Leila Chatti writes intensely physical poems about faith, illness, and sex

The poetic vision of *Deluge* reconciles Muslim and Christian themes.

by Jill Peláez Baumgaertner in the May 19, 2021 issue

In Review

Deluge

by Leila Chatti
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Leila Chatti, a Tunisian-American poet whose father was Muslim and mother Catholic, has written an astounding book of poems. Bold and provocative, *Deluge* presents intensely physical poems about faith, illness, and sex.

The title refers to the relentless deluge of blood Chatti experienced over two years from uterine tumors. This bleeding connects her intimately with the woman who touched Christ's robe and was healed of her hemorrhage. But that comparison appears only once in the book. Instead, Mary, the only woman mentioned in the Qur'an, is the brooding presence behind all of the poems. She is the touchstone and God the ever present listener.

"Oh, I wish I had died before this and was in oblivion, forgotten." These words attributed to Mary in the Qur'an form the epigraph for the first poem, which roots Chatti's experience of pain and suffering in "this fiercer Mary who'd disappear / if it saved her, who'd howl *to Hell / with salvation* if it meant this pain . . . ." The poet is comforted by Mary's humanity:

> (I like remembering she had a cervix, her body ordinary
> and so like mine) . . .
> (oh Mary, like a God, I too take pleasure
> in knowing you were not all
> holy, that ache could undo you
> like a knot)

Four different poems are titled "Annunciation," and several other poems allude to the event—the most startling when Chatti (perhaps Mary?) is on her knees scrubbing the bathroom floor and hears a voice say, "*God has plans for you. . . . I didn't say they were good*." This connection between the mother of God and the speaker consistently upends and reinterprets the event of the incarnation, beginning with the Annunciation. Mary is pregnant with the Savior of the world; Chatti grows only tumors ("shadows" on the ultrasound in the first Annunciation poem), and the difference has shocking implications.

At one point Chatti writes, "I fit inside my mother / when she fit inside her mother, and so on and so / forth, and further, a nest of matrons . . . / in which to be female is to be something like infinity." But what does it mean when what is fit inside her is not a child but possibly a cancer? The stretch of infinitude is suddenly stunted. The

future becomes bereft of possibilities. Chatti is convinced that God is present, as he was when Gabriel visited Mary, but Chatti lies in bed next to a man who “slumbers messageless, / unwinged.” She is alone, and if God has something to say to her, he must tell it to her himself, she insists. He is mainly silent.

In “Landscape with Bleeding Woman,” Chatti gazes at a painting of the healing miracle from the Gospels. She concludes:

> I won’t be the last
>
> to look into a painting
> like a mirror, to ignore
> the glutted world in order
> to better scrutinize the self. Is that me
>
> crouched at the feet of a god?
>
> Of course it’s not.
> But say it was—untouched, he turns
>
> away from me.

In another poem, “Exegesis,” Chatti begins, “I bled. God didn’t / want to hear about it.” She connects this experience with Eve, “a woman suffering / because a woman wanted.” God calls Eve “cursed.” And then God calls the second Eve, Mary, blessed—a woman choosing to suffer, conceiving a god. Chatti sounds as if she is seeking resolution here, concluding, “If he calls a curse a blessing / then so it is.” But this is no resolution. There is nothing neat and tidy at this point in these poems about the balance of doubt and faith, about the conviction that God stands at a distance, uninvolved and unconcerned.

And what about Chatti’s feeling toward Mary?

> In the beginning, as a child,
> I didn’t know she herself was a child, a sister

I would eternally be placed beside—favored girl, exemplar
of the lesser sex—and found lacking. And now a woman, all
my life

eclipsed, I cannot bring myself to resent her, ingénue who
yielded
to God’s impossible request—how could she have uttered
anything but yes?

Toward the end of this collection Chatti asks herself why she has become so obsessed with the Mother of Sorrows and concludes that she looks to her

for reassurance
that one can truly suffer, can bleed
and bleed as if gutted
by the blade of God’s command,
and still be loved by God
and, more importantly, love Him back.

A satisfying and hopeful ending, even if somewhat ambiguous, awaits the patient reader. Eight months after Chatti has surgery and her tumors are pronounced benign, she and her partner visit the holy cave, the shrine of Mary Magdalene in Sainte-Baume, where they look to the future and Chatti becomes “willing / to believe in any god offered, to think this hollow holy, / if it means possible the impossible children.” She tells her partner to pray and they sit in front of a cross, not knowing how to pray, bowing their heads, “Muslim and atheist fumbling in the dark,” praying to “*God of Mary Mary of God if when / make it so.*”

The final poem is titled “Deluge,” but here is no bleeding—just the abundance, the flood of words from the Bible, the Qur’an, and 42 poets as varied as Levertov, Donne, Kenyon, Plath, Oliver, Rumi, and so many others whose lines Chatti borrows—words of belief and questioning and resolve.

Brilliant is a word overused in reviews of contemporary fiction and poetry, but in this case it is the only word which will suffice. Chatti has given us poetry which reflects and contains her Muslim heritage and her Catholic training. She has found a way (for which there are few prior templates in poetry) to combine and reconcile two of the three Abrahamic traditions into a compelling search for connections with a God she cannot always see but knows is present.