Magical Representations of Individual and Collective Trauma in al-Samman's *Beirut Nightmares*[1]

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Abstract: This article examines Ghāda al-Sammān's creative fictional depiction of the causes and the atrocities of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) in her novel, *Beirut Nightmares* (1976). It investigates the author's perceptive fusion of different artistic tropes in order to achieve a proper articulation of her sociopolitical commentary on the early years of the conflict. It shows how al-Sammān bears witness to the collective war trauma of the Lebanese people through the individual trauma of a female intellectual. Al- Sammān transcends the realistic representation of events in order to magnify the traumatic experience through her employment of gothic elements and magical realism which purposefully disrupt the chronology of the narrative. The apt employment of different tropes enables her to effectively criticize the legacy of colonization as well as the oppression of current totalitarian regimes. It also concludes that al-Sammān's artistic techniques which bespeak trauma do not contradict with the intellectual's attempts to heal her own wounds and to overcome her personal frustrations in order to fulfill her communal mission of enlightening people.

Keywords: *Beirut Nightmares*, Ghāda al-Sammān; gothic, Lebanese Civil War, magical realism, trauma

1. Introduction

Even though Ghāda al-Sammān is a Syrian writer, her trilogy *Beirut 75* (1975), *Beirut Nightmares* (1976), and *The Night of the First Billion* (1982) traces the stages of the Lebanese Civil War during the first seven years of this bloody ethno-religious strife which lasted for fifteen years. The novel's translator, Nancy N. Roberts believes that *Beirut Nightmares* registers al- Sammān's maturity as a writer through broadening her horizons as she "expands her focus," "develops a vision for Arab society," and deals with wider sociopolitical issues (1997: iii). In addition to that, and following the Arab defeat in the Arab-Israeli War in 1967, al-Sammān's work as a devout feminist and leftist has foregrounded the role of Arab women as active participants in achieving freedom and justice and in eradicating the injustices against them in the Arab World. Evelyn Accad describes al-Samman's distinguished style in promoting her thoughts by saying:

> Al-Samman is a dynamic person who has founded her own publishing house and seeks to popularize her liberal ideas through a writing style that is by turns emotional, humorous, and even satiric. This is noteworthy because there are relatively few women writers in any culture who have attempted much humor or satire. (1993: 238)

Beirut Nightmares depicts the atrocities of the Civil War's early years while it simultaneously investigates the numerous causes of the conflict. The novel emphasizes the role of the French colonization of Lebanonand its legacy of instigating sectarian and ethnic violence among Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, Maronite Christians, Roman/Greek Catholic Christians, Druze, and Kurds. Moreover, the novel shows how the presence ofPalestinian freedom fighters on the Lebanese borders has ultimately led to Israel's invasion of the south of Lebanon in 1982 causing further complications to the political scene in the country. In addition to this political unrest, the narrative exposes the socioeconomic problems in the country which widened the gap between the rich and the poor and catalyzed the rebellion of deprived people.

For Miriam Cooke, al-Sammān, like writers and artists of all types, has "responded creatively to the war" and "tried to do what the political and economic analyst could not" by trying to "capture the pulse of the violence" in their works (1987: 4). To reflect the collective trauma, al-Sammān magnifies the negative consequences of the war through transcending the realistic representation of events. Instead, she resorts to a perceptive fusion of different tropes which belong to various artistic modes of writing in order to achieve a proper articulation of her sociopolitical commentary on the status quo. In this respect, Accad clarifies that the war was so intense, urgent, and horrible that conventional narrative styles could no longer serve the fictional purposes of those who tackled this particular theme (Accad 1991: 2). As a result, writers believe that the new "modes of expression [have] become a refuge from the war's cruelty and inhumanity, the author reversing its effects through distortion, with irony reaching the baroque and emphasis on the absurd" (Accad 1991: 2).

