

Origins in Love:  
Uncovering the Maternal Line and Achieving Justice in  
Wadji Mouawad's *Scorched*

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A play originally performed in French as *Incendies* in 2003, *Scorched* (2009) by Wadji Mouawad illustrates the effects of war in Lebanon in the twentieth century. The play begins with adult twins Janine and Simon Marwan, living in Canada, attempting to understand their recently deceased mother's cryptic and enigmatic will, which revealed that they have a brother and that their father (whom they have never met, and had presumed dead) is alive. Nawal, their mother, has spent the past five years in silence, and her death leaves her children in misery and bewilderment. The play dramatizes the uncovering of Nawal's past, and how Janine and Simon discover their mother's secret life in Lebanon. Not only do Janine and Simon realize they are the result of a vicious rape, but they come to learn that the rapist, Abou Tarek, is actually their mother's first son, separated from her at birth. However, the play counters its traumatic exploration of patriarchal lineage with an emphasis on a maternal inheritance of female friendship, parental love, and women's intimacy. In the play, women engage in fruitful and loving relationships in the midst of violence and warfare in order to subvert patriarchy and demonstrate alternative kinds of justice. This alternative justice takes form in the memorialization of female relationships in a world of warfare. The play suggests that a trial is not the only method for justice, and sometimes it does not provide sufficient comfort for victims. Even where there is consolation, it can be a "ruthless" (Mouawad iv), pitiless encounter with truth and explanation that harms as much as it consoles. The diverse manifestations of justice in *Scorched* offer a broader definition of the term that encompasses perpetual love and memorialization.

The audience observes a world of empowered females as

they follow Nawal's life from age fourteen to sixty. Through education, words, numbers, friendship, and singing, Nawal shapes her own fate and rejects Lebanese traditions that require women to stay at home, uneducated and silent (Thomas 63). Nawal's promises to her grandmother and infant son, Abou Tarek,<sup>1</sup> inspire in her an overwhelming urge to acquire justice for the atrocities of war she has seen. She acts on behalf of those with no voice or agency and creates an identity for herself that renders her a strong female character. She transforms into an assassin, the "woman who sings," and a loyal daughter, lover, and mother. The play suggests that in the face of warfare, rape, and torture, Nawal's passionate maternal love represents the ultimate form of justice because it finally breaks the chain of violence and bitterness that she has inherited. This justice comes late, after her attempts to seek justice by other means (assassination, legal redress), but ultimately she promotes maternal love and finds consolation in keeping promises.

Understanding justice and maternity requires contextualization: the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines justice as "maintenance of what is just or right by the exercise of authority or power; assignment of deserved reward or punishment." In *Scorched*, the International War Crimes Tribunal (WCT) functions as one source of authority, as Nawal testifies towards the legal condemnation of Abou Tarek. In their article "Beyond The Hague: The Challenges of International Justice," Richard Dicker and Elise Keppler discuss how the WCT attempts to achieve justice for instances of "mass slaughter, forced dislocation of ethnic groups, torture, and rape as a weapon of war"—crimes Abou Tarek has committed. Through the "creation of international criminal justice mechanisms and the application of universal jurisdiction," the WCT "hold[s] perpetrators of the most serious crimes to account" (Dicker and Kep-

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<sup>1</sup> Nawal names him Nihad as an infant.

pler). However, the article notes the dynamic nature of justice:

Due to inherent difficulties in rendering justice for these crimes, there have been failings ... those supporting efforts to hold the world's worst abusers to account [must] chart the path forward. The victims who suffer these crimes, their families, and people in whose names such crimes are committed deserve nothing less ... although international justice mechanisms provide imperfect remedies, they are a vitally necessary alternative to impunity. (Dicker and Keppler)

This quotation suggests that although the WCT is an imperfect institution, it symbolizes social justice and justice within the family, particularly when victims of war crimes have no alternative institution for the legal prosecution of international criminals.

