

La Maison Sans Racines «The House Without Roots»(*)

By *Andrée Chedid*



Andrée Chedid

(from *Le monde*)

Andrée Chedid presented her book «The House Without Roots» in Paris, October 1985 in a ceremony attended by Lebanese President *Charles Helou*, Mr. *Ghassan Tueni* and Miss *Yvette Turpin*, Lebanon's representative of tourism in Paris. Chedid's book starts with a quotation by *Gibran Khalil Gibran*, which says: «Your house will not be an anchor, but a mast». In fact, the reason why Chedid chose the title «The House Without Roots» is that the concept of a person's roots in life is primordial for her. The «House without Roots» is not one already built, but is a place where uprooted people find themselves and are in the process of building a house.

As a child, *Andrée* used to accompany her Grandmother (*Nouza* in the book) for the summer holidays at the Grand Hotel of Sofar (Solar in the book) in the Lebanese mountains. It was during these times that the young *Andrée* (*Kalya* in the book) learnt about her family's history, about the Lebanese way of life, the hospitality, warmth, generosity and... quick temper of its inhabitants. It was also during one of these holidays that she met her first love, *Mario*, a young law graduate whom she was to meet again during that summer of '75.

In the book, *Andrée-Kalya* lives in Paris and works as a photographer. She lived in three countries, Egypt, Lebanon and France, and in the three countries she set-up roots. *Kalya's* grand-daughter, *Sybil* is separated from her because her son, *Sam*, married an American and decided to live in New York. So both grandmother and granddaughter, although from the same roots, live different realities and are in different worlds. It is in the land of their ancestors that they decide to meet to spend the summer of '75 which marks the early days of the civil war in Lebanon.

Writing about roots *Chedid* says: «What are roots? Are they ancestral ties or are they woven through one's existence? Are they those of the ancestral homeland rarely visited, those of a neighbouring country where childhood was spent or those of a city where one has lived the longest time?»⁽¹⁾

Why did *Kalya* choose to come back to the land of her ancestors and bring her grand-daughter with her?

Chedid answers: It is because of tenderness. «Tenderness for this tiny land that one can cross in one day, this stubborn and fragile land».⁽²⁾

(*) Chedid Andrée. *La Maison Sans Racines*. France: Flammarion, 1985, 247pp.

(1) Chedid, Andrée. *La Maison Sans Racines*. p. 79.

(2) Ibid., p. 81.

Upon arrival to Lebanon both grand-mother and grand-daughter start experiencing life in a country beginning to be affected by war. They are stopped by a militia checkpoint on their way from the airport, they witness a bomb explosion at the local fruit shop, one of their friends is kidnapped, the airport is closed, finally they witness the secret plan for a peace march being prepared by two young women, a Muslim and a Christian, who refuse to see the country torn apart by confessional hatred.

This peace march is in fact the focal point of the book. It ties together the past and the present of *Kalya* who, throughout the novel, recounts in details the memories of her vacations with her own grandmother in 1932, then recounts the incidents of her 1975 vacations with her grand-daughter in the same country but in totally different circumstances.

This peace march which only lasts few minutes starts dramatically and ends dramatically. It begins with two young women, *Myriam* and *Ammal*, friends since childhood, who decide to put an end to confessional hatred by calling on people of all communities to join them. The two women agree to meet in the city-center, at dawn, wearing the same color, yellow, the color of hope and life. Once the assigned day arrive, and while walking towards each other to give the signal for others to join them, one of the women is shot. We never know who for it is not important. «Wounded together, they will recover together» writes *Chedid*. It is what happens after the women were rescued and the peace march was thwarted that is more important. For even if the march will cost the life of the most innocent character of the book: the little *Sybil*, hope still remains for peace in the country.

The idea of hope is very important for *Chedid*, because even if things seem irrevocably dark, this «blind violence cannot, should not last», she says. People should quickly join peace, join *Ammal* or *Myriam*, the young women bearers of hope before...

«... Before the city splits in two, before the last passage way (between the East and West) closes down, before hostages become an exchange currency... before an enemy is discovered in the house next door, before this morning's friend becomes tonight's executioner».

As the list of «befores» goes on, the reader realizes that ten years after the events of the novel, these things have become every day realities in Lebanon and that the word «before» does not exist anymore because «the pond of blood has deepened».

What can one conclude from *Chedid's* book, especially if one has lived these ten years of war?

Chedid's book is not an account of someone who has personally experienced the war in Lebanon, but of a person who has followed it very closely from far away. *Chedid* writes about the war as a poet, her words are sharp, her images are vivid and her emotions are well expressed. The rhythm of the book starts slow and speeds till the climax, the death of the little twelve years old girl who lives in the U.S., whose father is Lebanese and who has never seen her ancestral land.

With the death of the innocent child the reader is shocked for he/she would have wished her to be saved. But in fact *Chedid* chose well to let her die because she represents the death of beauty, innocence and truth in a country that has become mad but where hope still remains; hope exemplified by the yellow scarf worn by the organizers of the peace march, which, although splattered with blood, is carried far away by the wind.

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