

BEIRUT...THEATRE OF THE ABSURD¹...THEATRE OF
DREAMS²...

The Lebanese Civil War in the Writings of Contemporary Arab Women

This is a brief presentation of the works of seven women who have written of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-6). Although the writers were chosen more or less at random, they do represent most colours of the Lebanese spectrum: *Sunni*, *Shii* emigrated from the south to settle in Beirut, *Greek Orthodox*, *Maronite* advocating the return to a Phoenician Lebanon, *Palestinian*, and, peripheral to the body of the study but interesting for the purposes of comparison and completeness, *Syrian*.

It is clear that the war, despite its destructiveness and ultimate relentless apathy, has been a source of inspiration for artists—painters, sculptors, writers. This has manifested itself in the large numbers of exhibitions, many more than prior to 1975, and the marked increase in fiction published. It is also clear that the effects of the war in this field will continue to be felt for some time as many artists claim that they can only create when they have had the time to gain some distance from the minutiae of the tragedy—and the tragedy continues.

The Writers and Their Works

The best known is Ghāda as-Sammān, the Syrian-born fiction writer who, although Sunni, is not a practicing Muslim. In *Beirut Nightmares* (1976) *Kawābīs Bayrūt* she catalogues the events of a few days spent in the shadow of the infamous "hotels battle". During the period of the fiercest fighting (November 1975) she was imprisoned in her home next to the Holiday Inn by the constant shelling. In the same building with her were her uncle, cousin and their servant. The uncle dies of a heart attack, the servant is shot down by a sniper, and so Ghāda³ is left alone with her cousin whose only concern is the welfare of his possessions. In a series of images and flashbacks Sammān vividly portrays not only the anguish of the war but also its bitter routine, the insidious growth of hate and the rise of new values.

The second is the poetess Hudā Naʿmānī, also Syrian-born, also Sunni, but in this case a very devout Muslim with mystical inclinations.

¹ Title is a quote from Sammān's *Beirut Nightmares*, Beirut, 1979, p. 61.

² Emily Nasrallah, *These Memories*, Beirut, 1978, p. 97.

³ When referring to the protagonist of the novel the name Ghāda is used, when referring to the writer Sammān is used.

Hudā Na‘mānī’s war poem is entitled, “I Remember I was a Point I was a Circle”. It is a poem that illustrates very vividly what it was like to have been at the heart of the action, and yet to be on the periphery, to be passionately involved and yet to be frustratingly powerless, to participate and yet to be entirely isolated. Na‘mānī had remained in her building in East Beirut (the Christian-dominated sector) throughout the war. She writes of her experiences under constant bombardment, of her contacts with the fighters who had established their headquarters on the ground floor of her building. Although she had led, and now again does lead, the life of a recluse, during the fighting she had felt an urgent need to be with the fighters.

Then there is the Shii Ḥanān ash-Shaikh, all of whose works reflect the mentality of the Southern Shiis who have come to the capital in search of freedom, success or even only a home. Shaikh’s controversial novel, *Zahra’s Tale* (1980), tells the story of an unattractive girl who finds in the war emotional salvation.

It is interesting to note in Shaikh’s case how the war has developed her art. Whereas in 1971 she had written a very self-conscious *I am Free⁴ Anā Ḥurra* novel entitled *The Devil’s Mare*, out to prove how liberated the heroine is because of the success of her sexual aggressiveness, she now writes of a traumatised, pathetic but credible girl. After visiting an emigré uncle in Africa, Zahra returns to Beirut to find the capital embroiled in civil strife. Except for her compulsive attachment to her mother, Zahra has never been able to relate to others, and with the war she turns in on herself to live in a world of concrete comic-strip balloons, where the line between reality and illusion often blurs into nothing. This is not the unlikely metamorphosis of a shy teenager into a glamorous *femme fatale*, this is a rending tale of what the war does to a lonely, lost girl.

On the Christian side is the Greek Orthodox Emily Naṣrallah from Kfeir, near Hasbaya in southern Lebanon. Naṣrallah is best known for her first novel, *September Birds*, *Tayūr Aylūl* a delicate, almost wistful study of a village gradually being emptied of its inhabitants as they leave for the glitter of the city and the West. Her war novel, *These Memories* (1980) *Tilk al-Dhikrayāt*, is dedicated to her husband, Philip, after he had been kidnapped during the war. The entire novel deals with the period between March 15 and June 8, 1976 when the area in which she lived was under bombardment. For Naṣrallah this was a time when all that the individual

⁴ This is the first novel of the Egyptian Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Qaddūs published in 1954. It delineates the plight of an Egyptian girl trying to establish her independence in the face of terrible odds.

had left were his dreams, the only things that the bombs could not touch. Naṣrallah claims that she could not write during the war itself because she needed time for "contemplation". The novel deals, as do her earlier works, with the misunderstandings between two cultures—of those who have emigrated and of those who have remained, in this case, throughout the ordeals of the war. The novel is divided between two characters: Mahā, who had experienced the horrors, and Ḥanān who had been away throughout. The atmosphere is calm and resigned—God has abandoned Lebanon, and the war is devouring its victims.

