

## Women's Writings on the Lebanese Civil War

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The outbreak of the civil war in Lebanon spurred many writers to express their views and render their testimonies by means of weaving their own creative narratives of the 'situation'<sup>1</sup>, thus reflecting their immediate wartime experiences and providing a literary interpretation of war – not in retrospect but while the war was still being waged, battles fought, and while the fabric of Lebanese society was unravelling itself as the process of its disintegration continued. The initiative undertaken by those who wrote resulted in a multitude of writing of various nature and, in some cases, of dubious aesthetic quality: from works whose character was mostly documentary to literary achievements that were more mature with regard to their aesthetic value through works that, in hindsight, have proven to measure up to the criteria of excellence and which deserve their inclusion into the literary canon. Breaking their silence, women writers tried to give a wake-up call to the participants on all conflicting sides, in an attempt to lure them out from their state of apathy and stunned indifference, drawing readers' attention to the reality of war that gradually became a pervasive fact of life. Acknowledging the reality and confronting it, asserting life in the midst of war, assuming responsibility for oneself as well as others, being aware and, by the sheer act of writing, making others aware, became the *sine qua non* for meaningful survival.

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<sup>1</sup> In many scholarly works, the term 'situation' has been widely used when referring to the civil war in Lebanon. Even though it is clearly a euphemistic way of reference, it most likely stems from the specific nature of the conflict, which was not seen in its continuity but rather as a series of occasional ceasefires followed by periods of severe fighting.

Apart from the marked increase in the magnitude of the literary production of the period, a considerable shift in quality<sup>2</sup> should be noted in the development of the novel as a literary genre. During the run-up to and throughout the war, the Lebanese novel developed distinctive characteristics that not only enriched Arabic novelistic tradition but also gave the novel in Lebanon its local flavor. Yumnā al-ʿĪd, a Lebanese literary critic, traces the onset of these developments back to the late 1960s and early 1970s and links them to social phenomena<sup>3</sup>, as writers addressed the contradictions and complexities of Lebanese society, which was becoming more sharply divided due to internal tensions that had been brewing under the surface for decades. These social and political undercurrents started to signal with increasing clarity that the country stood on the verge of civil war. The need to express not only multiple viewpoints but also the nuances of speech of the many different segments of society led to experiments in characters' diction, which became more differentiated to reflect the speech of more than one social class. The language also tried to echo regional particularities with writers such as Emily Naṣrallāh, for instance, drawing upon the lexicon of the Lebanese village. Women's writings on war thus deserve to be rightfully assessed for their undeniable contribution to both phenomena, as women surpassed their male colleagues in the outcomes of their creative activity as well as exceeded them in number. For some of them, it was the first time in their lives that they had taken up a pen to render their individual experience of war and to imaginatively transform it into a creative narrative. For many of them, writing served as a form of much needed catharsis, others perhaps found in the organized structure of the narrative techniques a way of bringing some sense of order into the all-pervasive chaos of their lives. The most accomplished authors of the period succeeded in finding a new voice, forging an original yet authentic form of expression, in their search to reflect the distinct character of the Lebanese Civil War: a war which (as later started to become increasingly obvious) was neither Lebanese, nor civil.

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<sup>2</sup> In her study on the development of the novel in Lebanese literature, Yumnā al-ʿĪd, a Lebanese literary critic, speaks of a qualitative 'leap' in the genre during the civil war period. Radwa ASHOUR – Ferial J. GHAZOU – Hasna REDA-MEKDASHI (eds.): *Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide 1873–1999*. Cairo – New York: The American University in Cairo Press 2008, pp. 13–36. Īmān Ḥumaydān Yūnis, a contemporary Lebanese novelist, links the rise of the modern Lebanese novel directly to the civil war: regarding the former as a product of the latter. *Sectarianism as a Dead End for Lebanon*. Interview with Iman Humaydan Younes. Qantara.de, 29 January 2010. Available at [http://en.qantara.de/wcsite.php?wc\\_c=9141](http://en.qantara.de/wcsite.php?wc_c=9141).

<sup>3</sup> ASHOUR – GHAZOU – REDA-MEKDASHI, *Arab Women Writers*, pp. 13–36.

