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“How can we compare sufferings? Each person’s suffering is the most important.” This epigraph opening Nancy Huston’s novel, a quotation from Goran Tunstrom, encapsulates the essential theme of *The Mark of the Angel*. Each of the protagonists’ sufferings is overwhelming and absolute, therefore no gradation is possible between their respective torments. Huston analyses the nature of suffering, first as a private hell and cause for alienation, then as an energy bringing people closer together, finally as a constructive force resulting in unity and solidarity.

The novel is set in Paris between 1957 and 1963, at the time of the Algerian War of Independence. The three protagonists represent three different countries: Raphael is French, Saffie is German, and Andras is a Hungarian Jew. Their respective nationalities are significant in the novel, as the impact of the Second World War on the characters becomes an object of the author’s scrutiny.

When Raphael, a professional flutist on the verge of becoming famous, encounters Saffie, a strangely distant young German woman, he finds her withdrawal irresistible and decides to marry her presently. He hopes to heal his wife’s hidden psychic wounds by the power of his love. The immensity of her suffering and his relative happiness, however, make it impossible for the young woman to develop an emotional relationship with her husband. While he never realises the extent of her suffering, she cannot comprehend how his art can flourish, notwithstanding the atrocities of the war(s). Engulfed in her memories, Saffie is not able to see that music is the artist’s way of fighting for a better world; she cannot appreciate the soothing qualities of art.

Only when Saffie meets Andras, a Hungarian Jew who emigrated to Paris fleeing the barbarity of the Second World War, does she learn to relate. This love at first sight has to fight with the damaging images haunting the lovers’ memories. Will they manage to reconnect over the terrible loneliness of suffering? How will they confront love’s absolute demand to share the past, this past which apparently is more likely to separate than to unify them? Against the opposed political allegiances of their families, against the burden of the historical turmoil in which they have got tragically entangled, Saffie and Andras will struggle to keep their love alive. Oscillating between hatred and sympathy, they will finally face the greatest challenge of passion conceivable: to love the enemy. This relationship between a Hungarian Jew and a German woman appears particularly interesting in a Central European context where the wounds of World War II have not been healed yet. Communist indoctrination ignored the Russians’ beastly treatment of civilians in Germany; the enemy was always the German while the image of the victim *par excellence* was obviously that of the Eastern-European Jew. However, Huston rejects this oversimplified binary opposition. The image of the victim is constantly displaced in her novel, while she argues that individual sufferings cannot be compared despite the facts and statistics provided by the evidence of History. Although personal history cannot evade the History of our times, individual suffering tells a different story from the official records of politics and wars.

The narrator's deeply ironic voice analyses the relation between the private and the historical. The three protagonists' different reactions to the Algerian war for independence show people's various concerns for history. France's ambiguous role in the history of our century is constantly highlighted in the novel, and Raphael's artistic involvement seems rather tame in contrast with the surrounding tortures, reprisals and slaughters, which the narrator ironically reports "as the old, old story we persist calling *the news*" (173). Trying desperately to hold reality at bay, Saffie ignores the war until Andras forces her to admit that history has come full-circle. The young man's suffering resulting from the violence of the past makes him join the Algerians' armed struggle as a form of protest against all the crimes perpetrated by History.

In *The Mark of the Angel* Huston also analyses the relation between history and memory. The ambiguity of her conclusions shows the moral complexity of the problem. On the one hand, the metafictional narrator's irony seems to attack our willingness to ignore present history. On the other hand, the novel's protagonists long for the "mark of the angel" - a new-born child's complete ignorance. Andras seems to say that once we lose a child's innocence, however, we cannot remain impassive towards the brutality of History destroying people's intimate happiness. And yet, without the ability to forget we would be unable to survive. Huston suggests that consciousness must be selective and the multifaceted Truth of the past will always evade us. "Which truths are we required to pay attention to, and which can we ignore?" (116) asks Andras, in vain, and the readers have to find their own answer to the question both in the novel and in real life.

The suggested complexity of the problems explored by Nancy Huston in *The Mark of the Angel* renders the reading of her novel a mesmerising and thought-provoking experience. Dealing with complicated moral problems, extremely perplexing to every contemporary reader, Huston also touches upon the issue of the moral responsibility of art. The best is the art which allows us to forget momentarily about our individual suffering, but which at the same time places it in a more universal context and provides us with helpful hints guiding us through the labyrinthine web of moral issues. Such is Nancy Huston's fiction in general, and *The Mark of the Angel* in particular.