Another Christian, this time a Maronite, is May Murr, the ardent advocate of Lebanonism. Her main output during the war has been in the newspaper of the Saʿīd ʿAql School called *Lebanon*. With the renowned Lebanese poet, Saʿīd ʿAql, she has channelled all her energies to developing a pure Lebanese entity that divorces itself from anything Arab. Foremost among her endeavours is the creation of a Lebanese language—the Lebanese colloquial written in a modified Latin script. Hers is a furious cry of anger and protest at those who have made of Lebanon their home and who have abused this hospitality. Her solution to the crisis is a heightened awareness on the part of Lebanese of their national Phoenician identity.

Then there is the Palestinian housewife Līna Ṭabbāra who wrote of the civil war in almost clinical detail. *Survival in Beirut* (1978) sets out in journalistic fashion the progressive involvement in the war of a woman who feels emotionally compelled to participate while throughout retaining an intellectual distance that allows her to write almost impassively of the horrors. The only hint that this distance is illusory is in her constant allusions to her growing alcoholism.

Finally, to complement the works of these writers, all of whom live in Lebanon, indeed in Beirut itself, there is Qamar Kīlānī's *Cherry Orchard* (1978) *Bustān al-Karz*. Kīlānī is a teacher in Damascus and in 1978 she wrote this work which, as the title suggests, has a Chekovian theme—the break with the past. In a work full of blood and thunder this Syrian writer presents a Lebanon abounding in massacres, kidnappings and militia manoeuvres. A Lebanon in which all is possible: where professors take pot shots at passers by;⁵ where fathers shoot their sons after killing their lovers; where "your maternal uncles are Christians, your paternal uncles are Muslims; where you may belong socially to the rich class but your love and hopes are for the poor";⁶ where a grandmother will blame her daughter for causing the war because she, a Christian, had married a

⁵ Qamar Kīlānī, *Cherry Orchard*, Damascus, 1977, p. 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Muslim; where the heroine is killed in heroic circumstances and, as she is being buried, the heavens crack with a "mad" storm and a tree is struck down.⁷ Rather than a credible story, this seems to be an attempt to weave a multitude of events into the fabric of a single family, so that this should be regarded rather as an allegory: the family is a microcosm of Lebanon. As with Taufiq 'Awwād's *Death in Beirut*, battle is seen at third hand—it is a pretext for an action—packed plot, in which the real hero is Lebanon—the phoenix. This becomes particularly clear when Kīlānī writes of the heroine rescuing a baby after an explosion in which the mother is killed.⁸ The heroine calls the baby Lebanon because, regardless of the horror of the war, Lebanon is a self-regenerating entity that cannot be destroyed: "It is Lebanon, her Lebanon, Lebanon of love and joy, just as it is Lebanon of tears".⁹

With these seven writers we have representatives from the main factions that played a significant role in the war: Lebanese Muslims (Sunnis and Shiis), Christians, Palestinians and Syrians.

Challenge and Response

The novels of Sammān and Shaikh, *Beirut Nightmares* and *Zahra's Tale* will now be examined in some detail.

What distinguishes Sammān's writing is her obsession with identity and loss of self. Indeed, even before the war, she had written of identity fragmentation. In the first of her *Incomplete Works*,¹⁰ "Time of the Last Love", this fragmentation is limited to complete identification with another: the lover, whose voice comes out of her throat, whose cigarette smoke comes out of her lungs.¹¹ Already there is the suggestion that the individual is no more than the sum of a number of points that only become a line, a thread of continuity, in retrospect...in a flashback? She is in constant anguish about her direction, for wherever she goes she is assailed by roads, cars and worlds whirling around her madly. Indeed it is as though she were on an LSD trip and her mind had entirely

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

¹⁰ In 1979 Sammān began publishing the first of what she calls *Incomplete Works A'māl ghayr kāmīla*—a collection of writings as yet unpublished and published in magazines and newspapers, and written between the early 60s and 70s. She claims to have been encouraged to do so by friends afraid that otherwise these works would either be lost (as in the case of all the manuscripts that were burnt when her library was destroyed) or fall into oblivion (*Time of the Last Love, Zaman al-Hubb al-Akhir* Beirut, 1979, introduction). So far eleven volumes have been published.