*Scorched* offers maternal love as an alternative form of justice to legal punishment; however, it must exist alongside the WCT, not exclusive of it. When Nawal speaks at Abou Tarek's trial, her impassioned and confident speech never falters as she tells him, "you will not escape the justice that escapes us all" (Mouawad 101-02). For Nawal, Abou Tarek's international condemnation is a crucial facet of justice. However, at the end of her speech Nawal reveals that her promise to her grandmother Nazira motivates her passionate quest for justice. She promised Nazira to "learn to read, to speak, to write, to count, to learn to think," and therefore, "[her] testimony is the result of [her grandmother's] effort. To remain silent about [Abou Tarek's] acts would make [Nawal] an accomplice to [Abou Tarek's] crimes" (102-03). Although Nawal has committed murder, by the time she speaks at the trial she has seen how violence perpetuates violence and seeks to end the cycle through maintaining her promise to Nazira.

In her letter to her daughter Janine, Nawal speaks of a cycle of anger that exists through their maternal line:

The women in our family are trapped in anger.  
I was angry with my mother  
Just as you are angry with me  
And just as my mother was angry with her mother,  
We have to break the thread. (134)

Marie-Claude Thomas's book *Women in Lebanon: Living with Christianity, Islam, and Multiculturalism* notes how the living conditions for women in Lebanon in the twentieth century could contribute to bitter anger like Nawal and Nazira's: "society imposed certain models of conformity ... especially in villages, where [women's] choices are restricted" (Thomas 32). A woman in the rural milieu is conceived as an

eternal minor 'who leaves the guardianship of her father to be placed under the guardianship of her spouse' ... The conceptions [of women] may also vary ... according to the level of education of the family, and ... according to social classes or religious confession. Furthermore, the reigning ideology instills in women an education sucht that they end up wishing the treatment that society has served for them. Those who try to live according to new formulas sacrifice their health and mental equilibrium. (Thomas 33)

Nawal's community and traditions took away the most joyful aspects of her life: her love, Wahab, and the child she had with him. The resulting sadness indeed affects her "health and mental equilibrium." Nawal descends into a wandering silence (Mouawad 31), which seems to be the only socially acceptable way to express her anguish. This silence comes full circle for each member of Nawal's family as Janine, Simon, Nawal, and Nihad (Abou Tarek) respond to grief with silence: "silence awaits everyone in the face of truth" (130).

Nawal finds refuge in her grandmother, who speaks words of wisdom by suggesting the path to justice. She states, "Poverty is to blame for all of this, Nawal. There's no beauty in our lives ... Just the anger of a hard and hurtful life ... What is left for you? You can fight poverty, perhaps, or drown in it" (29). This scene demonstrates the maternal bond between granddaughter and grandmother, a crucial female relationship that inspires the course of Nawal's life. Nazira suggests to Nawal she has the power to make choices in the face of adversity, and that her inherited community does not define her life. On her deathbed, Nazira explains to Nawal how "the women in our family are caught in a web of anger" (33), and asks her to "break the thread" (33). She states:

Be courageous and work hard, sweet Nawal! ...  
learn to read, learn to write, learn to count, learn to  
speak. Learn. It's your only hope if you don't want  
to turn out like us. Promise me you will ... [T]hey  
will bury me ... but they won't write anything on  
the stone because no one knows how to write ...  
come back and engrave my name on the stone:  
Nazira. Engrave my name because I have kept my  
promises ... tear yourself away from here, the  
way we tear ourselves from our mother's womb ...  
learn to think. Nawal. Learn. (32-33)

This intimate scene demonstrates how matriarchal love encourages education in order to escape poverty and find "any possible happiness" (33). This love fuels Nawal to keep her promise and memorialize her grandmother accordingly; justice takes the form of engraved letters in a stone. Nawal also reflects this engraving in her letter to Abou Tarek, as she writes, "I push down my pencil and I engrave every letter / Remembering the names of all those who died at your hands" (129). Because Nawal's writing honours the promise she made to her grandmother, her memorialization of Abou Tarek's victims serves as one step towards ultimate personal justice for Nawal.