In *Beirut Nightmares*, al-Sammān portrays war-stricken Beirut and chronicles the traumatic experience of a female intellectual who eventually manages to overcome her trauma through the therapeutic effect of writing. The novel is a first-person narrative which takes the form of a diary that consists of numbered nightmares. The episodic narration of events represents the series of psychological situations the protagonist goes through during the horrific experience of war and entrapment. Al-Sammān's effective employment of the marvelous and the supernatural intensifies her portrayal of the protagonist's as well as the whole society's trauma as a result of the brutal ethnic strife in the country. She endows the narrative with a gothic atmosphere whereby a horrified heroine struggles to survive during war time, ghosts haunt a destroyed city, and characters inhibit sinister and mysterious locales. Al-Sammān uses magic to disrupt the realistic and logical development of events and to fragment the narrative in order to reflect the suffering of a traumatized society. The protagonist's ability to relive past events with her deceased lover, the store mannequin which turns into a real person and roams at night in the devastated city of Beirut, and the speaking corpses in the morgue as well as in the cemetery exemplify how magical occurrences manifest themselves in the text. In so doing, al-Sammān utilizes her artistic techniques to criticize the legacy of previous colonization and the oppression of current totalitarian regimes in order to raise the awareness of her readers and to shape their political

consciousness in the hope of inspiring change.

2. Review of related literature

The scholarship on al-Sammān's *Beirut Nightmares*, has mainly investigated the originality of its subject matter and the innovative techniques the writer uses to achieve her artistic ends. In his book, *The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant*, Stephan G. Meyer argues that al-Sammān is one of the most significant authors to write about the early years of the Lebanese Civil War and that she strikingly and effectively documented its beginning (2001: 118). Cooke classifies the novel as a "horror fantasy" in which al-Sammān relates the notorious Hotel Battles during October and November of 1975 (1996: 5). On the other hand, Nedal Al-Mousa investigates al-Sammān's modes of representation which include fantasy, surrealistic elements, anthropomorphism, anthropocentrism, and polyphony (2020: 240). In the same vein, Renée Ragin Randall believes that there is "a supernatural hermeneutic which highlights the irreparable damage of both pre-war and wartime environs to the individual soul and the body politic" (2023:1) in al-Sammān's trilogy on the Lebanese Civil War.

In terms of al-Sammān's narrative techniques, Meyer focuses on the form and the structure of al-Sammān's narrative which serve her fictional purposes; he observes that she uses a "diary form" to relate to the reader the protagonist's innermost feelings about the experience of war in a way that renders the narrative more intimate and more subjective (2001: 123). Meyer adds that "the chief aim of these devices is to structure the novel not by means of chapters, but by sections that she refers to as 'nightmares' (2001: 123). He argues that "[s]ome of these narrative sections relate to the overall thread of the book, some are part of a distinct narrative series within the work, and others are single, self-contained vignettes" (Meyer 2001:123). The significance of al-Sammān's use of a series of nightmares as the basic structure of the novel emanates from the fact that nightmares reflect the psychological state of the traumatized protagonist because of the ongoing war.

The use of nightmares is one of the salient narrative techniques of magical realist writers since it simultaneously reflects the collective memory and the psychological disturbances of individuals. However, previous studies conducted on the novel treat these nightmares as a basic feature of trauma, which they are, but they overlook their relationship with the magical realist and gothic techniques which the writer employs in the novel. *Beirut Nightmares* registers al-Sammān's initiative of relying on the strategic tropes of magical realism to censure the Civil War's ethno-religious conflict since it provides a vivid dramatization of the severe psychological impairment of its traumatized victims through the protagonist's horrific experience of war. Al-Sammān's initiative goes beyond producing an early literary chronicle of the early years of the war; al-Sammān can be safely credited for being a pioneer Arab practitioner of magical realism. This study addresses al-Sammān's attempt to bear witness to the trauma of the Lebanese Civil War showing how she employs the nightmare motif in order to create a wilder landscape for magic. Al-Sammān's achievement in this regard should be keenly acknowledged since infusing magic within trauma articulation adds a noteworthy artistic vigor to the author's testimony on the horrors of war. Accordingly, this study fills a lacuna

in the scholarship on al-Sammān's proficient employment of magical realism in trauma narratives.