¹¹ Cf. "The Tornado" (*op. cit.*) where Noah and the Woman converse, but not as one might expect: the Woman expresses what Noah merely conceives. Although he wants to kill her, this would involve killing his mode of expression.

dissociated itself from the burden of her body. As she runs through life her disintegrating body is abandoned along the wayside only to take root in the asphalt and to sprout up as plants in the spring.¹²

This early work is often obscure, sometimes brilliant but unfailingly violent and protesting. With the war has come concentration and perhaps direction. Protest, which, before the war, had been the main reason for writing, has changed into a challenge. The social protest that she had indulged in until well into the 70s has become an anachronism. The time for "flower-power" whining has passed, now is the time to shout and scream, to defy Death by living fully. And it is this call for life that distinguishes the works of all these writers. No longer is tomorrow dreaded as a dull repetition of today, no longer are we living in an Osborne-type hell. This hell is different and, for its difference, it is better. For now tomorrow is ever different, bringing the hope for some of peace and order, for others of danger and excitement. This can be seen very clearly in Ḥanān ash-Shaikh's *Zahra's Tale*. The heroine revels in a brinkmanship that makes her whole being throb with self-awareness as fear pumps adrenalin through her benumbed brain. Indeed, the description of her actual death is less graphically presented than is the previous presentation of her apparent death. When she is actually dying the description dissolves in an abstraction of moods, longings and cryptic descriptions.¹³

The war has brought challenge: for those like Zahra the challenge is emotional, almost existential—she must live even if on the borders of reality; for Ghāda the challenge is intellectual: "Why should I not learn to kill with weapons as well as with the pen? What really matters is to remain alive, for wrongs can only be righted by the living...this is not a time for self-examination, or for philosophical discussions".¹⁶ She does not, cannot, examine herself, for she is the sum of her dissolving parts—arms, legs, fingers, eyes scattered around her in the hecatomb that her life has become; fragmentation has become externalised, this is not identification, but alienation from self: "Who is this god who allows his name to be nailed into skulls and dug into the bodies of his worshippers? Go to your churches and mosques and to the coast and travel into the depths of the earth, and ask him if all this pleases him. I saw ears piling up in the streets outside the front doors, blocking them as though they were piles of snow in winter. I saw gouged-out eyes floating in the cups of coffee that I was preparing. I saw torn strips of corpses pouring down into the streets and forming piles higher even than the mounds of garbage. I

¹² See "The Cock" (*ibid.*)

¹³ See below, pp. 20-23.

saw amputated fingers floating above empty trees and making purposefully toward their executioners. And I saw men whose blood had been drained out of their veins into those of other blue corpses who were rushing around. I saw faces totally devoid of features because of the great pain they had endured, and severed heads floating on a sea of blood and darkness looking for their tongues that had been torn out with pliers. I saw people coming out of torture furnaces and running away with their bodies on fire, and the stink of their burning flesh filled the air. I saw the city turn into a witch's cauldron that was bubbling and boiling furiously. And the bullets pierced many throats that tried to say something that lay outside the logic of bullets. I saw the poor dying. The lonely, innocent poor were the ones to die. The butchers had fled from the city of nightmares and madness to the cabarets of Paris, London and Geneva. And I saw my lover emerge out of the cauldron and make toward me...they are bringing me his body riddled with bullets...and I hold him close to me and I scream at him: 'I still love you' ".¹⁴

And another example is the following: "I became one huge, attentive ear on the alert. I smelt something peculiar, the smell of fear. I didn't know if the smell came from me, or from that unknown being that was crouching in the dark. Maybe he was as afraid as I?...Why should I not confess that I am shattered to realise that the civil war is laying bare before our eyes the falseness of stability, into whose trap I had almost fallen...The civil war has shown me that I have built my house on an earthquake".¹⁵

It is essential to pull all this together to function, to live fully in the face of this omnipresent death, of this advancing rock against which our fragile lives shatter. In Zahra's case peace has ceased to be on the horizon of thought and aspiration, and so the challenge is to "grab the bull by the horns", not only to accept war as a *modus vivendi* but to plunge in, crying out for more.¹⁶

The Bourgeois at War

The war has emphasised the vacuity and horror of peacetime society and its bourgeois values which have persisted. This emptiness Sammān illustrates in the following telephone call:

"Hallo, Susu."

"Hi, Kuku."

"What's up?"

¹⁴ Sammān, *Beirut Nightmares*, p. 54.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-90.

¹⁶ See below, pp. 13-14.

"Nothing much. Just disasters and other such vile stuff... Imagine, only yesterday the Egyptian cook left me, so did the 'femme de ménage' and the French nanny is going to abandon the children to go back to her country!"

"How awful! What are you going to do, Susu?"

"We're going to go with her!"

"You're absolutely right. We won't be able to go on living in this country. Would you believe that when we went to the Wait Wow last night, and I was wearing my 'robe longue' and my new mink, the restaurateur demanded that we leave before midnight. He was afraid! Just imagine, Kuku, we were home by 12:30—there was nowhere else to go!"

"It's a dog's life, really. We must leave!!!"

"Talking of dogs, we're going to take the cat, Marie Antoinette, with us. The other cat, 'Antar, ran away. As I said, we are all going to go with the French nanny to Paris. We've already changed the money. What's to keep us in this country with all these wild people?"

"They say there's a famine in the city."

"Good heavens, what a lie! There's not once been a shortage of 'saumon fumé'—where is this famine? Even the dog eats a kilo of meat a day."