Their works, as well as their lives, articulate women's response to the conflict, albeit representing different attitudes to what was happening around them as each writer's perception had been shaped by a different set of wartime experiences and life circumstances. However, in their totality their works allow us to see the events of the period somewhat holistically if we adhere to claims that literature as such is to a great extent a reflection of reality. Fictional characters and their fates cannot be completely torn out of the historical and socio-cultural context<sup>4</sup> from which they arose and in which they are firmly rooted, neither can the individual authors' experiences be separated from what they try to convey when bringing these characters to life. In "Notes on English Prose", Raymond Williams offers his theoretical reflections on the sociological aspects of literary creation:

"... the society determines, much more than we realize and at deeper levels than we ordinarily admit, the writing of literature; but also [...] the society is not completely, not fully and immediately present until the literature has been written."<sup>5</sup>

In what they chose to reflect and recite, they do not try to impose narrowly defined, unidimensional meanings of the events – their aim is to evoke a much more complex reaction in the reader. Given the distinct character of the Lebanese war, the most important contribution of women writers of the period lies in their ability to catch the moods of the war – its dynamics. In their writings, they searched for human undercurrent, thus transcending the individual experience to render it universal.

As artists usually derive material from experience, those who write on war more often than not tend to fall into the trap of a personal chronicling of one's experiences. Michiko Kakutani spoke against "the sheer accumulation of closely observed details"<sup>6</sup>, pointing out the repetitive character of such works<sup>7</sup>. Yet, "the need to testify to what one has witnessed and somehow to make sense

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<sup>4</sup> Georg LUKÁCS: *The Theory of the Novel*. Translated by Anna Bostock. Cambridge: MIT Press 1971. As Lukács has shown, every novel is dated because its origin is motivated by a concrete problem which a given community/society faces.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond WILLIAMS: *Notes on English Prose*. In: *Writing in Society*. London: Verso, n. d. Quoted in: Evelyn ACCAD: *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East*. New York – London: New York University Press 1990.

<sup>6</sup> Michiko KAKUTANI: *Novelists and Vietnam: The War Goes On*. *The New York Times*, 15 April, 1984. Quoted in: Miriam COOKE: *War's Other Voices*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> See also LUKÁCS, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 85: "pure reflexion is profoundly inartistic".

of it through words”<sup>8</sup>, which often serves as the prime motivation for the need to write, does not necessarily make for great art<sup>9</sup>. It is precisely the creative writer’s recourse to imagination along with her style that lends a work of literature its aesthetic value and literary merit. As Miriam Cooke noted, “the criterion of excellence is not approximation to ‘reality’, but rather the degree to which style and content promote and enhance one another within the creative process.”<sup>10</sup> She quotes John Irving, who has said of a fiction writer’s memory that it is: “an especially imperfect provider of detail; we can always imagine a better detail than the one we can remember. The correct detail is rarely, exactly, what happened; the most truthful detail is what *could* have happened, or what *should* have happened.”<sup>11</sup>

Lukács concurs with Irving and Cooke on this point; departing from what he calls the ‘writer’s naivety’ [arising from the need to reflect, to convey the reality explicitly, and inartistically, for that matter], he lets the writer’s imagination enter into the equation to arrive at their reconciliation within the discursive space of the novel, where “the hard-won equalisation, the unstable balance of mutually surmounting reflexions – the second naivety, which is the novelist’s objectivity – is only a formal substitute for the first; it makes form-giving possible and it rounds off the form”.<sup>12</sup>

Women writers managed to escape the repetitiveness in their writings by means of experimenting with both style and content, searching for a new language that would communicate a new reality from a female point of view. They were acutely aware of the need to “reinvent the language of culture so as to get out of this crisis.”<sup>13</sup> At the same time, they were using language to *create* a new reality. Their deconstruction of a dominant discourse provided them with a foundation for its gradual reconstruction. Their writings were not only reflective but also became transformative, for the novelist is at once “a witness [of society] and an actor [an agent of change].”<sup>14</sup> They soon came to realize that discourse may function as a conduit for power. It can foster and promote

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<sup>8</sup> KAKUTANI, *Novelists and Vietnam*. Quoted in: COOKE, *War’s Other Voices*, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> As Lukács would have it, “the need for reflexion is the deepest melancholy of every great and genuine novel. Through it, the writer’s naivety suffers extreme violence and is changed into its opposite.”

<sup>10</sup> COOKE, *War’s Other Voices*, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> LUKÁCS, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 85.

<sup>13</sup> Nohad SALAMEH: *Les Enfants d’Avril*, p. 130. Quoted in COOKE, *War’s Other Voices*, p. 43.