3. War trauma and the gothic atmosphere

The narrative of *Beirut Nightmares* opens the war narrative in *medias res*. It depicts an unnamed Lebanese journalist who gets trapped in her apartment in Beirut during the Hotel Battles. The protagonist expresses her amazement because she and her family have survived the previous night's bombardment. A state of hysteria seizes them as they gather up some of their belongings and decide to move the young and the old to a safer place. Together with her brother Shadi, they remain in their apartment with minimal food supplies. Shadi leaves without warning, and the protagonist ends up alone in the apartment where a sniper controls the area and targets any moving object. She feels that his presence in the neighborhood places everybody underhome detention. On the other hand, as an intellectual, the protagonist recognizes her ineffectiveness and her confusion about the best part she should play in the war. Subsequently, she decides to reevaluate her role as an intellectual in creating a glimmer of hope through innovative thoughts in her writings. She believes that the intellectual has a moral role in society which obliges him to employ his knowledge in raising the awareness of other people. He should use his profound wisdom to steer society to the right path. Hence, the intellectual has to be an active agent of change who continuously and relentlessly struggles for the welfare of the nation through promoting tolerance, equality, democracy, peace, and social justice.

Al-Sammān's *Beirut Nightmares* portrays the war-stricken city as a haunted and chaotic place. As the novel's title suggests, the protagonist's war trauma manifests itself in the nightmares that shatter her peace of mind. The protagonist describes the minute details of her waking and sleeping during her ten-day- home confinement. The numbered nightmares relate to the reader the protagonist's thoughts and innermost feelings about what is going on around her; they also recount other self-contained stories about traumatized Lebanese people.

Different psychiatrists analyzed the relationship between war trauma and nightmares. In the aftermath of World War I, Sigmund Freud speculated about the pathological symptoms of the traumatized victims such as repetitive behavior and recurring nightmares inflicted by the horrific war experience. He clarifies the connection between the repressed feelings of trauma and nightmares by saying that the "manifest content of the dream is the distorted substitute for the unconscious dream-thoughts and this distortion is the work of the ego's forces of defense—of resistances;" traumatized victims have these dreams because while they are awake "these resistances altogether prevent the repressed wishes of the unconscious from entering consciousness" (Freud 1957: 35). Thus, repressed feelings return to the traumatized in the form of a dream. In the words of Roger Luckhurst, individuals "who experience wars, disasters, accidents or other extreme [stressful] events seem to produce certain identifiable somatic and psycho-somatic disturbances . . . [so that] 'the traumatic event is persistently re-experienced'- through intrusive flashbacks, recurring dreams, or later situations that repeat or echo the original"

(2008: 1). The content of the protagonist's nightmares shows how she becomes obsessed with certain bloody images and horrific memories which keep recurring to her during her sleep and sometimes in her waking as a result of the ongoing war.

The protagonist's random and horrifying nightmares provide the novel with an episodic narrative form. Additionally, al-Sammān fragments the narrative through including episodes about other characters as well as supernatural and gothic events which disrupt the chronology of the main character's story. This deliberate fragmentation of the narrative is in compliance with the poetics of trauma fiction since it functions as an index to the protagonist's ordeal. In this context, in her book *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead argues that novelists represent the impact of trauma when they allow "temporality and chronology [to] collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection" (2004: 3). The non-linear order of events in *Beirut Nightmares* indicates that the protagonist is psychologically impaired and that the narrative stylemimics the symptoms of her impairment. The narrative follows the psychic time of the protagonist rather than the universal solar time to show how trauma distorts the victim's perception of reality. By doing so, al-Sammān creates a connection between form and content: fragmentation bespeaks trauma and chaos.

As for the gothic and supernatural elements in the novel, Whitehead states that trauma fiction "often demands of the reader a suspension of disbelief and novelists frequently draw on the supernatural" (2004: 84). The overwhelming and haunting effects of the war foster the apparition of ghosts. Mona Fayad argues that the "array of characters who appear in these semi-hallucinations, brought on by a combination of hunger, fear, and lackof sleep, provide haunting reflections on some of the social problems that led to the Civil War" (1998: 2). Within the novel's context, such events are shrouded in mystery because they could be mere figments of the protagonist's mind.

To underscore the protagonist's predicament, al-Sammān sets the events in a deserted and half-destroyed building and the nearby streets are full of bloodied and decayed corpses. The onlysounds to be heard in the neighborhood are those of explosives and bombardment. In her solitary confinement, she cannot set foot outside the building and sleeps in their dead neighbor's bed. She can only sneak into the pet shop at night through following creepy dark passages that enhance the setting's ominous atmosphere. As such, the protagonist resembles the heroines of Gothic fiction. Hence, Fadia Suyoufie argues that some "of [al-Sammān's] ghost stories rely on the characteristic paraphernalia of the Gothic with its dark, stifling interiors, labyrinthine passages, supernatural events, and psychological disturbances" (2009: 183-4).

