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The Animal Nature & the Nature of Animals in *Sitt Marie Rose*

One striking feature of Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose* is the use of nature imagery, particularly that of animals. Themes of herd-like behavior, predator and prey, and animals led to the slaughter appear throughout the book. The author juxtaposes qualities associated with wild beasts with the inhuman/inhumane behavior of her characters. From the beginning, when Mounir contrasts the beauty of birds in flight with the violence of gunfire, to the end, when he allows the brutal murder of Marie Rose, the central male characters are on the hunt. Their world view has been reduced by hatred and war to the dichotomy of "us and them".

At the beginning, Mounir is the male character with the greatest potential for redeeming himself. Through his film we see that he has a chance to connect with the wider world rather than focusing on narrower tribal priorities. The narrator describes how he portrays the beauty of the Syrian desert—a sunset...a marsh...birds on the wing. All of the sudden it becomes a celebration of the hunting exploits of Mounir and his friends, perfectly synchronized to the music of Pink Floyd. It is a brutal scene that demonstrates an appreciation for beauty and a simultaneous joy in destroying it.

Mounir later speaks to the narrator about wildlife with a nonchalance that reveals his true feelings. The hunt is a conquest.

—Vous avez tué beaucoup d'oiseaux?

—Non, il y en a plus qu'au Liban mais on peut dire que la Syrie a déjà perdu la faune qu'elle avait. Notre prochain voyage, d'ailleurs, est en Turquie. C'est encore vierge.¹

The use of the word virgin is deliberate. Mounir and his friends are suspicious of sex and take more pleasure in car rallies and hunting than attempting to reach out to women.

Fouad is the most extreme of the friends, his view of sex as merely a physical function in contrast to “making love” is a sign of his inability to make meaningful connections with other human beings. The hunt brings expressions of joy to the faces of Mounir, Pierre, and Tony. By contrast, Fouad is unmoved. He is the “tueur parfait”. Shooting birds is not intimate enough to satisfy his blood lust. “Il souffre de ne jamais assez tuer”.² In Temps 2 we see the full consequences of this predilection.

For his next film Mounir asks the narrator to write a script. He wants to portray Syrian workers in much the same way as he used the birds in his previous film. Their primitive and inferior culture, as he sees it, should act as a foil for the natural superiority of the Lebanese. They will stare in wonder when Mounir and his friends enter their village—“nous représentons ce qui est moderne...le pouvoir de nos fusils est chez eux inimaginable.”³ When the narrator tells him her plan to interview actual Syrian workers, he doesn’t understand. She wants to tell the story of the Syrians as complex human beings. He wants to express the superior hunters’ point of view.⁴ He makes no distinction between the anonymity of a flock of birds and that of people from Syria.

The narrator consistently provides a broader view even as the civil war begins. She is able to see the humanity of individuals throughout the story rather than the anonymity of “the enemy”. In the midst of war, she tries to rouse someone to protect the innocent Syrian workers who are under fire. No one will come to their defense. The

¹ Etel Adnan, *Sitt Marie Rose*. Paris: des femmes, 1977. p.12.

² p.8.

³ p.11-12.

⁴ p.13.

owner of the building looks at them and sees only Arabs. He hates Arabs, therefore he has no obligation to protect them. His ability to reduce them to a single, detested identity, releases him from any responsibility toward his fellow human beings. He has nothing in common with them. The narrator wishes for a million birds to be released into the sky over Lebanon to distract the hunters from randomly killing their faceless enemy.⁵

Adnan clearly shows how being taught to hate from an early age has caused many to see others as less than human. The characters are able to reduce their enemy to animals to be slaughtered. By doing so, they themselves become animal-like in their brutality. In school Mounir and his friends were taught to see Muslims as the other. They were crusaders fighting against the infidel not people of a common heritage who could peacefully coexist.⁶

This tribal attitude appears in greater concentration in Temps 2. The male characters are completely governed by it, while Marie Rose tries to broaden their increasingly narrow view. The men go along with each other as if in a herd. Marie Rose declares “Que vous soyez berger ou moutons, c’est toujours en termes de troupeaux que vous vous définissez !”⁷ Tony sees this mind-set as a mark of loyalty, proudly stating “...la volonté du groupe est souveraine.” He compares the conflict between Christians and Muslims to a pack of vultures fighting a pack of eagles, as if they have no choice, as if it were the natural course of things.⁸ The narrator recognizes that the decisions of the group will be carried out by any means necessary.⁹ Their brutality knows no bounds in a

⁵ p.24.

⁶ p.56.

⁷ p.66.

⁸ p.44.

⁹ p.74.

conflict in which people on both sides are slaughtered and their bodies dismembered and sent back to their families. These acts dehumanize the killer as much as the victim.