"My husband says that it's an international Zionist communist conspiracy, and that the world would be a much better place without all that".

"Of course! Your husband really understands all those things. Give him my regards".¹⁷

This is reminiscent of Qamar Kīlānī's description in *Cherry Orchard* of Nādiya, the heroine's sister, who steps out of the bathroom in an A.U.B. dormitory whistling a foreign tune. All that really concerns her about the civil war are the electricity cuts which meant that she could not use her hair-dryer.¹⁸

In contrast with the preceding offensively petit-bourgeois telephone exchange, Ghāda records a conversation that she had overheard on a partyline:

"Are you coming tonight? The kids are missing you."

"I can't make it. The hospital's crawling with the wounded, and with the corpses of those who died on arrival."

"But we haven't seen you for three weeks, and you had promised to come tonight whatever happened."

¹⁷ Sammān, *Beirut Nightmares*, p. 54.

¹⁸ Kīlānī, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

"I'm sorry Munā, but I really can't..."

"You sound strange, did anything happen tonight?"

"No, nothing."

"I want to know. I'm sure something's happened. Tell me."

"They brought in a fireman, a corporal. They said that he had been hosing a fire that had started in some warehouses. He was already half-dead when someone shot him."

"Well, that's not new. They're constantly shooting at the ambulance drivers and firemen. You've had to deal with dozens of them daily."

"Well, in this case the fireman had lost his right arm and both legs. Someone had not been satisfied with merely preventing him from work, that someone had also taken pleasure in torturing him before killing him. There was someone who had used an axe to crush the limbs of this body. Are you listening, Munā? I'm scared. Do you understand? For the first time I'm afraid. What's going on in this city is madness. These killings smack of sadism, and it is this that scares me. I've just got to get away..."

"This is the first time that I've heard you talk like this. You were the one who used to criticise our friends for going away and leaving the country to bleed to death instead of helping to stem the flow."

"My hand has begun to shake when I operate. Yesterday the nurse noticed this while I was sewing up the wound of a 14-year-old boy. Can you believe that they kidnapped him and then tortured him? And his torturers, I was told, were not much older than he. The sewing job that I did on this boy was worse than anything that a first-year medical student would do."

"Come on over, you're exhausted."

"I'll tell you frankly—I don't dare venture beyond the hospital gate. I've come to the point where I'm scared to walk in the streets. This afternoon they hung a notice on the hospital gate which read: Caution. A sniper is here to welcome you."

"What are you going to do?"

"I shall go up on to the roof and will start taking pot shots at people. I'm as afraid as though I were pregnant. The only thing that can save me is that I should turn into a wolf."

And he started to laugh as though he had just cracked a joke. But I heard Munā scream: "I beg you, come here before you go crazy!"

It was clear that she knew him well. She knew that he meant what he said, and that immediately upon hanging up on her he would be standing on the roof of the hospital and maybe would blow his brains out when the first passer-by tried to come for him.¹⁹

¹⁹ Sammān, *Beirut Nightmares*, p. 67.

Responsibility

For Zahra the war is a state, not something to be questioned but something to be rejected or assumed; for Ghāda it is a constant reassessment and re-affirmation of communal guilt. It is the revolution that points the finger at all and condemns all, particularly those who do not participate. The greatest sin of all is "neutrality", for in war neutrality means lack of understanding:

"The new dead man, whose skeleton still retained its flesh which had started turning grey blue, said: 'I was also a philanthropist. On the day that Beirut went crazy and started to kill people, because of their ID cards at the barricades, when people were killed because they were sons of Muslims or Christians, I came up with the idea of flower barricades. Whenever a guard stopped you at a barricade he would be carrying flowers, and instead of asking your religion and killing you if he felt like it, he would give you a flower for being alive and for being a compatriot. And they would plant flowers into the mouths of their guns hoping that they would turn into trees of goodness, and not into trees of fire. But I was killed by a tree of fire, even though I was innocent'.

He was expecting to find sympathy among his dead companions, but he was still a stranger and had not learnt their laws. He was amazed that they turned away from him, and so he repeated his question: 'By God, what did I do wrong? What was my crime?'

And the wise one among them answered: 'Your crime was blindness. Did you really believe that you could cure the wound by sticking a rose in it?'²⁰

The *Nightmares* end with an allegory satirising the attitude of the Arab world to Lebanon (those Arabs that are of all others the guiltiest):

"The same rich man is gambling in a casino. He has lost a lot tonight. More than he had expected. Next to him is an almost life-size map of the Arab world with trees, seas, lakes and hundreds of thousands of people.

He slips in his knife and cuts out a chunk of Arab land, and he puts it on the gambling table. He plays. He loses. He slips in his knife and cuts out another chunk of land. In exchange he gets a pile of chips. He plays. He loses.