4. The magical representation of the ethno-religious strife and political oppression

In *Beirut Nightmares*, the ethno-religious conflict represents a major fictional concern which the author reflects using magical realist tropes like the characters' mutation between different realms and their magical metamorphosis from one shape into another. Al-Sammān blurs the boundaries between life and death to

criticize bigotry and religious intolerance in Lebanon. Wendy Faris explains that the readers "experience the closeness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds. Fluid boundaries between the worlds of the living and the dead are traced only to be crossed" in many magical realist texts (1995: 172). Next to the protagonist, several characters in the novel metamorphose into other creatures like birds, animals, or even become different people. Interestingly, these magical episodes add up to the ghostly atmosphere of the novel and foreground its gothic aspect. Thus, supernatural and magical realist techniques collaborate effectively to enhance the representation of the individual and collective trauma of war.

One of the protagonist's nightmares features a number of corpses of people who have different religious backgrounds fighting to obtain a place in the overloaded storage locker ofdead bodies. They demand the morgue supervisor to find them a place before they start to rot. One corpse threatens him if "you don't let me in, you'll be violating the principle of equal representation among the sects and of allowing corpses to be seated along sectarian lines!Besides that, my uncle will have your head!" (Al-Sammān1997: 221). The image of the corpses in themorgue shouting "I'm Shi'īte," "I'm Drūze," and "I'm an Orthodox Christian," (Al-Sammān 1997: 221) indicates that the prejudiced Lebanese upbringing poisons people's life and escorts them to their graves. Certainly, al-Sammān aims to ridicule the mentality of such bigots who stubbornly cling to their beliefs in the most absurd situations.

Throughout the novel al-Sammān provides further criticism of religious intolerance usingmagical realism. A Christian character returns to life several times in order to show how innocent people get killed on the basis of their names which reflect their religious backgrounds. On his way home, Maron goes through a number of checkpoints and he gets killed three times and magically comes back to life. At the first checkpoint, a Muslim named Hasanain kills him on the spot because of his Christian name. Maron gets up and walks away till he arrives at a second checkpoint and a man named Joseph stops him this time. Although they belong to the same religion, when "Joseph discover[s] that Maron [hasn't] joined Joseph's 'team,' he kill[s] him twice over" (Al-Sammān 1997: 250). Killing in the name of religion becomes random and whimsical during the chaos of wartime. Religion becomes a pretext and a mere camouflage to get rid of all opponents and to monopolize power. Maron, who represents the common Lebanese man, realizes that it is all about politics not religion, and he decides to change after this bitter experience.

By transferring from the realistic to the defamiliarized magical, al-Sammān invites the reader to see things from a different perspective. In the novel, incidents of metamorphoses censure the roots of the Civil War. One of these incidents highlights the way society strongly opposes interfaith marriages as manifested in the relationship between the protagonist and her lover. While enjoying the company of her boyfriend, a group of children stops their car at what seems to be a checkpoint. Upon recognizing that the protagonist belongs to a different religion, they decide to blindfold and kidnap her but they release her boyfriend. The couple manages to escape but the protagonist suffers from an intense sense of fear. Staring

at the children in amazement, the protagonist sees their faces change and become like adult faces as "they began to sprout beards, their fingernails grew out, their faces developed wrinkles and sweat came steaming down their foreheads. Suddenly, they'd turned into a gang of pygmy highway robbers" (Al-Sammān 1997: 32).

The children's metamorphosis into adults shows that religious intolerance in Lebanon is transmitted from one generation to the other, and indicates that such inherent beliefs hinder any future reconciliation between the different sects and religions. Al-Sammān juxtaposes the story of a loving couple who could not get married because of their different religions next to a group of vicious children who act like highway robbers to pinpoint the roots of this intolerance. Through this juxtaposition, she proves that unjustified animosity blindfolds individuals and forbids them from embracing "Others" regardless of their beliefs. Her underlying message is that love enables people to overcome their differences and teaches them to respect different perspectives. She shows that such acts influence the whole society negatively and perpetuate the religious conflict. Accordingly, al-Sammān, like many other authors who have tackled religious intolerance in multi-sectarian societies, translates this awareness into fiction which promotes for the possibility of coexistence through "love, friendship, and neighborhood, which act as counterforce and antidote to any exclusive and hate speech discourse" (Hamdan and Salameh 2023: 72).

