

Haifa BITAR  
Excerpt from  
*A WOMAN OF THIS MODERN AGE*

### **The Fourth Session**

After every session, I fall further into a profound sadness. Everybody around me talks to me about nothing but my health and my therapy. They arouse despair and disgust in me. Don't their questions about my health and their anxious, sympathetic looks mean they are just picking the scab off my wound and reminding me of my disease? I think that an intense fear, nestling deep within me - which I try to ignore and eradicate - is driving me to be suspicious of all human beings, making me feel that their words have hidden meanings, their looks are puzzling and their smiles are silent indications of things they don't want me to know.

I woke up today in a gloomy mood. My telephone did not stop ringing. I noticed that my voice was charged with challenge and insistence on meeting. Even my laugh was becoming a chuckle of contempt for this odious cancer.

There is a hidden battle between the cancer and me. Despite my fear and my sensation of being choked by the terrifying flood of my own anxious and troubled feelings I was determined to defeat the disease. But I must admit I did not know that the abyss of despair was so deep. I have gone through many experiences in which I have felt desperate, but my despair is now so dense and oppressive that there is no room in it for self-deception.

I feel that I am now threatened to the very core of my existence and that life's rug will be slowly pulled from under my feet. I drive my car and, with eyes at once affectionate and challenging, I scrutinise all aspects of life around me.

Will I be deprived of all this warmth, and of all this noise of life around me? I feel I am being transformed into a hunter of opportunities and have to capture all aspects of life around me as they become closed to me. I am outside the parentheses of life, and I try to create an intimate dialogue with myself to lift my morale before arriving at the centre for radiation medicine. But I discover that I have lost the ease of verbal expression. My sentences are disjointed, my phrases are disconnected, and I feel there are spaces of forgetfulness in my brain. My language is no longer elegant, compliant, gushing, I wonder, has the treatment affected my nervous system? Or is it that my declining morale has brought confusion to my mind? In spite of everything, I feel I am exalted above my situation; for I am larger than myself and greater than my disease.

I examine my face in the car rearview mirror at the red traffic light: What is it that has altered the features of this face? They all express the insult – that insult life has dealt me. My heart throbs violently as I go up in the elevator. I am invaded by the memory of a flame, the like of which I have never experienced before. It is now a sudden fire that burns my heart and my whole being. I try to expel the man's image from the flame of my

memory but I retreat because I will, one day, recall him to the space of my loneliness and I will relive my blazing memories with him...

I winced visibly when the nurse stuck the needle of serum into my arm. " sorry ", she apologised tenderly, " Have I hurt you ? " I smiled at her to set her mind at rest and let her know the wince was not because of the prick of the needle; it was because of a fire in my memory.

When I remember him, I feel I am recalling the memory of that flame which burned so long throughout my whole being. In spite of the passage of many years since I first met him, he is still a man who resembles fire. I have not been able to solve the riddle – the riddle of my having been attracted to him without any effort on his part to win me over, and without a long period of time having to pass or a long conversation before being utterly dazzled by him !

I don't exaggerate when I say that I melted in him, I was totally enraptured by him, and that this feeling caused me pain. I always felt I was losing control of myself whenever I was with him, it was as if I had given him the reins of my soul. I don't know why he dazzled me in that way when I met him for the first time. Was it the halo of authority and fame that surrounded him ?

He was president of a number of institutions. He had established the Society of Women's Struggles, whose main objective was to defend women's rights. The society became increasingly well-known and expanded widely, receiving world acclaim. He was also president of the Medical Association of Psychiatrists. He had important books to his name that were taught at several universities and were about his experience in treating psychological illnesses related to our societies and also about the psychological illnesses of the Arab woman. I was passionately interested in his radio and television programmes, during which he took questions from anonymous suffering people, analysed them, and expressed profound and radical opinions.

I considered myself fortunate when I met him by chance, a coincidence I thought was wonderful. He was a friend of my friend's husband, and I poured all my feelings into my hand when he held it between his hands as he greeted me and looked into my eyes with obvious depth and admiration. I cannot deceive myself, so let me say that what was seething within me violently throughout the evening party was my feverish desire for him. I did not divert my gaze away from him and I desired to store in my mind every word he said and every motion he made.

I did not care that everyone there noticed that I did not divert my gaze and that I was dazzled by him. I was fascinated by his slightly sarcastic smile and the warmth of his look, a look he did not give anyone else. I liked his style of speaking. He did not have a favourite author, philosopher, actor, or actress that he preferred to others. His philosophy of life, as I felt it, consisted in showing a light measure of sarcasm towards everything: love, faithfulness, work, values, etc . He appeared to me to be without values, but he was the force behind a huge vital project; he exerted great efforts in the fields of psychotherapy and women's liberation, and his books were bestsellers and reliable references for all those interested in culture.