<sup>14</sup> ACCAD, *Sexuality and War*, p. 5.

violence, as Slavoj Žižek has shown in his eponymous study on the phenomenon, identifying a ‘symbolic’ violence embodied in the language and its forms. Apart from the obvious examples where the language clearly promotes the relations of social domination<sup>15</sup>, as reflected in our habitual speech patterns, he further recognizes “a more fundamental form of violence that pertains to language as such, to its imposition of a certain universe of meaning.”<sup>16</sup> Hence discourse may serve as the remedy against the very threat it poses. By undermining the dominant discourse, women writers embarked on the process of transforming the society which had given them roles but not a voice. Their consciousness, awakened by the urgency and intensity of wartime conditions alongside the ongoing fragmentation of their country’s identity as an independent patriarchal polity, led to their heightened participation in the public domain, informing the world about women’s experience. In the corpus of

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<sup>15</sup> In the wake of feminist movements in the Arab world, women’s oppression in Arab society as well as instances of violence against them were often linked to the violence inherent in the patriarchal language. In women’s writings in particular, Arabic has often been accused of being a sexist language that discriminated women in both its vocabulary and grammar. In scholarly works, the case of *fuḥūla* is often noted as a prime example of these claims. (see Joseph T. ZEIDAN: *Arab Women Novelists*. New York: State University of New York Press 1995. Also: ASHOUR – GHAZOU – REDA-MEKDASHI, *Arab Women Writers*) *Fuḥūla*, the very word for literary excellence, and the term that has been widely used throughout the history of Arabic literature, is derived from ‘*fahl*’, originally meaning a superior male. The term also became the target of the Iraqi writer Nāzīk al-Malā’ika’s attack on Arabic language. (ZEIDAN 1995, p. 43) Other examples abound; the Arab Feminist Conference held in Cairo in 1944 recommended to the Arab Language Academy that the Arab world eliminate *Nūn an-Niswa* (the plural feminine marker of Arabic verbs). Mayy Ziyāda chose an example of gender agreement to demonstrate the discriminatory nature of the Arabic language. Also some of the *Beirut Decentrists* adopted the feminist viewpoint on the issues of male domination and women’s marginalization, seeing themselves as being ‘appended’ to the centre. “How sad it is to hear this defective verb *kāna*, particularly when the *tā*’ of the feminine is attached to it.” (Naṣrallāh, quoted in COOKE 1998, p. 145) However, it should be noted that English and French were also accused of being discriminatory languages and the same phenomenon can be found in other languages as well. The subject of gender-neutral language still remains an area of much controversy. Many linguistic studies have been conducted to investigate the issues of sexism in the language and even though it has been shown that it certainly does exist, it seems that the whole theory is central only to the social and political project of feminism, which, in its attempt to change linguistic usage, seeks to change society, and, perhaps even more so, its thought patterns. However, throughout our study, when discussing a specifically ‘female’ voice, or the language of women’s fiction, we do not refer to the above-mentioned features of Arabic. What concerns us is the use of new, often subversive, stylistic devices that women experimented with in order to find new ways to communicate meaning.

<sup>16</sup> Slavoj ŽIŽEK: *Violence*. New York: Picador 2008, p. 2.

literature inspired by the civil war, the number of women writers exceeds that of men. In addition to their literary undertakings, most of these women were active in the field of journalism. The continuity of society rested upon their shoulders, and as they wrote they also tried to transform it. Through the creative process itself, they came to acknowledge and fight their own marginalization. Women's voices heard through their fictionalized narratives of war were becoming more and more radical in their demand for a restructuring of society. After having been excluded from both the literary canon and social discourse, they acquired a new voice and a new arena for expressing themselves, developing a distinct women's literary tradition and recognizing the process underway at the time of its formation. The process continued to find its echoes also in other national literatures of the Arab world; however, it is to these Lebanese women that the Arabic literature is indebted for this radical break with tradition. Having created a new language that exploded 'out of the present', they managed to confront "social problems in their entirety so as to change culture."<sup>17</sup> They established the model of an activist literature which questions the patriarchal values of the Lebanese, and by extension Arab society, and calls for fundamental change.