In another nightmare the metamorphosis aims to criticize the corruption of some politicians and the immigration of many citizens to avoid the war. The protagonist sees an actor named Nano who turns into a fish and swims away. Nano looks exactly like the king of an unnamed country and he used to make good money because of this outstanding resemblance; "at the beginning, this was a reason for Nano's success who remained a mediocre stage actor for years" (Al-Sammān 1976:112)[2]. However, his fortunes hit rock bottom when a civil war starts in the country and the king's life and his own become at risk. When they secretly kill the king, some politicians kidnap Nano and ask him to assume the role of the deceased king and to make a speech to appease the anger of the people.His inability to lead a normal life in these conditions coerces him to think of committing suicide. Instead, he makes a deal with the kingdom's magician to metamorphose him into a fish in order to escape. This nightmare exposes the politicians' devious and dishonest practices. The image of the fish swimming away through the Mediterranean points fingers at the hundreds of Lebanese people who immigrated to Europe and other countries to escape the war.

Al-Sammān employs the magical realist technique of metamorphosis to satirize the misleading media and to expose how they shape people's herd mentality and deforms their psychology. The editors of news bulletins try to raise the spirit of the citizens through broadcasting false news about the prevailing peace and prosperity in Beirut despite the ongoing fights. The station forces the announcer to read these fabricated news items against his will. He expresses his moral indignation and rejection of being an accomplice in the crime of misleading people by refusing to report untrue stories. He finally succumbs to the instructions of his

superiors in order not to lose his job. As a result, the announcer starts to detect the symptoms of a peculiar ailment in his throat and in his vocal cords. His voice changes and "it start[s] sounding remarkably similar to the bleating ofa lamb . . . and with every passing day his voice seemed to become less like that of a human and more like that of a sheep" (Al-Sammān 1997: 258).

Both his doctor and his wife assure him that nothing has changed in him, yet he remains convinced that his voice has lost its human qualities. Moreover, he discovers "two small protrusions like a sheep's horns were sprouting under his hair" (Al- Sammān1997: 259). The announcer becomes psychologically impaired due to the traumatic experience of war. He imagines things that other people do not see and this affects his behavior. While announcing one of the fabricated reports, he repeatedly bleats "baa" instead of reading the bulletin news items. Ironically, the Lebanese listeners or "the rest of the sheep" (Al-Sammān1997: 260) understand his meaning. Al-Sammān accuses the media of lack of integrity and of brainwashing the citizens. They mislead people in order to passively conform to illogical laws and to acquiesce in unjust policies in a way that enhances the collective trauma of war.

The protagonist's metamorphosis into an owl criticizes the government's exercise of arbitrary power during the war and reveals the predicament of Palestinians all over the world. One morning, she wakes up screaming "[w]here's my brother?" and describes what happens nextas follows: "[m]y body had grown noticeably smaller and, when I felt myself, I found that I was covered with feathers . . . I'd sprouted wings as well, so I flew over to the mirror, nearly crashinginto it, so astonished was I to find that I'd been transformed into a small owl" (Al-Sammān1997: 328- 9). As a bird, she can overcome the confinement, the sniper, the police, and the prison regulations. She immediately decides to fly to the prison to see her brother. This metamorphosisrepresents a latent critique of the fact that Lebanon has become a police state during the Civil War since it is the only way for the protagonist to sneak inside the prison. The protagonist's brother is imprisoned without trial and the family knows nothing about his crime and his place.

Upon arriving in the prison, the protagonist watches Shadi through the window of his celltalking to a fellow Palestinian prisoner, Abu Tha'ir. Their conversation sheds light on the plight of Palestinian refugees in the aftermath of the Israeli occupation of their land, and reveals the atrocities perpetrated against them in prisons. Abu Tha'ir tells Shadi that his Palestinian roots make him a most wanted person wherever he goes; he says that there "isn't a single country I've gone to without ending up behind bars . . . my only crime is being Palestinian. I've seen the inside of a cell in most foreign countries, and in most Arab countries aswell" (Al-Sammān1997: 330).

