

# Etel Adnan's New Language: Poems that Rewrite Masculine Discourse

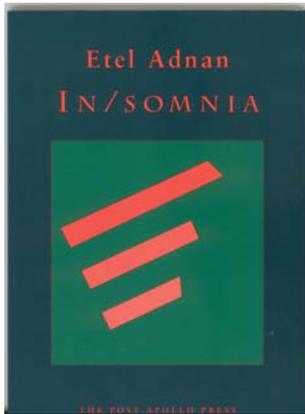
In/Somnia

by Etel Adnan

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BY RIM ZAHRA AND RAZZAN ZAHRA

Etel Adnan's "In/Somnia" is a provocative collection of 27 short poems that resist conformity to any given set of rules or structures that belong to masculine discourses by resisting conformity to any given set of rules or structures. In this collection, Adnan does not offer a direct critique of Lebanon's civil war, as she does in her well-known novel "Sitt Marie Rose" and other poetry collections like "The Arab Apocalypse." Rather, Adnan deconstructs the syntax and semantics of conventional narrative structures in order to convey the destructive consequences of that war on the individual and society at large.



The reader quickly notices that Adnan refrains from following the traditional subject, verb, object sentence patterns and invents semantic and lexical items throughout her book. Sometimes, Adnan creates an auditory effect by adding vowels to words like "feever" and "stooory." Other times, her words are separated by slashes, hyphens, brackets, asterisks, and question marks or

are followed by arrows and colons rather than dashes. For instance, she includes words like "break:up," "\*\*\*move/ing," "Af(ter)ghanistan" and "(wet) weapons." Adnan's use of such symbols conveys the illogic of war's logic without ever mentioning the word "war." At the same time, she challenges the linear order of masculine discourses and the social and personal turmoil they create.

Rather than merely condemning the "crooked str-strategies" of patriarchal thought, Adnan re-inscribes hierarchal discourses of opposition that govern masculine ideologies. She refrains from constructing categories of superiority/inferiority to describe "comet coming" and "plane/planets/driftng" and demonstrates that it is only by giving up conventional forms of writing that poetry can transform into a tool that challenges patriarchy. Adnan, in fact, announces her intention to give up the use of metaphors or as she puts it, "meta-phoros":

Bye & Bye gentle meta-  
phoros. Go to your !  
grave. Pillars. stand/ing  
metelas/s/s.....no! no!

For Adnan, one must abandon traditional thought in order to realize that there is no one poetic form just as there is no one war experience. Therefore, to perceive poetry as merely a language of metaphors would be to interpret it through the lens of the binary male/female and passive/active qualities. The feminine connotations of the word "gentle" and the masculine attributes associated with the word "pillars" urge poets and readers alike to consider a poetic form that lies outside dual hierarchal discourses. Her use of spaces, slashes, and symbols, therefore, model some of the ways that language can be used to rewrite existing ideological frameworks within patriarchal structures.

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In other words, her poetry works to disrupt any manipulation of discourse that leaves the patriarchal framework intact and, thereby, opens the possibility of a different poetic form for expressing the breakdown of the self and of society.

Adnan suggests that it is often the state of waiting for the inevitable bombing to occur that leads one to inhabit a state of insanity:

"insane in/sane the right  
to wait wait! waited for  
for wait a minute for/the/  
dark/light of morning

By using alliterations and breaking up the word "insane" into "in/sane," Adnan suggests that individuals need to occupy a space of in-betweenness so as to reclaim their sense of worth. It is only by occupying such a space that new discourses and forms of expression emerge. Adnan concludes her poems by envisioning "mobile sleep," a state in which one exists on the boundaries of consciousness and unconsciousness, yet never fully occupying either space. Adnan finds that it is only in this space of in-betweenness, this state of "in/somnia" that freedom of hierarchal binaries and discourses becomes possible. It is only in that state that one can begin to envision new ways of being, existing, and expressing.

We highly recommend this book to anyone interested in exploring a language that can operate beyond the socio-cultural and socio-political discourses that shape how we use language to express our understanding of the world. **AJ**