I was ashamed of myself for being so thoroughly dazzled by him. How could a woman at the age of thirty-seven, brilliant in her architectural work and tempered by life's experiences and vicissitudes, be so dazzled and allow herself to revolve in the orbit of a man – whoever he may be ?

" why don't you join the Society of Women's Struggles ?" he asked.  
 " I would like to", I said as I blushed, " but I am afraid I don't qualify."

He pressed my shoulder with the palm of his hand and an electric current surged through my whole body. "We will be honoured, " he said, " to have a human being like you join us".

Since the first dinner brought us together, I knew he had captivated me and left me in a state of continuous thirst for just a glimpse of him. The next day, he travelled ( back to Jordan) and, although I was dying to do so, I did not have the opportunity to bid him farewell as he had numerous appointments with members of the press. This man took me back to the adolescent days that I had left behind me ages ago. I began to daydream about him constantly and that made me ashamed of myself; I imagined that I danced with him and held him close to me, or that we had dinner together in candlelight to the tunes of romantic music and tender poetic songs! I missed him tremendously and was afraid of the sudden pangs of desire that jabbed me like arrows in my soul. I had a craving for him that was like a diabetic's craving for sweets. I often tried to persuade myself that my longing for him was not logical and had no rational foundations.

I joined the Society of Women's Struggles that defended women's rights and I wrote many articles for its magazine. And when I received an invitation to attend the conference on "Violence against Women" to be held in Amman for a week, I was beside myself and my joy and excitement knew no bounds. I began to pay hysterical attention to my body, my figure, my complexion, my hair. Had this man touched me with the flames of infatuation ? How had he seized me and possessed my feelings ?

It was something akin to a thunderbolt. It was enough for his image to pass through my mind for me to feel wildly agitated. I used to feel how my body shone for him when merely warm images passed through my mind. Throughout my life I have never felt as violent a passion as the passion I felt for him, which threatened to completely uproot me. The question which continued to puzzle me, and of which I was afraid, was whether it was his fame playing the main role in what I was feeling towards him.

I can now think rationally, many years after the events of those memories and after I had acquired some wisdom in understanding the world from my experience with cancer. I can now evaluate matters logically: there is nothing worse for us than living as captives to our feeling of superiority. This famous man who dazzled me is conceited in the extreme and tries to give an impression that he is spontaneous and has no designs to lure anyone around him with his authority, women in particular, although every moment he practises the magic of authority in a studied, deliberate manner.

The conference was at a Holiday Inn. I arrived at the elegant hotel, and my imagination was on fire with my infatuation for the president of the conference. We were more than one hundred and fifty women scholars and about seventy male scholars and thinkers, all participating in the international conference. I realized how feverishly

anxious I was to see him, how completely unable I was to control myself. I looked for him everywhere, I observed him in all his movements as though I were a compass pointing to him, I changed my position from place to place so that I could always be near him.

Disappointment seared my heart because I felt he was common property, an absolute master, head of the conference, while I was merely one of the participants. I was so amazed and surprised when feelings of deadly jealousy grabbed me, besieging me like sharp knives cutting my body into pieces. The conference opened. I contemplated him in his grey suit and dark red tie on a pure white shirt. He was extremely elegant. He began with a smile, the smile that had enchanted me. I did not understand any of his words. Of his lecture, which that lasted three-quarters of an hour I grasped nothing but the warm rhythm it created in my feelings. Everything in me was abounding with fancy and desire. Did he search for me in the midst of all those faces? That was what occupied my thoughts. Yearning for him demolished me and I thought that the most miserable thing in life was freedom. Did not my freedom embroil me in difficult feelings and attitudes? lectures succeeded one another while I was exhausted by my longing for him and burned by it. I waited impatiently for dinner, but how disappointed I was to see him greet me and kiss my cheek in the same manner as he had practised his magic and allurements on the other women participants at the conference. I tried hard to see what was special in his relation to me, but in vain. I felt he was not eager to see me or be alone with me.

He was common property. I observed him with the utmost attention and noticed he did not search for me, even once. I flung myself down on a far-off seat in the big dining hall, looking emptily into the air, cursing the moment I had accepted the invitation to the conference, and imagining that I would be spending the whole week in merciless suffering. Yet this man made me enter a state of dazed distraction and stupor. Here I was, worshipping him, yearning to be with him, trying to console myself, to delude myself that he desired me - while I had no evidence but my disappointed female intuition.