When he stretches to cut out Lebanon his fingers are burnt by the burning volcano and the fire that is flaring up out of it. A piece of burning material spits on to the gambling table so that he can play with it; but they refuse to give him a single chip in exchange for the pile of ash that is covering the whole of the baize.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

A servant comes with his brush. He sweeps away the ash and they all rush to the door to receive another rich, influential Arab with exactly the same face and body, and the story repeats itself".²¹

The War-Machine

An interesting point of comparison is the presentation of the sniper. For both Ghāda and Zahra the sniper has become the Other, the war-machine that tramples blindly between opposing lines deriving energy and life from a total commitment to destruction. In *Zahra's Tale* the sniper represents release from the normal condition, he is that which allows the ugly Zahra to partake of excitement and therefore life. One day Zahra decides to go to the building where the sniper is said to be hiding. Regardless of the guards' warnings at the barricades she continues into the danger zone. Dazed by the tension she makes her way up to the roof and finally she meets him. After a short exchange he rapes her, and she withdraws, still in a state of shock. Daily she returns for a repeat of the same scenario. And with time the reader begins to suspect the unchanging routine—did this really happen, or is it merely an erotic fantasy? But the reality of the adventure is irrelevant as far as Zahra is concerned, what matters is that "he" makes her live more fully than she had ever dreamed of living. He is a mysterious, almost legendary figure that the war has allowed her to "meet"—if one is to accept that their relationship is real and not just a figment of Zahra's fevered imagination. For Ghāda, on the other hand, the sniper is the symbol of her captivity. Whenever she ventures forth out of her house he is there teasing her with the spectre of her freedom, only to draw a fence of bullets around her, keeping her "prisoner of the open skies".²² He is also a fun-seeking child, surprised by the war:

"They used to come out to him daily—family after family. Entire families with the old and the young and he would shoot them down. And when they were hit by the bullets they would wave to him their thanks and walk on a few steps toward the sea where they would all fall down. Seconds later a wave would come and sweep them off the shore, clearing the spot for another family, and so on, forever. He must feel that as long as they keep coming in this way the Beirutis are committing conscious, collective suicide".²³

At this point Līna Ṭabbāra's *Survival in Beirut* will be drawn upon as a point of comparison with the previous two works. This is a factual, blow-

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 354-355.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 104.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

by-blow account of the events from the outset of the war on March 13, 1975 until its "end" in October 1976. Unlike the other two works the account is not obsessively introverted, but portrays rather an Odyssey through a frantic kaleidoscope of events. For this Palestinian woman the sniper is just another "armed element" to whom no more thought is given than to any other aspect of the war. He is neither playful nor mysterious, he is an inevitable evil in an evil situation.

Madness or Ecstasy

Perhaps a significant difference between the fictionalized stories and the documentary of Ṭabbāra is that in the former two cases the adrenalin which keeps their systems charged is madness, and in the latter case it is alcohol. In the following passage from *Beirut Nightmares* Sammān graphically portrays the delirium: "What madness has swept over this city? It has become difficult to have a sound, rational conversation with anyone. It is as though the civil war throughout these past few months has affected everyone to a certain extent. As though all had drunk at the well of madness. Some of us are leaving, some of us are laughing and some of us are killing ourselves, some of us want to dance the dabke and some of us are still upset by the effect that the events are having on the tourist industry".²⁴ And then we read of Zahra's madness: "I am standing on the razor's edge between life and death, and I feel a mysterious peace envelop my soul, that peace that madmen feel, the peace that lies beyond peace".²⁵ This is Zahra's peace just as it is her madness. It is a culmination of almost ecstatic harmony with a situation that had been growing and developing. This madness seems for both Ghāda and Zahra to be the final letting go, the ultimate disintegration.

But Ṭabbāra never allows control to be lost, she never slips into the abstraction that can be felt throughout the other two works. With Ṭabbāra it is as though she were desperately holding on to grim reality with her endless glasses of gin, fiercely enumerating the massacres, the bombardments and the utter misery—as though therein lay sanity. And yet even in this clinical account there is a moment when the reader can detect the "madness" taking control:

"One of the victims was crushed by a falling balcony. I feel strangely lightheaded, wavering between hatred of the Fates that have singled Marwān and his family out for attack, and satisfaction at seeing the triumphant placidity of the Lebanese under the Syrian peace shattered. I

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

²⁵ Ḥanān ash-Shaikh, *Zahra's Tale*, Beirut, 1980, p. 115.

cling to this unhealthy tipsiness—anything is better than the lethargy that is killing me more surely than the cold”.²⁶

All these women plunge the reader into their individual civil wars, but the exhilaration and excitement Zahra derives from the assumption of the madness of the whirling vortex is deplored by Ghāda: “How vile are those who make of the war their only path to life, the only path to happiness, who build tents of freedom and houses of clear glass, without fearing the stones of those who have a monopoly on the sun and on life”.²⁷