#### BEIRUT DECENTRISTS

The mid-1970s mark the emergence of an unprecedented number of women writers who entered the then predominantly male discourse and who are collectively known and referred to as the *Beirut Decentrists*. The term was coined by Miriam Cooke, who conceived of these writers as having been 'decentred' in a double sense: first, they were scattered all over the self-destructing city, which accounted for them being decentred physically, and, alongside their isolation in the physical world, they inhabited separate intellectual spheres<sup>18</sup>. They would not conceive of their writings as being related to one another's, however, as a collectivity, they succeeded in creating a new form of expression for themselves and their works became representative of the moods and dynamics of the Lebanese predicament. These writers were Arabophone, Anglophone or Francophone,<sup>19</sup> of diverse confessions and persuasions, yet nearly all of them came

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<sup>17</sup> ŞĀLIH: *Adab al-mar'a fī al-jazīra*, p. 92. Quoted in Muḥammad Muṣṭafā BADAWĪ: *Modern Arabic Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992, p. 456.

<sup>18</sup> COOKE, *War's Other Voices*, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> This study includes only writers who wrote in Arabic, for our interest lies in the interaction between the novels written in Arabic and their Arabic-speaking readership. Another case in

from the same economic background: they were either middle or upper-middle class. In her in-depth study on the writings of the Beirut Decentrists, Cooke singled out seven women writers which she described as the group's 'charter members'<sup>20</sup>, alongside many others whose voices are being heard throughout the book to contextualize the achievement of the most prominent writers in whose works the major themes are developed most fully. This study introduces three of them in an attempt to shed light on those aspects of war that were to a varying degree and from different perspectives explored by other writers as well and introduces the works of a contemporary Lebanese writer to provide a glimpse on the novel in the postwar period and illustrate the continuum as well as points of departure from the novelistic tradition that has been set forth by the Beirut Decentrists.

#### A NEW VOICE

The specific literary expression of the Beirut Decentrists was nurtured in isolation from each other against the backdrop of war as their shared experience. Their writings focused on those aspects of war that were not dominant in the works written by men. Thus strategy or ideology bore little significance to them as creative writers as they tried to refrain from portraying anything but the dailiness of war, which for them had become a fact of life. Reality can be looked at from many different angles, and it is literature that can serve as a polyphonic platform where many different voices come to be heard. In much the same way as standing at the back of a demonstration provides one with a 'privilege' to see something interesting – a revelatory detail – these women looked at many different aspects of war and offered new perspectives; for instance, through describing war from an emotional point of view as opposed to its external description prevalent in men's writing. To borrow from feminist rhetoric surrounding the issue of situated knowledge, one can argue that the very fact of these women having been located at the margins gave them a certain 'epistemic privilege' that pertains to the position of marginalized subjects

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point is the relationship between Arab women writers and the Arabic language itself. Yet, given the cultural complexity of the Lebanese society, we shall bear in mind that a considerable part of the Lebanese population, which was bilingual until the 1970s, became trilingual and thus an educated person would often seek to read a book in its original version, be it in English or French. Rania NAUFAL: *Observations from Beirut*. Publishing Research Quarterly 16, No. 4, 1 January 2002, pp. 53–55.

<sup>20</sup> Other writers being Daisy al-Amīr, Laylā ʿUsayrān, Claire Gebeyli and Etel Adnan.

as subjects possessing an alternative and more critical optics, with a sharper, keener eye that enables them to notice what escapes the view ‘from the centre’<sup>21</sup>. Reading men’s fiction on war one encounters a great deal of polemics as well as instances of direct ‘preaching’. Women’s fiction is more subtle in approaching the war subject. Displaying a keen eye for capturing the nuances of the human condition and for accessing its overtones, they focus on everyday reality: on life that needs to be lived whatever the circumstances one finds themselves surrounded by. They find the scarcity of water, and problems with electricity and garbage worth rendition (Ḥanān ash-Shaykh in *Beirut Blues*<sup>22</sup>), they zoom in on the details that once would have been considered too trivial or commonplace to write about – often in order to emphasize the alienation of the individual from their environment. The narrator of *Beirut Nightmares* contemplates on things of daily usage as she performs actions of what had once constituted her everyday ‘routine’: “So here I was again, hanging up my clothes on a clothes rack that didn’t belong to me and washing my face in a bathroom whose tap I didn’t know exactly how to use, not being sure just how much to turn it so as to keep water from either gushing out in torrents or coming down in a feeble trickle. I was using unfamiliar soap, drying my face on a towel that I was seeing for the first time [...] As I lay there, I stared at cracks in the ceiling, which were different from the ones I’d grown used to in my own house.”<sup>23</sup> The details are blown out of proportion, their imposition of the new routine – the civil war routine – looms large over the heroine; yet prolonged contemplation of each of them does just that: it places her squarely in this new mode of existence – wartime existence. At the same time, these enhanced details highlight the need for an individual’s awareness and mental ‘presence to the present’.