That night I needed sleeping pills to give myself some rest, but still had many confusing nightmares that were charged with obscure, violent feelings. In the morning I left my room as though fleeing from hell. I sat in the vast hotel lounge, searching for a human look I knew I would not find, and would not be afforded. I tried to calm myself down. I was happy that my body was relaxed and that my movements were slow because of the sleeping pills. I had my breakfast, feeling that I had lost weight on account of my violent emotions. I went to attend the day's lectures with an exhausted mind. I did not know that he was in his private office, where he received intellectuals and listened to them. I learned that only at noon when I was having lunch with an Algerian friend with whom I had straight away established a firm friendship, strengthened by the accumulated disappointments experienced by both of us. She said she had entered his office and told him of her desire to translate a book by a German woman writer who had made a long study on violence against women. "Where is his private office?" I asked in a trembling voice.

I decided to visit him in the afternoon. I wore my most beautiful dress, the weakness I had felt previously left me completely. The sap of hope ran through my veins and thirsty blossoms of desire opened up. I entered his office and he sprang up to greet me

warmly. He had other visitors but invited me to sit down. One of the men sitting there praised my elegance, and I was extremely happy - as though his praise had given me a visa into the famous man's world that I desired to enter. Most of the visitors then left except for a woman journalist in her fifties who was trying to look young. She was nice and asked me to sit beside the famous man so that she could take a photograph for us. He held me by the hand and sat me on the arm of the chair he was sitting in, with my back close to his shoulder. I felt the fire of desire burning me and kindling the quiet ashes resting inside me.

" That was a wonderful shot, " the journalist said. " I'll give you the photograph before the end of the conference".

I got up to go. I did not realise that we were now alone. I contemplated his large office, the big beechwood table surrounded by twelve chairs, and the elegant leather armchairs. My heart started to beat fast and shake like a newly-slain hen. He came closer to me without uttering a word. He took me by the waist, drew me to him, and I complied like one bewitched. He pressed his lips against mine in a divine kiss, a kiss that tasted of eternity, a kiss I am unable to describe. For many years later, I continued to recall the magic of that kiss with rare pleasure and to be intoxicated with the unique and amazing feeling it has given me. It was as if I wanted to embrace within me that incident of magical emotion which that could never be repeated.

Did that kiss last an eternity or only a few seconds ? It had never occurred to me that a kiss might possibly be exchanged in his office in that unexpected manner, and I could not judge whether what had happened was right or wrong. At that moment I was lost in an ethereal world. Besides, how could I blame myself when I was electrified by him ? But I soon fell back into the real world when a group of participants at the conference entered. I quickly finished my tea and left. I was unaware of myself. I was transformed into a spirit that soared on the wings of passionate love. I believed he would get in touch with me in the evening; but my telephone remained silent. I excused him for he was the president and was certainly occupied with numerous matters. I slept remembering the taste of that magical ecstasy. What an exquisite nectar that kiss was ! An idea crossed my mind and gave me pain: is it not conceivable that he may kiss another woman in the same manner as he kissed me ?

I went to his office the following day. It was crowded with visitors. He welcomed me, shook my hand with a strong squeeze and invited me to sit down. I gave him a long and sad look of reproof and he responded with the smile that has always shaken my whole body. For the first time, I paid attention to how he spoke and acted for I truly wanted to know how he was able to captivate me.

He affirms his ideas by negating those of others. His obsession is with the latest fashion of ideas. As I liberated myself for a moment from the power of passion, I felt that what he desired was to become a star and to gather around himself an elite of intellectuals who would revolve in his orbit. I did not know why I was beset by those ideas, I who still lived the allurements of the previous night. Who is this man who has bewitched me and made me lose control of myself ? with captivating rhetoric, he defends woman as though she were a mere idea, but without real sincerity. He was not a man with a cause he believed in, but rather the originator of a project that he wanted to

exploit in order to achieve his own personal glory, not really and seriously to liberate women.

He noticed that I was distracted, so asked me whether I was enjoying the panels I attended. I looked into his eyes, exhausted, full of blame. He responded with a smile, pointing to a small monitor by which he could follow the lectures in all the rooms. I don't know why but I felt an intense frustration and asked myself: " what do I want from him ? why am I in a state of crazy expectation, always waiting for him ?" And I knew he was reading my thoughts.

" Something is disturbing you," he said. " Something is preoccupying your mind. It is clear your sleep is not restful".

I took my leave, feeling a strong urge to weep. He stood up to see me to the door. He pressed my hand and thrust a little piece of paper in my palm. On it he had written the number of his private telephone. I flew to my room to call him immediately.

" Why do you leave me alone ? " I said.

" What's the number ?" He asked.

At first I did not understand what he meant.