But there is worse than this, there are those who profiteer throughout the war: “The rich are trying to buy their own ransom from the people’s anger with money. Some of them were able to escape with their fortunes to Europe where a special kind of hell awaits them. The others have decided to remain hoping to become richer because of the civil war and its continued outbursts, deluding themselves that anything can be bought for money, even redemption”.²⁸

Dissolution of the Metaphor

In both *Beirut Nightmares* and *Zahra’s Tale* there is a growing abstraction. Zahra’s involves a mistiness that increasingly surrounds her and her sniper, a mistiness that obliterates barriers between reality and dream, so that when she is finally shot it is as though she is drowning in a fog that has merely become denser. Ghāda’s abstraction takes the form of flashback tableaux and recurrent scenes conjured up not as memories nor as scenes but as visual symbols of a mood or an emotion. The symbolism is often multi-layered, but the main impact is the image itself. What is important is to allow the words to work emotionally, not intellectually. One could say that Ghāda’s abstraction takes on a concrete form—each emotion is represented by a scene, making rational and concrete the irrational and the immaterial. These scenes give the semblance of a story, and yet, just as loose ends are picked up they are again abandoned. The impression left is a confusion unfounded in reality, for there is no reality—just random scenes, weird stories within stories, obsessive thoughts about her brother and lover, and the whole punctuated by pellets of irony. All that is real is hunger:

“From my spot in the darkness I could hear their (pets’) cries. I could see a fish as big as a bull that had suddenly stopped eating another fish with brightly coloured fins like a butterfly. I could see the cats waiting for

²⁶ Lina Mīkdadi Tabbara, *Survival in Beirut*, (Eng. Tr.) London, 1978, p. 178.

²⁷ Sammān, *Beirut Nightmares*, p. 118.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

a wounded cat to die so that they could eat it...the unconscious parrot...the rabbits jumping around madly in the corners of their small cages, perhaps banging their heads against the iron..."²⁹

The whole world has started to spin around her. People have become objects: her cousin Amīn with his passion for material possessions; and objects have become people: her books and her notes for her novel are beings with whom she can converse, indeed the only beings with whom conversation is at all possible. And yet as the ordeal reaches its climax the reader can see that even that which she holds dearest—words—has come to assume a fluidity and uncertainty that threatens all grasp of reality. As she is talking to Amāl, a friend of hers, the telephone line is cut; as Ghāda puts it: it had a heart attack, the words scattered like marbles and she could not remember what she had said.³⁰ Here it appears that the disintegration of the body is taken a step further to the disintegration of words, and it is here that one can pinpoint the ultimate loss of identity. She had seemed to posit a unity in words that she has created, the only unity that can give her the stability and the assurance that she is one; and now even that is gone. Time and space lose all sense as she totters around in the wild confusion of actuality and imagination. This eerie timelessness is well-described in the following passage:

"I looked at my watch again. It really had no hands, nor even figures. It was just a small, white, closed circle with a black dot in the middle. I felt as though I, like the black dot, was a prisoner of a mysterious desolate fate imprisoned by some circle or other..."³¹

Indeed, it is only at the end, when Sammān has presented the 206 nightmares that constitute *Beirut Nightmares*, that the reader is amazed to discover: the crisis has lasted for less than a week. What a hell of waiting it had been:

"How long is the night, when between life and death is the night of waiting. Alas, how slowly does the sand of black darkness drop, when each grain of sand has become a nightmare..."³²

With Sammān and Shaikh the only unifying factor throughout moments of greatest fragmentation is a weak, tenuous line of author/observer that weaves through the work—a line that is sometimes lost, especially with Sammān, when the perception of the self is altered and distorted.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 315.

The madness of the war has receded from *aventure vécue* to *aventure perçue*. Ghāda has finally been rescued from her hell, and as she is driven along the Corniche in an armoured vehicle she asks to be dropped by a hotel. After remonstrating briefly the tank driver acquiesces and leaves her on the hotel steps. As she looks up at the windows faces peer down on her, each one willing her to titillate his jaded senses with some horror story. She cowers away from them, horrified by their hungry looks. She goes to the beach where in a last dramatic act she shoots her final vision of Yūsuf, her dead lover. Having eliminated the obsession she ceases to exist and her pen frenetically conjures up strange, disjointed stories. The whole is finally reduced to an indefinite series of impressions, each fleetingly made concrete by some visual representation seen by the reader, not the protagonist. How far is this ultimate personal effacement from the hyper-self-awareness of Zahra! And yet despite this difference in perspective how similar the impression both give of disintegration of personal identity. In a confusion of past and present Zahra talks the reader through her last seconds of life:

“As long as I have known him I’ve never been out so late. It’s already night. The street is empty except for the boys at the barricade....It’s raining...I’m falling. I grabbed hold of the telegraph pole as though pushed by something. My thigh hurts...it’s hurting more and more. I stretched out my hand to feel it only to find that it was wet...was it the rain? But it’s not raining that hard. Am I having a miscarriage...I can’t walk..but I’ve got to go on. I’ve got to get to the house. The pain is unbearable. I really can’t walk. I fall to the ground, my fear mixing with my pain. I’m afraid, I’m in pain. I stretched out my hand to the painful spot and felt something sticky. In spite of the darkness I realised that it was blood. I had been hit by a stray bullet, although I hadn’t heard a thing. It started to rain lightly. Whenever I touched my face and leg the pain increased. I heard my voice rising up out of its own depths and shouting: ‘Help!!’. I heard footsteps and voices approaching and then receding—‘Beware! Sniper!’ I shouted again, the pain was now in my neck: ‘Help!!’ Fear made me quiver like a decapitated chicken. I am screaming as though my life, past and present, has been gathered up in this one scream: ‘Please, help me!’ I hear distant voices, and drops of water are still falling on my face. I tried to make out the various buildings despite the darkness. I stretch out my hand deliriously and shout—or am I perhaps not shouting? The pain was now in my stomach; this foetus, is it the cause of all this pain? Is the sniper in the red building? As I had myself once said: ‘There’s a sniper in the red building’. Had he misled me on purpose? Was he hesitating to kill me, or did he get me by mistake as I was crossing

from one pavement to the other? I noticed that I was staring into the dark, and I feel the rain pouring down on my face and on to my body. I no longer heard the voices...but I hear whispering from time to time. Or perhaps I don't hear a thing. Screaming hurts, more and more. My subterranean vocal chords are sprouting up at the bottom of my heart. He is killing me. He is missing my head—once—twice—he is missing the foetus the third time. I went on screaming, and went on stretching out my hand to feel the streaming blood. But I didn't move, hearing nothing but the rain pouring down on to the yellow bag which I had thought would protect me forever. I realized that I had begun to await each drop. I hear the word: 'Woman' from far away, as though the sound were coming out of a cave. I hear: 'Keep clear! Sniper!' My glances are lost in the darkness. Fear seizes me and turns to tears—where is my mother's face? Where is Ahmad? Where is my mother? In which warm room? Oh, I wish I could be close to you now! I wish I could be with you at home! Why am I alone now in the middle of the road with my blood streaming all around me and mixing with the downpour. I have begun to get used to the excruciating pain, just as I got used to the dark. I closed my eyes for a second and I saw stars of pain, and when I opened them I saw rainbows in the white heavens. He is killing me. He killed me with the bullets which were by his side when we made love. He killed me and the white sheet on which I had lain such a short while ago is still where it was. Did he kill me because I was pregnant, or because I had asked him if he was a sniper? It is as though someone is dragging me along the ground. Shall I shout out 'Help!?' I tried but I didn't hear my voice. I closed my eyes again. Or had I not opened them? Again I saw the rainbows in the white heavens. One rainbow after the other, one heaven after the other. Brilliant rainbows and shining white heavens. Is it still raining? I no longer felt it. I hear a voice saying: 'Come on, boys'. Are they coming to rescue me from Death's clutches? Where's my mother? Is she in a warm room? I wish I were with her at home. Why am I alone? The darkness has changed into fear, my body has turned into fear broken up into the various muscles. He's killed me: that's why he made me wait until night. Maybe he couldn't pull the trigger in daylight. They're dragging me along, I can feel someone dragging me along. Again I felt the raindrops, I am on the same spot, and it is as though I hear them saying: 'That sniper is still there', as though they are leaving me. I closed my eyes again, or had I perhaps not opened them. Again I saw the rainbows in the white heavens that were closing in on me at a terrifying speed...'³³

³³ Shaikh, *op. cit.*, pp. 225-227.

How different is this from Kīlānī's description of her heroine's death. In this case it is a highly romanticised, impressionistic description of the heroine collapsing surrounded by cherries³⁴—cherries whose "black blood" had been referred to earlier so poignantly.³⁵ Indeed, it is in descriptions such as these that the reader will find epitomised the mood of the work—stark, subjective and harrowing, or a turbulent pastiche of pastels.

It is interesting that among the seven writers mentioned, the one who has tried to coin a philosophy for the war, to see a moral and a purpose is the mystic, Hudā Naʿmānī. Where Sammān and Shaikh have achieved a physical mystery, a transcendence of the material by the material Naʿmānī has reached out to the real. Her war poem, *I Remember I was a Dot, I was a Circle*, was inspired by a dream in which she was surrounded by columns, and then she became the circle that the columns comprised; this illustrating so well the ambivalence of her position as a temporarily participating observer. Although she had this dream at the beginning of the war, it was only well after the war had officially ended that she one day put pen to paper and, "pressing on the tip, allowed the ink to draw ever-widening circles that seemed to pour out of the heart that had been the dot". The poem then started to flood on to the paper in streams of images and impressions that her pen tried vainly and desperately to catch and to hold on to long enough before they disappeared. Images that were like electric impulses and then like bullets, so fast and uncontrollable was their impact. The staccato rhythm—often reminiscent of the sound of a machine gun—explains the urgency, portrays the speed, and hurtles the reader into the nightmare world that had been Hudā's for so many months. When she finished the poem, she had a vision of God gliding over Beirut and whispering the word *salām* (peace).