Alienation (of an individual from their environment, of the whole society from the lived reality of war) is a recurrent theme in the writings of the Beirut women writers. As a logical consequence of escape, alienation brings home the need for active participation, or at least ‘active mental participation’, in other words, awareness. Ḥanān ash-Shaykh’s heroine, Zahra<sup>24</sup>, also feels alienated at

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<sup>21</sup> For the concept of epistemic privilege as a key concept in feminist standpoint theory, see: Bar On BAT-AMI: *Marginality and Epistemic Privilege*. In: Linda ALCOFF – Elizabeth POTTER (eds.): *Feminist Epistemologies*. New York: Routledge 1993.

<sup>22</sup> Ḥanān ASH-SHAYKH: *Barīd Bayrūt*. Bayrūt: Dār al-Hilāl 1992.

<sup>23</sup> Ghada SAMMAN: *Beirut Nightmares*. London: Quartet Books 1997, pp. 37–38.

<sup>24</sup> Ḥanān ASH-SHAYKH: *Hikāyat Zahra*. Bayrūt: Dār al-Ādāb 2004. If not stated otherwise, I am quoting from this Arabic edition.

witnessing others' dulled indifference to what was happening around them. People in the village carried on with their lives as if nothing was happening in the capital. They watched the news; nevertheless, they acted as if they had nothing to do with what was going on in Beirut or Tripoli. Ḥanān ash-Shaykh condemns such attitudes because she believes that they perpetuate the continuation of war. She intimates that shutting out the reality of war enables it to drag on through neglect, for 'that which is not seen cannot be ended.'<sup>25</sup> At the beginning of the novel, ash-Shaykh presents Zahra as dislocated and alienated from her immediate family and society at large, whose members categorized her behaviour (characterized by frequent withdrawals into her own world) as madness. However, throughout the novel we learn (through flashbacks and Zahra's recollections) that it was not that she had not understood what was happening around her, but rather that she simply could not relate. For example, she renders the experience of having been sexually abused as if it had not happened to her, as if she was 'a mere spectator, a witness' (p. 133). However, the war made her alert, perceptive and, above all, present. On the other hand, Aḥmad, her brother, spends most of the war in a state of numbness. He drugs himself in order to behave 'like a man'. He explains: "Drugs have given the war a new dimension. I can't really explain it. They help you see the war through a filter that screens the eyes ... *It cancels out* the guns, the rockets, the firing, even though we go on fighting."<sup>26</sup> (p. 200, my emphasis) Even though there are other motivations that are accountable for Aḥmad's behaviour, the passage underlines the absence of awareness and provides an example of yet another type of withdrawal. Apparently, Aḥmad is not in touch with reality, just like Zahra was not in touch with it before the war. During the war, Zahra's experience of alienation blows from the opposite direction. On one hand, she finally feels integrated into society because her behaviour is no longer considered abnormal; in a twisted logic of war, withdrawal became a norm. Yet Zahra finds herself marginalized once again; she does not act as expected under the given circumstances. Ironically, it is her embracement of the present, her affirmation of life in the face of atrocities, that alienates her from her bellicose society.

In time of war, one's whole life became an absurdist stage and its continuum seemed to be secured only by the individual's instinct to survive. The survival instinct calls for the adoption of 'the logic of the bullets', while mea-

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<sup>25</sup> COOKE, *War's Other Voices*, p. 56.

<sup>26</sup> ACCAD, *Sexuality and War*, p. 52.

ningful survival, as the works and the lives of these women writers relate, is achieved through awareness and demands the individual's full presence to the present. The Beirut Decentrists themselves came to epitomize these attitudes. By being present, they strived to depict the daily reality as minutely as they could because they were aware of the fact that its ideological re-interpretation and re-ordering would follow suit as soon as the conflict was over. Needless to say, time has proven them right.

