she and Abd el-Wahab, medical doctors committed to the modernization of Algeria, were targeted by Muslim extremists engaged in a different sort of battle [Find a quote to put here, either from L'année... or from Frères...].

She has fled Algeria in order to put physical distance between her and the site of her loved ones’ deaths at the hands of armed Islamists. Moreover, she hopes to protect

her unborn child, conceived just before her husband's murder, from any possible danger. Both her mother and mother-in-law have urged her to leave her homeland following the completion of the requisite 135 days of mourning according to the Koran. [Document this.] As the narration opens, Hayba is in her fifth month of pregnancy.

Hayba's future motherhood compounds her present grief. Her daughter's demise has affected the protagonist as a mental and physical shock. Hayba watched helplessly as Dounia was raped and killed. Not only must Hayba come to grips with the illogic of her 9 year-old preceding her in death, she must also forgive herself for not having been able to prevent the atrocities performed on Dounia. Further, Hayba has been physically abused herself. The armed fanatics forced her to have sex with them too, and then slashed her thighs and abdomen.

Hayba's body recalls her late daughter's weight. However, it also remembers the oppressiveness of the terrorists who lay on top of her. [Find passages for these two statements. Quote from Bessel van der Kolk on PTSD here.] Hayba's own rape sullies the memory of her pregnancy with Dounia. Thus, it is no wonder that Hayba feels estranged from her physical self. She has become addicted to warm baths for the purpose of washing away her contamination [Cite something here.]. She has lost her appetite permanently, but swallows some food every day in order to give nourishment to her unborn child.

Besides accepting her daughter's death, Hayba has to acknowledge that Abd el-Wahab will not be there to share the responsibility of their second child. This, like Dounia's death, is an incomprehensible fact. Women, for the most part, outlive their husbands, but Hayba's husband has been brutally taken from her [Put something here as

support.] She sees his absence as “ [Quote something here.], although he visits her in her dreams. As a matter of fact, Hayba does most of her initial grief work while sleeping. Her reliance on sleeping pills prescribed by her psychiatrist enables her to seek this refuge [escape?] as often as she likes. Like a warm bath, cocooning in her bedclothes comforts Hayba.

By submerging herself in sleep, Hayba avoids confronting an even more incredible phenomenon: her current pregnancy. She had been told that she would not conceive any more children after Dounia was born, and that if she did, she would imperil her own life. Despite her recent physical and mental trauma, Hayba has carried her second child for five entire months. In short, her gestational well-being has outstripped her mental health.

Hayba’s psychotherapy has not been progressing because she has refused to speak to her doctor about the terrifying incidents of December 1998. At the onset of L’année de l’éclipse, he does not know that Abd el-Wahab was decapitated at the hospital where he and Hayba worked and that the box containing his head was sent to his wife; nor does the psychiatrist know that masked religious terrorists subsequently burst in on Hayba and Dounia at home. By not narrating these moments of her life, Hayba ultimately denies the “story” as her own. Psychologists claim that ordering one’s narrative by putting it into words is one of the most important steps in regaining one’s mental health [that is, moving beyond victimization? Find a quote to back this up.].

Livre II, « Crépuscule » [Twilight], begins with a paratexte from Maurice Blanchot: « ‘Le souvenir est la liberté du passé’ » (107). Similarly, Livre III,

« Ténèbres » [Darkest Night] offers a poetic excerpt from Les Mille et Une Nuits [The Thousand and One Nights] on its first page:

Ami, déserte les lieux où règne l'oppression
 Et laisse la maison retentir des cris de deuil sur ceux qui l'ont bâtie
 Tu trouveras d'autre terre que la tienne,
 Mais ton âme est une et tu ne la retrouveras pas. (155)

The above-mentioned titles and paratexts summarize and symbolize the mental regrouping in which Hayba engages in order to become psychologically healthy once more. By probing the most painful memories of her former life, the protagonist starts to emerge from the depths of her depression. The image of the darkest night, “Ténèbres” preceding daylight, used in Book III’s title, succinctly captures the course of Hayba’s emotional healing. Once she admits to her psychiatrist what has occurred in her life during the past year, she begins to be freed of her guilt feelings and despair. She consequently accepts invitations to meet friends and even starts a new job as a medical receptionist. Little by little, she understands that she deserves to be a mother again and to be loved.