Nawal's relationship with her best friend, Sawda, also begins with Nawal fulfilling this promise, as Nawal teaches Sawda the alphabet (51). Through this shared learning, they become devoted friends and participate together in a political newspaper that eventually implicates them as traitors. Even though their friendship begins with education, the audience immediately senses how words can also contribute to violence. At Nazira's grave, Nawal states, "one man spit on me. He said: 'You know how to write but you don't know how to defend yourself.' I took a book out of my pocket. I hit him so hard, I bent the cover and he passed out" (43). In this landscape, education does not claim valuable space—violence functions as the only practical form of education because it is necessary for one's survival (which is why Nazira suggests Nawal must violently tear herself away from the violent environment). Nawal literally uses words to injure the man, thereby proving him wrong about both the importance of her writing and her ability to defend herself. The book, although here used as a physical source of power, symbolizes Nawal's intellectual power, which ultimately becomes her most effective defensive tactic against warfare. However, it is then ironic that her written contributions to the newspaper eventually bring about the deaths of her close friends: her community still does not value knowledge, and they punish the politically engaged literati with death. Sawda asserts that she sees letters "burning with the heat of the anger" (44) on Nawal's face, which suggests that education and violence are at war with one another. The image of fire that she illustrates also alludes to the play's title: *Scorched*. Nawal even uses educational tutoring as a way to infiltrate the paramilitary leader's home so she can assassinate him. Knowledge, ironically, helps Nawal achieve justice by perpetuating violence.

Although Nawal's friendship with Sawda results in the most violent time of Nawal's life, their relationship exceeds the boundaries of normal friendship to the extent that they consider separation

equal to death. Their separation only occurs after Nawal volunteers to assassinate the paramilitary leader, whom she will shoot once on Sawda's behalf. Nawal's interpretation of justice here mixes female love and violence: Nawal has persuaded Sawda not to "strike back blindly" (84) and feed the "idiot game" (85), but rather to kill a single man because it will give others—namely Sawda—a chance to "love with passion" (89). Upon their separation they sing the Arabic poem "Al Atlal" to celebrate their love for one another, and vow to repeat it when they miss each other. The poem, translating to "Ruins," expresses the departure of a lover. This poem suggests an exceptionally powerful female relationship by equating Nawal and Sawda with lovers. A lyric from the poem states "had love seen two as intoxicated as us?" (Oum). There does not seem to be any evidence of a sexual relationship between the two women, but through their devotion to each other, they certainly exist somewhere on Adrienne Rich's lesbian continuum (first outlined in her text *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*). Nawal also says to Sawda, "there is nothing more beautiful than being together" (90), which reflects the words exchanged between lovers Nawal and Wahab (30), and also Nawal to her son (132), again suggesting their relationship transcends typical friendship to reach the intensity of love between lovers or between a mother and her child. Nawal believes she sacrifices her own life in order to save Sawda's, though in reality, the reverse happens as Sawda is killed as a result of Nawal's attack on the paramilitary leader. Nawal memorializes Sawda by singing (which was Sawda's talent) in prison, and so their identities become conflated through the act of song, each note an act of embrace. Nawal's identity then reshapes into "the woman who sings," which seems to save Nawal's life: the janitor suggests Nawal was the only survivor of the prison because she sang (92). This new identity of "the woman who sings" also makes it easier for Janine to retrace Nawal's steps and uncover her mother's history when she explores Lebanon. The act of memorializing female love helps Nawal to achieve justice for Sawda's death, and Nawal's

promise, kept to Sawda, helps Nawal overcome the horror of being raped and tortured while imprisoned.