#### CLOSING THE FILES

“Too much has been forgotten in the name of memory.”<sup>27</sup>

In her Master's thesis, entitled “Neither Here, Nor There”, Ī m ā n Ḥ u m a y d ā n Y ū n i s focused on the experiences of the families whose loved ones had disappeared during the war. She was interested in hearing and documenting the actual stories of their children's disappearance, looking closely at how they perceived their own narratives and how they overcame their suffering and loss. Drawing specifically upon the narratives of the female family members, she maintains that the external approach to dealing with memory often “fails to acknowledge the internal and local dynamics that these people depend on in overcoming violence.”<sup>28</sup> She felt that the official mainstream narrative of war, in which an ‘ex post facto’ memory is imposed upon individual members of society by the state, tries to obliterate real memory by “creating an alienated, abstract version” – a new memory where “no legitimacy is given to validating loss.”<sup>29</sup> It is from this very same perspective that she approaches the act of creative writing. Drawing upon her extensive socio-historical knowledge and her own emotional perceptiveness accompanied by her capacity to creatively reflect the perceived and the experienced in writing, Ḥumaydān skillfully blends both the aesthetic and the social functions of the novel. In prose which is sparse and pared down to necessities, she manages to present the reader with an almost cinematographic account of personal and socio-political histories of the Lebanese, doing so in a multi-layered narrative that deploys voices of which many have never been heard before.

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<sup>27</sup> Don DeLillo, an American author and playwright.

<sup>28</sup> Anja WOLLENBERG – Klass GLENEWINKEL (eds.): *Iraq 360°: Views on a Journey from Baghdad to Damascus, Ankara, Istanbul, Cairo and Beirut*. Friedrich Ebert Foundation, pp. 86–93.

<sup>29</sup> A letter by Īmān Ḥumaydān Yūnis, published under the title *Beirut (20 June 2006), letter from Iman to Irada*. Niqash, available at: <http://www.niqash.org/articles/?id=1278&lang=en>.

In her civil war novel, *B as in Beirut* (Bā' miṭl bayt ... miṭl Bayrūt, 1997), Ḥumaydān Yūnis continues in the tradition of women's writings on war, established in the beginning of the 1970s. She shies away from the clinical descriptions of violence that the majority of men writers have not managed to dispense with, and focuses on war's less overt aspects as experienced by her four main (female) protagonists, who each is given a voice in one of the four sections into which the book is divided. Her multi-layered narrative reminds us of Ḥanān ash-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra*.<sup>30</sup> Another similarity that the two novels share is the first person narration. One of the features of Ḥumaydān's fiction seems to be the absence of historical references as history is only vaguely alluded to in her works; however, what might initially be seen as a shortcoming can yet prove to be the work's defining quality; dropping an image here, an allusion there, her writing transcends the specificities of the Lebanese conflict and addresses the realities of war in general. Thus in its perceived 'weaknesses' perhaps also lie the narrative's greatest strengths since the writing for an Arab audience takes on the dimension of writing for humanity.

Ḥumaydān Yūnis conceives of conflict as an agent of change; exposing the impermanence of traditionally held values and destroying social norms, it allows something new to emerge. "The war has opened up strong, official, mainstream voices and pushed them to the side."<sup>31</sup> This holds true not only for a distinct literary tradition that started to emerge in the wake of the civil war but also for Lebanese society as a whole, as these forces often intertwine, reinforcing each other dialectically. It was the dissolution of social norms that opened up the space for uninhibited expressions of self-assertion on the part of women authors. Writing women were gradually becoming more and more radical in their demands for change and the reconstruction of society – not along sectarian or communal lines, but towards a sense of belonging and citizenship where one may proudly call himself/herself 'a Lebanese'.

#### VILLAGE: PORT OF MEMORY

Ḥumaydān Yūnis's second novel *Tūt barrī* (Wild Mulberries, 2001), set in the 1930s in the Druze community of the Shūf mountains, revolves around a

<sup>30</sup> In *The Story of Zahra*, the third chapter is narrated by Hāshim, Zahra's uncle and the fourth by Mājīd, her husband. In the Arabic original, it is left up to the reader to determine who the narrator is: the chapters are numbered but they have no headings (unlike its English translation, where the chapters got their titles according to who the narrator was).

<sup>31</sup> *Sectarianism as a Dead End for Lebanon*, interview with Iman Humaydan Younes, 2010.

young woman's coming of age. Though being different in the tone as well as subject matter to her debut novel, the narrative of *Wild Mulberries* explores the themes that also resonate in *B as in Beirut*. Exposing the oppressive confines of patriarchal control, Ḥumaydān simultaneously explores the family dynamics, which forms a concave mirror to the broader social dynamics, and hints at these as underlying and nurturing the causes that have eventually led to the civil war.