" What number ?" I asked.

" The room ."

My heart jumped to my mouth as I said 723.

" Will you come ?" I asked bravely, after I had caught my breath.

" Of course," He responded confidently.

" When ?" I asked anxiously.

" I 'll call, " He said curtly.

I withdrew from the huge audience that had gathered to hear a famous woman singer and stole away to my room, claiming I had a bad headache. I ignored the surprise of the conference participants, who found my withdrawal from the session strange. I phoned quickly.

" I'll be with you in a moment," He said.

This ' moment ' was three hours of waiting that ravaged my nerves to the point of despair and humiliation. After midnight I was surprised by my telephone ringing and then his cold, confident voice, free of any anxiety, saying : " Open the door. "

I opened the door. And there he was, in all his greatness.

I remembered the monitor in his office.

" Is it conceivable that we are being observed?" I asked , fearful.

He laughed : " Impossible ."

He threw his jacket aside and embraced me with brusque, passionate desire. I wanted to talk, to drink something , but found I was choking - from his desire and his insistence. I did not know how, in a moment, he had got rid of his clothes and made me undress without uttering a word. I prodded him to speak about any subject, but he said no more than one sentence.

" Women like you excite me "

" Do you mean my figure, or ... ? " I asked.

" Sh! " he interrupted me, grumbling.

" Are you a chatterbox in bed ? "

I confessed to him that I was immensely infatuated with him and felt a great attraction towards him. He laughed as he explored my body with his burning palms and ran his hand over my breasts, whose firm pride excited him. But I was greatly disappointed to discover he was impotent, that his greatness and the imposing appearance of his person were paralleled by the paralysis of his maleness. Yet in spite of his impotence, my infatuation with him did not change . My crazy attraction to him did not subside - despite his sexual incapacity. It was sufficient for me to touch him, to be next to him. The exchange of breaths and feelings was pleasure enough for me. Tenderness surpasses orgasm immeasurably.

How humiliating those memories seem to be now as the echo of his voice rings in my ears: "Bring out the closet prostitute in your soul."

At the time his words shocked me, and so I moved away from him, terrified. " What prostitute?" I asked. " What is this craziness ?" He laughed, saying it was a common expression.

Nothing has remained of those memories but the bitterness of a sick but passionate love. Was it a passionate love for the man, or for authority ? For the charismatic authority represented in him or for the fashions of modern thought he embodied ? Or was it a passionate love for the resounding conferences he opened in the grandest hotels ?

That was the single, abrupt act of sexual intercourse and it was not to be repeated. He did not attempt to get in touch with me, not even to reassure himself about me. I was merely a delicious fruit that he wanted to taste. Was this the jealous defender of women's rights ? Does he really understand the psychology of a woman ? Does he respect the human being in her ? Or is woman to him just a billboard for the prominent display of his fame ?

The international conference ended with intense bitterness for me, and I needed several months to relieve myself of its intensity. This man taught me a lesson about the betrayal of authority, about the treacherous and specious behaviour of important men who enjoy having authority over others, especially lonely women.

Whenever I watched him later on a television programme, I used to feel the same bitterness and contemplated him with suspicion, recalling that humiliating experience. I liked to turn the sound off sometimes and observe him as a skeleton and watch how this pretender behaved. I observed the movements of his hands and his hypocritical smile. I brooded long over that authority which he represented, the authority of his big position which nourished his maleness, already inflated by conceit. I felt that all he had written and continued to write and propagate had no value for him because it did not come from his soul. It consisted only of high-flowing words and glittering ideas that he did not believe in. I am very much inclined to believe that , at every one of his conferences, especially those calling for women's liberation, he captured a woman who excited him and then exploited her by practising on her the power of his deficient manhood, humiliating her in bed just once, then deliberately neglecting her in order to enjoy the illusion that his authority had humiliated the educated woman who believed in equality.

His behaviour indicated really nothing except his profound rejection of equality between the two genders. It grieved me enormously that all those women whose rights were infringed and whose feelings of dignity were impugned would not be able to expose publicly such a corrupt cultural symbol as him ...

My gaze was fixed on the tube connected to the bag of serum as I observed the drops continuously falling, drop after drop, disappointment after disappointment ... The disappointments of women dreaming of equality with men and believing in it will accumulate like small holes that one day will join up and make a large pit in which can be buried a conceited, overbearing man and bogus cultural leader. But will a woman like me, whom cancer has freed of fear and of love of false lights, dare proclaim the truth, encouraged as I have been by the drops of a medicine killing off the cancer cells as well as the seeds of that fear nestling deep within these cells of mine ... ?

*Translated from the Arabic by Issa J Boullata*