When I first met her it seemed as though she did not share the pessimism and bitterness evident in the pronouncements of most Lebanese writers. For her the war had brought change: this life of danger, of waiting for and touching death, had, she felt, transformed the materialistic Lebanese. And she cites as a vivid example the response to the poem which she had written in 1965 called the Love Ode. At the time of its first publication it was rejected as obscure, it was "wrongly" assumed to be addressed to a man, and not to God. Indeed, at all the weekly gatherings that she used to hold in her apartment before the war poets and writers alike had received her mystical compositions with hostility. In July 1980, however, Ṣaut Lubnān, the *Christian* radio sta-

³⁴ Kīlānī, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

tion, broadcast this poem with commentary and the public response was enthusiastic. The Lebanese, she claimed, were at last responding to love, to God. And the war had not only awoken this spiritual awareness, it had also revealed that within each person there are clairvoyant powers that lie dormant until roused by some trauma—in which connection she cites numerous examples of dreams that she had had previous to the outbreak of the war which were confirmed by later events. But with this cosmic clarity has come personal confusion. In attaching a moral and a ‘good’ to the evil that the war has represented she has fallen into a self-destructive trap. For, when the war was over, when she felt that the need for her presence among the fighters had gone, she had returned to the island of her apartment, where she waited anxiously for the eventual “happy” outcome of the war. She waited for four years. And on July 16 1980 Riyāḍ Ṭāha, the head of the Lebanese newspaper syndicate, was killed. Naʿmānī then wrote *Butterfly*

Has the war killed true love; justice and the heart
 Fear and the voice of our conscience?
 These voices to which we listen when we are alone
 Why are they stifled when we mix with others?

Like the other writers Naʿmānī finally had to succumb to the despair and inertia that seems to be the inevitable outcome of the experience of the war. It is interesting to compare this attitude with the fictional character created by Emily Naṣrallah in *These Memories*. Mahā and Ḥanān are talking through the night of their past, the distant past of their shared youth, but also the more immediate past of the war, the war that Mahā had experienced and that Ḥanān had missed in her asylum in London. Ḥanān spoke of the horrors that someone had just related to her—a baby shot in its mother’s arms—Mahā could not summon the energy to react. She had become detached, inured to pain—part of her had died.

The Syrian Perspective

And in contrast with the works of these women who consider themselves Lebanese, or at least of Lebanon, is Qamar Kīlānī. But it is obvious that the Syrian observer has not sensed the inertia. Her account is a whole work of fiction created out of such massacres and horrors as the others have alluded to, but the whole has been massed together in such a way that it cannot be accepted except as an allegory. She stands outside the war, and describes what she assumes the war to have been. For her it cannot have had its own routine, for the changes in people are not, cannot for someone like her, be gradual, subtle and therefore the more dramatic. For her, the war naturally brings out the beast or the hero. For

her, Lebanon is a great laboratory where all sorts of chemicals are thrown together and left to bubble and boil without control, where all semblance of sanity has gone. But out of this holocaust will arise the great new Lebanon. Riyāḍ, the heroine's brother, and his wife, (the new generation) adopt the orphan Lūlū (the nickname for Lebanon). In other words they will inherit the good of the civil war—it being inconceivable (at least for those of us who have not participated) that the war could have been waged for nothing. Gullible perhaps or politically oriented?! And yet ironically this attitude is reminiscent of May Murr, the arch-Lebanese Phoenician, who has become aggressive, almost militant in her call for recognition of the fact that this war is a *jihād* for a new Lebanon in which all live together in harmony: "Le Liban vit en effet l'une des plus glorieuses époques de la pensée libanaise et peut-être humaine".³⁶

Such was each person's war: Ghāda as-Sammān and Ḥanān ash-Shaikh write of an intensely subjective war, triggered by outside events but ultimately independent of them; Hudā Na'mānī waged her crusade of love in the face of evil and hate, vacillating between participation and isolation; Līna Ṭabbāra writes of the trauma of growing participation in the actual fighting mechanism; Emily Naṣrallah's war became a desperate detachment; May Murr's war was a marshalling of energies to fight for the great new Lebanon; and then there is Qamar Kilānī's outsider vision of a horrendous but ultimately portentous event.

Whether the work be presented in the form of a novel, a poem or an article it has the violence and immediacy of personal experience. And yet what is different in each case from mere recorded personal experience, however vivid, is the self-conscious stylisation of the writing—highly abstract collages of nightmarish scenes, multi-angled presentations, flashback, extended internal monologues spilling over into quasi-dialogue, bold, and at times, perverse imagery. The writing it would seem is a therapeutic exercise: not a remembrance in the recording, but a forgetting and a purging in the distorting.

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³⁶ *An-Nahar*, July 18, 1980.