Both novels are populated by characters of diverse religious or ethnic affiliations, who nonetheless form meaningful bonds that go beyond the boundaries as dictated by tradition. Whether they are ties formed among a group of migrant workers, servants, tenants and missionaries inhabiting a small village with a predominantly Druze population (as in *Wild Mulberries*) or family ties, sacred by law (as in the case of mixed marriages in *B as in Beirut*), or bonds that local women in both novels form among themselves, Ḥumaydān tries to point out that diversity has always been a fact of life in Lebanon, and invites the reader to rethink their traditionally held positions regarding their sense of belonging to a society that is essentially multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian, yet which as a whole strives to be Lebanese. By way of promoting mutual understanding between members of different sects, communities and religious groups, she urges her readers to conceive of diversity as a source from where Lebanon as a nation-state can in turn still derive its strength.

Another novelist whose fictional world is firmly rooted in the village is Emily Naṣrallāh. In her works she focuses on the phenomenon of emigration, which has always been a vital area of life in Lebanon, where both internal migration (leaving rural areas for Beirut) and *mahjar* (emigration outside Lebanon) have become a consistent fact of life. Her first novel *Ṭuyūr Aylūl* (*September Birds*, 1962) depicts the unique world of the village, exploring the ties to the land which lie at the heart of the novel's nostalgia and at the onset of one's identity formation. The characters yearn to abandon their village existence because of its rigid traditions which deny them the right to shape their own destinies, yet in the city, pulsating with different life rhythms and ever-changing, they experience profound feelings of estrangement and isolation; the nostalgia for their native village hits hard, urging them to return only to realize that the village had erased them from its memory. The rift between the two worlds and two times results in a sense of alienation in the novel's characters who are unable to identify with either of them, thus experiencing a sense of *internal* alienation typical of the novels of the civil war period. The dynamic tension of two times as presented in *Ṭuyūr Aylūl*, lies, according to

Yumnā al-ʿĪd, in the opposition of “village time, where the present corresponds to the past, and city time, where the present exposes the alienation of its dwellers”. The village time is perhaps best exemplified in Ḥumaydān Yūnis’s *Wild Mulberries*<sup>32</sup> as its heroine contemplates the changing of the seasons: “October colors the leaves diverse yellows blended with the damp hues of the earth. The ground becomes wet with silent, sudden rain, while inside, dryness prevails. Snow does not come to ʿAyn Ṭāḥūn and neither does the sea. It is a place between the two. [...] Time here cannot be squandered; it has no bumps or contours. It is like this place. Disciplined and even.”<sup>33</sup> The village is ‘a place between the two’ (snow and the sea) and the time is like the village: disciplined and even. One’s sense of belonging is fostered through this unity of time and place, of the present and the past. However, the same extract lends itself to a different reading, while not excluding the former: staying and waiting in the village, in ‘a place between the two’, between snow and the sea, presents one also with the sense of being ‘between the devil and the deep blue sea’, pondering over the two alternatives of escape that were equally unthought of and prohibited for women by the village code of behaviour. Both snow (Beirut) and the sea (mahjar) are seen as transient places, whereas the village may be taken as the locus of one’s cultural survival.

One’s ties to the (home)land are explored again in one of Naṣrallāh’s later novels, *al-Iqlāʿ ʿaks az-zaman* (*Flight Against Time*, 1981). The novel’s protagonist, who comes with his wife to visit their children and grandchildren in Canada in the wake of the civil war, eventually ‘flies against time’ to meet the very destiny his children had feared for him, unable to cut ties with the land and community which gave him his identity. Naṣrallāh depicts Raḍwān’s ties to the land and the importance of cultural identification with the place and community one lives in through his inability to accept different funeral customs as he witnesses them when his son-in-law’s father dies. He could not imagine and was not able to bear it if his own funeral resembled the one he attended. Ironically, his dream of having a traditional funeral in his native village is rapidly fulfilled, because upon his return to Lebanon he is kidnapped and eventually killed. However, there is a smile on his face all through the funeral – an old man is at peace with himself, surrounded by all whom he loved and who loved him, exactly as he had wished for. The novel poses the question of whether

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<sup>32</sup> Iman Humaydan YOUNES: *Wild Mulberries*. Translated by Michelle Hartman. London: Arabia Books 2010. If not stated otherwise, here and in other places I am quoting from this edition.