“Renaissance,” the title of Book IV, goes beyond the notion of daybreak to the idea of recasting the self. A paratext from Omar Khayyam that ends in an imperative sums up the process of rebirth: “N’oublie rien de ton passage/Tu n’y repasseras pas” (199). The good advice from this 12th century Persian poet states that only in re-examining the past can we move forward, as Hayba succeeds in doing [Quote something related to grief and/or depression at this juncture. Document the information on Omar Khayyam.]

Politically speaking, L'année de l'éclipse typifies the victimization of Algerian civilians by armed Islamists. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, ultra-conservative, violent religious factions known under the umbrella title of “groupes Islamistes armés” [Armed Islamist Groups] terrorized Algeria. The extremists used violence to make their rhetoric realistic. The religious terrorists’ thinking included a redefinition of chari’a, whose original meaning is [Quote from Wikipedia here?]. Led by Ali Benhadj and _____ Madani, the AIG understood chari’a to be a strict interpretation of the Koran, *their* interpretation.

Mainstream Muslims perceived the fanatics as outsiders to their faith: no longer were the latter submissive to their religion [“Submission” is the translation of the term “Islam.”], but they had perverted Islam for their own violent purposes. For instance, the extremists shaved their eyebrows, ringed their eyes with kohl, shaved their beards, and even cut off the first digit of their right index fingers so that they could no longer raise this phalanx in the traditional sign of submission at the end of prayers [Give source of this information.]. The Koran orders none of this for men’s behavior. Algeria was seen merely as one “domino” in their game of converting the entire world to their brand of faith. [You must document the preceding sentences, too.]

The Armed Islamist Groups especially targeted non-practicing, westernized Muslims, whose modern ideas were considered a betrayal of rigid conservative values. Uncovered [unveiled] women were easy prey, identifiable by their European-style clothing. Innocent children murdered by fanatics served as an example of the religious perverts’ strength. Algerians in both cities and small towns feared for their lives. Many escaped to France. In terms of intellectuals, an estimated _____ relocated to French

soil. Among those who remained in Algeria throughout the last two decades, at least _____ were struck down by religious fanatics intending to purge society of liberal, anti-chari'a ideas [Put a footnote in here to give names of a few victims.].

The final number of victims struck down by religious extremists remains a mystery. As recently as _____, another mass grave into which the bodies of those who had been kidnapped by the government or fanatics had been discovered and then resealed. Families whose loved ones had disappeared continue to experience a lack of closure. Governmental amnesties directed at armed religious extremists in _____ and _____ have intensified this non-closure and awakened angry feelings about pardoning the extremists. However, the tremendous participation of “former” Islamic terrorists in the amnesties has resulted in general peacefulness and the existence of only one terrorist “cell” operating in the Algerian mountains to the north {Document this as necessary. Come up with a transition for the two last sentences, above.].

Religious fanatics did not attack civilians in Ouargla, Algeria in early December 1998, as L'année de l'éclipse depicts, although they could have. On December 9, 1998, three small towns to the west of Algiers lost a total of _____ citizens, _____ men, _____ women, and _____ children to the fanatics' cause [Document this. And say something about small towns to the south also? Look at the interview with Ben Mansour to see if there is anything to add here about her personal life. Could you add something about writer Leïla Marouane as an intellectuelle who fled Algeria at this point?]. Even though the novel departs from factual veracity, its political and psychological representations ring true. Someone like Hayba, professional, highly

educated, and westernized could easily have faced the tragedies that Ben Mansour's protagonist encounters.

If Ben Mansour fictionalized events in Ouargla, Algeria at the end of 1998, she relied on historical fact in framing her novel with the occurrence of the August 10, 1999 eclipse of the sun, visible in Europe and North Africa in the early afternoon. The obfuscation of the sun by the moon cast an eerie shadow on the earth's surface for approximately _____ minutes.