Other than metamorphoses, al-Sammān uses several magical realist techniques which defamiliarize and bewilder the reader and affect his perception of reality. These magical events include objects with human attributes, human beings with supernatural qualities, flying carpets, and magical balls which show the future. Faris, who sees magical realism as a major legacy of Surrealism, argues that the former takes the poetics of defamiliarization to its extreme elaborating that "in

contrast to the magical images constructed by Surrealism out of ordinary objects . . . magical realist images, while projecting a similar aura of surprising craziness, tend to reveal their motivations -psychological, social, emotional, political- after some scrutiny" (1995: 171). Accordingly, the magical element in magical realist fiction remains deeply rooted in reality despite its uncanny and surreal nature.

In *Beirut Nightmares*, such magical events interrupt the chronology of events to indicate the depth of trauma and to portray the atrocities of war. They represent aprojection of the psychological impact of war on people and mirror its appalling consequenceson all life aspects in Lebanon. According to Faris, the reader of magical realist fiction "may hesitate" and "experience some unsettling doubts" regarding "two contradictory understandings of events" and his "primary doubt in most cases is between understanding an event as a character's hallucination or as a miracle" (1995: 171). Even though such magical events initially bewilder the readers of al-Sammān's text since they first perceive them as part of the protagonist's wild nightmares and hallucinations, the readers are finally able to decode their underlying messages and to connect them to the hellish existence in Beirut. This attests to the writer's ability to firmly ground these magical events in the reality of the ongoing Civil War.

In *Beirut Nightmares***,** the one-eyed sniper epitomizes the callousness of the civil war's random killing. Al-Sammān characterizes him as a freak creature to bewilder the reader and to magnify the cruelty of his job which deprives innocent people of their lives and deprives him of his own humanity. Cooke deems al-Sammān's sniper to be a symbol of the protagonist's captivity because he besieges the whole neighborhood with a fence of bullets to keep them in their cages (Cooke 1996: 34). The sniper has "a single huge eye in the middle of his face," (Al-Sammān1997: 99) and he cannot remember how and why he has started his profession. At the beginning, he thinks that he will find a difficulty in killing people; however, he discovers that killing defenseless citizens in cold blood is much easier than he thought. His new profession seems boring and unchallenging since his victims do not resist and they even welcome death because of their despair.

The sniper's physical deformity reflects his psychological impairment since warfare turnshim into a heartless killing machine. Unlike normal people, he is one-eyed and he uses it to aimat his target because killing people becomes his only interest. When he sees what seems to him tobe the last man in the city, he feels "possessed once more by his bloodthirsty passion" (Al- Sammān1997: 102) and he decides to kill him instead of sparing his life to keep him company. It amuses him to torture the man with several empty shots before killing him. When the freak sniper approaches his victim to get a closer look,he discovers that the man's face is his own. At this point, he realizes that he has received the same shots in his own body, and that he will have a slow painful death. The man in the street resembles the sniper and represents his alter ego. By killing him, the sniper relinquishes his own humanity after which he should cease to exist.

In order to portray the social and the economic ills of the Lebanese community, al- Sammān uses the fashionable Hamra district to function as a microcosm for Beirut. She depicts the socio- economic situation in the capital city

through the watchful eyes of a store mannequin whose magical features enable her to curiously roam around the aforesaid neighborhood. The humanlike attributes of the mannequin allow her to wander freely from place to place and to report the war conditions to the reader.The mannequin admits that what "the city's human residents didn't know was that once darknessfell, the majority of its mannequins and statues would spring to life. In fact, when the human population departed each night for the land of Nod, the city's 'other' residents would regularly take over the entire metropolis" (Al-Sammān1997: 263). In her capacity as a model, she observes the social and economic changes through the display window for two whole years without fully comprehending the deteriorating situation in the country. The surrounding blasts, the lightless streets, the absent proprietor, and the generally alarming atmosphere confuse and frighten her.