<sup>33</sup> YOUNES, *Wild Mulberries*, p. 39.

economic security and physical safety (while violence in Lebanon is mounting) measure up to the sense of belonging, of being counted and respected in one's community, and whether material and physical survival can take the place of cultural survival. Even though Naṣrallāh does not pass any judgment on those who emigrated, she sheds light on another important aspect of emigration that the war brought to the fore. Emigration is at once seen as enhancing one's prospects for individual survival, be it in economic or other terms, while simultaneously decreasing the prospects for national survival which depends on a community being present. She highlights the need for assuming collective responsibility, without which the survival of a nation is threatened at best and impossible at worst. In Naṣrallāh's works, we once again encounter the major thematic concern of the Beirut Decentrists – their insistence on being 'present'. Where Ḥanān ash-Shaykh and Ġāda as-Sammān emphasize the need for mental presence (awareness), Naṣrallāh brings home the fact of emigration and stresses the individual's presence in the physical sense of the word.

Ḥumaydān Yūnis, whose civil war novel came out much later, has noted that the literary output in post-war Lebanon has moved away from the centre and takes place 'on the edges of the country', with writers telling the stories of the 'unknown' Lebanon. According to Yūnis, everything that epitomizes Lebanon, or the Lebanese for that matter, is located at the edge: in rural areas where diversity had once been the norm, where strong ties to the land shape one's future memory, where one's sense of identity is forged and remains firmly rooted<sup>34</sup>. Cooke observes a perceptual change towards internal migration due to the transformation of the concept of the village that was brought about by the war. Whereas before the war the village was perceived as a separate entity, a self-referential world, closed in on itself and a totality, after the war the village came to represent Lebanon, which it became both a part of and one with<sup>35</sup>. Thus also the tension between staying and leaving, waiting and escape, was reconciled for women as new boundaries were drawn up, since "to have stayed in Beirut during the war was, in some ways, like staying in the village; it was to have denied the natural impulse to leave a painful confinement, so as to realize oneself in a more congenial environment."<sup>36</sup> For women, leaving the village before the war led to ostracism and condemnation as it was men alone who were expected to leave, while the women's condition (as well as their expected

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<sup>34</sup> *Sectarianism as a Dead End for Lebanon*, interview with Iman Humaydan Younes, 2010.

<sup>35</sup> COOKE, *War's Other Voices*, pp. 144–154.

<sup>36</sup> COOKE, *War's Other Voices*, p. 154.

behaviour) was to wait. After the war, the gravity of a woman's choice between staying (in the village) and leaving (for Beirut), as well as the consequences that such a move entailed, was shifted to staying in Lebanon or emigrating (*mahjar*).

After 1943, when Lebanon gained its independence, many Lebanese families moved from the rural areas to Beirut where a new generation was born. Having turned into city folks, this generation no longer suffered the alienation of their parents' generation who left a vanishing world to forge a new existence in the city. However, it seems there is no sense of belonging either, as the post-war generation has experienced another type of alienation – their own internal one – as they no longer see themselves as citizens of the country and therefore, according to Ḥumaydān, they withdraw into their religious or ethnic community, which in turn fosters their sectarian or communal identity at the expense of a broader national one. Thus the village, within the constraints of the implied contradiction, seems to safeguard Lebanese identity, which Ḥumaydān sees as at once rooted in its regional particularities, yet cosmopolitan at heart. For in the world of the Lebanese village, “seasons come and go, torn threads reattached by the strength of nature, the strength of living and survival. [...] life is reconnected year after year; and the vestiges of these connections remain recurring riddles, painful but not fatal.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> YOUNES, *Wild Mulberries*, p. 60.

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## R e s u m é

### Libanonská občianska vojna očami arabských spisovateliek

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Príspevok sa zaoberá tvorbou libanonských spisovateliek v časoch občianskej vojny. Skúma reakcie žien na vojnu a spôsob, akým kreatívne pretavili svoju skúsenosť do literárnej podoby. Približuje románovú tvorbu skupiny spisovateliek známych ako „bejrútske decentristky“, ktorých diela publikované počas prvých siedmich rokov konfliktu (1975–1982) predstavujú výrazný kvalitatívny posun vo vývine libanonského románu. K vojnovnej tematike sa opäť vraciame v diele Īmān Ḥumajdān Jūnis v snahe priblížiť cestu, akou sa libanonský román uberal v povojnovom období a tiež spôsob, akým nadviazal na románovú tradíciu predchádzajúceho obdobia.