It seems ironic that Marie Rose tried to protect her students from killing chickens, a death which at least served a purpose in the normal order of things, now that they have seen bodies lying in the streets and have even witnessed murder. It is significant that the children describe the bloody details of a sheep being slaughtered—the butcher cutting off its head, disemboweling it and eating its liver—and conclude that now “on fait pareil pour les musulmans et les Palestiniens.”¹⁰ Neither side simply kills its enemies, they obliterate each other.

Having seen such events and witnessing those in the classroom, the deaf-mute children understand that something serious is about to happen. Pages 90 and 91 are full of animal references. Men in the street resemble herd animals, representing their willingness to follow the pack. Cats no longer behave like cats having given up hunting rats, but the men in the classroom have become more feline, looking at Marie Rose with glowing cats’ eyes, ready to pounce. Their behavior is more and more ferocious.

Marie Rose sees the narrow focus of her captors and feels as if she has been judged by a different species.¹¹ She tries to defend innocent refugees and draw attention to the commonalities between the Christians and Palestinians. Thinking their former affection and his sensitive attributes might allow her to reason with Mounir, Marie Rose describes a broader view of society, but the will of the group will not be swayed. They are deaf to reason. In answer to her, Mounir himself paints the situation in terms of wild animals.

¹⁰ p.52.

¹¹ p.82.

- Vous n’avez rien compris à cette histoire. Vous vous battez comme des aveugles. Vous êtes en train d’égorger des innocents.
- Ce sont, et ils le seront toujours, des étrangers. Il n’y a pas plus de place chez les loups pour les renards.¹²

Fouad, however, again appears as the least human figure among his comrades. His inability to empathize with other beings as seen in his hunting and mating behavior has grown worse. He has narrowed his view to that of a predator, “Je suis le pouvoir absolu...J’ai réduit toutes les vérités à la notion de vie et de mort.”¹³ He characterizes himself as a wolf on the hunt.¹⁴ While interrogating Marie Rose, he describes his morning meal as a means of intimidation. He has eaten the raw liver, marrow and brain of a lamb. “Tout ce qui est intime, quoi.”¹⁵ The fact that it was a lamb, a traditional Christian symbol of innocence and sacrifice, that it was raw, as if eaten by a wild animal, and that he devoured the innermost parts, all emphasize Fouad’s brutality and his crimes against the very faith her purports to protect.

In the end, the men descend into pure animality, mindlessly rending Marie Rose limb from limb. On seeing the slaughter of their teacher, the children say “aucun être humain ne ferait ce qu’ils font...Comme ils sont sauvage.”¹⁶ In her final moments Marie Rose accuses them of having forgotten what it is to be human. It all comes down to the will of the pack for which she ironically uses the word “love”. “Les hyènes, les reptiles, les cochons, ne se nuisent pas les uns aux autres comme vous savez le faire. Et cela au nom de l’amour du clan.”¹⁷

¹² p.98.

¹³ p.45.

¹⁴ p.102.

¹⁵ p.70.

¹⁶ p.92.

Une résumé du “The Animal Nature & the Nature of Animals in *Sitt Marie Rose*”

J’ai remarqué partout dans le texte, et de plus en plus près de la fin, un thème d’animaux et de l’homme. Les personnages ont les mêmes qualités que les animaux—they sont innocents, violents ou loyaux. Au début la narratrice décrit le film qui monte les oiseaux tirés par les chasseurs sans conscience. Pour son prochain film le réalisateur, Mounir, voit les ouvriers syriens comme des objets avec la même inconscience. Pour lui, ils sont primitifs, inférieurs et peu mieux que les bêtes.

Au début Mounir est l’homme qui pourrait être le plus humain. La narratrice et Marie Rose reconnaissent une appréciation pour la nature, les autres sociétés et la beauté, mais ses décisions partout dans le livre mènent à une fin triste. Il donne sa loyauté au groupe qui agit ensemble comme des bêtes féroces.

Les enfants sourds-muets, la narratrice et Marie Rose sont des témoins à la brutalité des hommes. Les femmes voient l’héritage commun entre les peuples palestiniens et libanais. Marie Rose ne peut pas convaincre les hommes à voir un monde plus grand. Tout le monde comprend que les actions des phalangistes sont moins qu’humains.

Le pire des personnages est Fouad qui est « le tueur parfait ». Il pense comme un loup. Il écartèle le corps de Marie Rose devant les enfants sans conscience. Son action horrible et brutale lui satisfait. Il n’est pas capable à reconnaître l’humanité de l’autre.

À la fin la narratrice, Marie Rose et les enfants écrivent de l'homme descendu au niveau d'un fauve. Comme un loup, il ne demande pas s'il *devrait* tuer sa proie, il simplement tue. La conscience du tribu mène aux actions tragiques.