The mannequin's job in the store and her night expeditions reveal the moral decadence of the Lebanese people. Other than the store's proprietor who flirts with the shop attendant, the coffee-shop girls prostitute themselves for the sake of money. She compares their profession to her own since they have to display their charms to customers. The striking similarity between herand these girls makes the passersby unable to notice that she is a mannequin and not a human being. She pities these girls because they have to pretend that they are drinking coffee for an indefinite time to meet men. When a customer shows his interest in them, they have to whisper their price in his ears instead of just wearing a price tag as she does. Several times during her night expeditions, men of different ages and positions ask the mannequin to spend the night with them for meager amounts of money which shows the cheapness of these prostitutes. By comparing the girls of Beirut to mannequins, al-Sammān satirizes their artificial looks and their lack of decency and decorum.

The loose morality represents a general lifestyle in Beirut during the war and marks the whole city as well as its inhabitants. The fragile morality of the people indicates the fragility of Lebanese society as a whole. As one of the citizens observes, "Beirut's *dolce vita* days are over. Its golden veneer is wearing thin and it won't be long before it shows its true colors" (Al- Sammān1997: 270; the emphasis is al-Sammān's). The war results in the total collapse of society which cannot hold in the face of this major event. Cooke believes that whether "Beirut was flourishing or suffering, to its inhabitants it has always been more than a mere city. It was a vibrant being that excited ambivalent emotions, and never more so than after 1975, when the jewel of the Mediterranean became the 'center of all prostitutions.' It was the Bitch/Goddess upon whose survival the survival of much more depended" (Cooke 1996: 16). Undoubtedly, al-Sammān agrees with Cooke's inclination to expand the reference of prostitution as a decadent act to encompass the political, economic, and even the religious levels. Though she focuses on the moral and the social levels in this particular section, she exposes the decadence on other levels in other nightmares.

The presence of a mannequin in an elite neighborhood enables her to observe the strugglebetween the different social classes in Beirut. The economic problems and the political strife impede the normal procession of people's life and widen the

gap between the rich and the poor. The pampered life style of the shop customers and their indulgence in luxury contrasts with the sales assistants' utter poverty. The mannequin notices the sadness of the shop attendants when they dress her up with an "outrageously expensive attire" while they wear "tattered and torn" outfits (Al-Sammān1997: 265). Additionally, the men and women in the street stare in her furiously when theyread the price tag. She also notices the constant fear and grief in people's faces as if something threatens them. She reads the lips of the passersby and learns that most of the rich people's conversations in the coffee shops revolve around their immigration to Europe, Australia, and Canada. They want to flee the danger of the war and to enroll their children in decentschools abroad. The poor deal with the war differently, some of them work as persistent flower vendors, others endanger their lives by working as restaurant waiters during the night, and many beg in the streets.

Al-Sammān encapsulates the sociopolitical situation in Lebanon in the image of the unstable table in the coffee shop where the mannequin perceptively comments that virtually "everything was rocking to and fro. The ground didn't seem completely firm either. She feels that it was beginning to collapse from beneath and that at any moment everything in sight might plunge into a bottomless abyss" (Al-Sammān1997: 268-9). The shaky ground in Hamra Street parallels the instability of the country during the war. Cooke diagnoses the problem in war-torn Lebanon as "one of incongruence" (Cooke 1996:114) because the society "was splintered into autonomous groups that refused to communicate, much less co-operate with each other" (Cooke 1996: 8). Hence, the social, religious, and political incongruity of the Lebanese people fuels the conflict and poses different challenges to them.

In a way that indicates the unmistakable influence of T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" on al-Sammān, the novel includes a character which resembles Eliot's Madame Sosostris which he uses to reveal the decadence of wartime. In the novel, the magical ball of a fortuneteller called Khatoun shows the negative consequences of poverty and political corruption. Like several other characters in the novel, war conditions and poverty force a seamstress to change her profession and to become Khatoun, the fortuneteller. The Lebanese society ladies abandon her products for the sake of the ready- made clothes of famous fashion designers. Subsequently, she feels obliged to change her profession. Her unemployed husband advises her to publish an advertisement in the newspaper which promotes her magical skills. To avoid eye contact with her clients, she buys a crystal ball and claims that it is a magical ball through which she can see the future and occult things. Other than the half-wit ladies who come to her and ask her to break the power of some charms or ask her to make binding knots that would keep husbands and lovers from leaving, some important politicians also seek her services.