Finally, one must consider Nawal as a mother. Nawal's constant search for her son leads her to see horrific warfare, which in turn inspires her to become part of the anti-war movement. When Sawda confronts Nawal with the story of the woman who was forced to choose which son of three to save, Nawal reminds the audience that her first son, too, was taken away by war (87), and she revels in the idea of vengeance against the men who perpetuate it. However, vengeance cannot be the answer because of her promise to Nazira. She then promises her lost son, over and over again, "no matter what happens I will always love you" (31). When she realizes her son is also her rapist, she "blindly [chooses] not to speak" (132); her silence lasts five years. In an inversion of her speech at the WCT where Nawal's silence would implicate her in his crimes, Nawal's later silence functions as a defense mechanism to "preserve love" (132). By siding with Nihad, Nawal keeps her promise to him. She creates her own form of justice in refusing to allow the world of warfare to take away the love she had promised for her child. Her unrelenting love shocks the audience members, since the play does not prepare them to recognize Nihad in Abou Tarek and forgive him the way Nawal does. Abou Tarek has a "ruthless heart" (129) and committed atrocious war crimes with pleasure (101). In contrast to her unconditional love for Nihad, Nawal finds it "impossible to love the children [Janine and Simon]" (100) and "raise[s] them in grief and silence" (100) because they embody her experience of torture. Janine and Simon cannot understand Nawal's five years of silence, and at the reading of Nawal's will react to their mother's apparent selfishness in silence and screaming rage respectively. Mouawad describes the play as the "scene of ruthless consolation" (iv). In order to achieve this consolation, Janine and Simon must explore their mother's brutal past to seek answers for their childhood. Her will is the enigmatic answer to their childhood;



it responds to their grief of their “dead” father, unknown brother, and their silent, unconventional, dead mother. “Childhood is a knife stuck in the throat” (Mouawad 133), and for Janine and Simon, consolation is the removal of this knife with their symbolic transfer into adulthood. Like Wahab and Nawal, they leave behind whatever happiness they thought they had known in order to accept a future of strife and grieving. Although Nawal’s attempted form of justice, in her coldness towards her own children, is indeed pitiless, the play ends with the potential for consolation and healing. Janine and Simon “listen to their mother’s silence” together with “torrential rain” in the background (Mouawad 35). The earphones they share connect them like an umbilical cord; the rain—a pathetic fallacy for their anguish—expresses their pain, and upon Nawal’s death, they become closer to their mother than ever before.

The letters Nawal writes to Janine and Simon also emphasize her maternal love because they directly link to the promise she kept to her grandmother. Not only has Nawal learned to write, but she writes her children a poem. The letter employs repetition, alliteration, and iambs, which in combination have a musical effect that sounds soothing and natural, like a heartbeat. In the most striking line, “we have to break the thread,” iambic trimeter stands out from the free verse that precedes it, and the caesura that follows it, suggests an actual “break.” Nawal’s promise to Nazira is also in iambs: “to learn, to speak, to write, to count” (102). The musicality of the poem reminds the audience that Nawal is “the woman who sings.” Her lyrical gift, which once memorialized Sawda, now comforts her children. Nawal explains to Janine that each of the letters of “Sawda” are an “open wound in her heart” (134), and that Nawal would have named Janine after her. Nawal chooses to emphasize to her innocent children that their story begins and ends with love—a love which claims superiority over violence and rape and thrives on education and memorialization.

*Scorched* questions how to find justice in the face of war,

and how to best memorialize those who have been lost. Nawal creates justice by keeping her promises to her family and demonstrating devotion to the females in her life. She acknowledges her past through silence, letters, and words, and transfers this past to Janine and Simon by asking them to uncover their genealogy. The play highlights forms of literal and metaphorical inheritance: the traditions Nawal inherited and rejected; the cycle of violence and anger; the passing on of literacy from Nawal to Sawda, Janine, and Simon; and the passing on of silence. By the end of the play, Nawal subverts the patriarchal line by emphasizing maternal love and the need to “break the thread” that leads only to pain and alienation. Although Nawal had been a part of both the violence and anger, she recognizes her responsibility and claims, “all that is left is our possible dignity” (102). She makes this statement before the tribunal, suggesting that, whatever the limitations of institutionalized justice, Nawal achieves self-respect by keeping her promise to her grandmother at the trial. Women’s relationships become transcendental—Chamseddine proclaims “the friendship of women [is] like a star in the sky” (125-26) that has guided Simon to him, and Nawal tells Sawda, “Never let hatred be your guide ... reach for the stars, always” (87). Nawal attempts to achieve justice through violence, but recognizes that ultimately justice comes from within: from keeping promises, from education, and from perpetual love. She finds consolation in memorializing those she has lost, and her children memorialize Nawal by uncovering the suffering and the endurance of her past. In its conclusion, the play dramatizes the preservation of love in the face of war.

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