I mentioned earlier that the eclipse of the sun is an apt metaphor for Hayba's suffering in L'année de l'éclipse. While depressed and grieving the deaths of Abd el-Wahab and Dounia, she spends several months in mental darkness before she feels ready to surface towards the light once more. The titles and paratexts of the novel's four books summarize Hayba's psychological recovery. Additionally, other stylistic elements in the novel, such as spatial references, tropes, and idiomatic expressions play into the darkness-light dichotomy.

When Book I, "Illusions," of L'année de l'éclipse opens, Hayba is in the Paris metro, en route to a pawn shop where she plans to sell her jewelry. The métro is one of the semi-dark places in which she can relax. The train rocks her to sleep as she thinks about the changes in her life over the past few months. We learn that she witnessed her daughter's rape and murder and that Hayba herself was forced to have oral sex with her armed assailants. The rocking of the train consoles Hayba and puts her to sleep. However, her violent dreams counteract this comfort.

Later, Hayba refuses to take the subway, for the following reason:

Mais l'idée de se retrouver une fois encore prisonnière du métro,

coincée sans air au milieu d'inconnus au teint blafard, la dissuada de pénétrer dans la première bouche venue. (16-17)

The expression « pénétrer dans la première bouche venue » (17) reminds the reader of the sexual abuse that Hayba experienced.

The same sort of comfortable, yet violent image comes to mind as Hayba awakens in bed “sous sa couette humide” [under her damp quilt] (19) from one of her numerous pharmaceutically –induced naps, according to the following: “Les tranquillisants l’assommaient. Mais était-ce vraiment l’effet des tranquillisants, ou celui des sexes enfournés dans sa bouche par ses tortionnaires fous d’Allah? ” (L’année 32) The memory of Hayba’s rape intrudes upon her repose.

A third example reiterates the invasion of a safe space by Hayba’s traumatic memories. She has entered the Saint-Sulpice Church where the silence and half-light trigger a series of happy reminiscences concerning her daughter and husband. When the priest tells her that the church is closing, however, Hayba likens his kind face to that of a monk friend who was killed by the intégristes. Once more, painful memories shatter the consolation of Hayba’s reverie.

Not only does Hayba’s past encroach upon the half-lit places into which she ventures, such as the church, it also colors her waking thoughts. Initially, Hayba is overwhelmed by the prospect of impoverished, single motherhood that looms before her. Descriptions of Hayba using metonymy reflect her feeling of being out of her depth. Metonymy consists of designating a physical object or an abstraction not by the term that usually defines it, but by a word that is associated with it: by expressing the container for

its contents, the cause for its effect, and the part for the whole entity. In psychoanalytic terms, metonymy is considered infantile thinking (Ben Mansour Frères 193-94).

Hayba considers her unborn child «la vie [qui] lui [donnait] des coups de pied » [Life that was kicking her] (13) ; «Cette énergie qu'elle portait en elle» [This energy that she was carrying inside herself] (12); «La boule [qui] grossissait dans son ventre» [The ball that was getting bigger in her belly] (11). In each of these instances an idea associated with the word “fetus” replaces the common term. “Life”, “energy”, and “the ball or head” are all aspects of the unborn child rather than a reference to the entire fetus. It is as if Hayba’s mind cannot fully grasp the concept of motherhood, so she thinks of the baby inside her incompletely or indirectly.

The protagonist’s thoughts about the armed religious fanatics that devastated her family rely on animal metaphors connoting evil and violence (Ben Mansour Frères 194). She remembers her assailants as «les chiens sanguinaires» [blood-thirsty dogs] (12), their neighborhood networks as «l’hydre» [the octopus] (119), and the town of Ouarlga as «leur nid de vipères» [Their vipers’ nest] (160), to mention only a few examples. For their part, the ultraconservative Muslim leaders invoke similar imagery in their sermons about those who do not follow their rigid interpretation of the Koran (Ben Mansour, Frères 193-97).