Khatoun's prophecy to an influential politician foretells his bloody death and brings about her own doom. In effect, this particular client has a bizarre impact on her; she feels different andpeculiar pains in her body. Such pains are typical of real fortunetellers who deal with jinn and it surprises Khatoun to suffer from them. She used to fake such symptoms to convince her clients that she is a

professional soothsayer. When this infamous man throws his filthy money to Khatoun and orders her to tell him what she sees in the ball, the most amazing thing happens. Khatoun sees "his bloodied, bullet-riddled corpse flung onto the pavement" and notices that his face "was undergoing a kind of transformation it had become the faces of numerous other men…most of them she didn't recognize, although she'd seen pictures of some of them in the newspaper before" (Al-Sammān1997: 170). This man becomes the epitome of all the corrupt politicians who use their positions to exploit people and oppress them.

Khatoun's "magical" crystal ball reflects the horrific situation in Beirut during the war and causes the fortuneteller to lose her ability to speak. Al-Sammān's use of supernatural and magical events in this section means to warn against the appalling repercussions of the conflict. She pictures the city as a vast field "convulsed by a colossal earthquake" which splits the land "into two massive ridges, between which there opened up a vast, unfathomable abyss" (Al-Sammān 1997: 171). Khatoun sees the most horrid images: a man with two fighting heads, a funeral procession of an important figure, tongues of fire, ashes and human remains, springs of blood, and cracks and fissures which swallow everything. As a result, she goes through a silent trance after which she discovers that she is unable to utter a word. She becomes aware of the fact that "she'd been struck dumb by a force beyond her control" as a penalty for opening her eyes to "the unseen world of the supernatural" (Al-Sammān 1997: 172). The fact that the fortuneteller becomes tongue- tied after what she sees in the ball magnifies the impact of the horrible scenes on the reader and functions as a warning sign for those who feel tempted to take advantage of the chaos caused by war.

5. The healing power of writing and the role of the intellectual

According to prominent literary trauma theorists like Geoffrey Hartman, Shoshana Felman, and Cathy Caruth, trauma is an intensely painful experience which the mind cannot process normally and tries to forget (Pederson 2014 :334). They believe that trauma is "unregistered" and "unclaimed" in the sense that victims cannot express it in a verbal form, instead they "may flash back to the trauma, or they may dream of it, but they will not speak it" (Pederson 2014: 336-7). The repetitive nightmares of al-Sammān's protagonist are clear expressions of her severe trauma. Her nightmares about Yousef, her late boyfriend, recur throughout the first half of the novel. The author represents the protagonist's latent wish to stop time in the magical way the hourglass functions. Staring at the hourglass which Yousef gives her as a token of their enduring love, she sees the sand moving magically from the lower sphere to the upper sphere as if to grant her wish of going back to the past; she says that suddenly "I found myself with Yousef on the seashore. No longer was his body riddled with bullets. Instead, here we were, reliving our sweet days together. Everything was repeating itself, exactly as it had been" (Al-Sammān1997: 79). The fact that she clings to her past in the first part of the novel indicates that trauma renders her in a state of denial regarding her lover's death.

The protagonist expresses her doubts about the power of her pen to inflict

change as opposed to the power of bullets. She begins to harbor ambivalent feelings towards her library, her academic certificates, and her job as a journalist. This underscores her uncertainty "about whether she should or should not write give way to the need to write" (Cooke 1996: 44). Writing for her becomes a persistent need rather than a choice since it helps her cope with her trauma through expressing it rather than ignoring it. Writing the manuscript of *Beirut Nightmares* helps her pass the long time of her home imprisonment.

In *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life Writing*, Suzette Henke argues that "life-writing provides a way to generate a healing narrative that temporarily restores the fragmented self to an empowered position of psychological agency" (1998: 11). Al-Sammān's protagonist performs a clear practice of Henke's concept of scriptotherapy where she both bears witness to the atrocities of war and strives to cope with war consequences. The text of *Beirut Nightmares* develops as a journal to provide a day-by-day account of the war and functions as a therapeutic process for the traumatized protagonist. Narrating the trauma through writing has a cathartic effect which helps her to overcome the shocking experience of war and the tragic death of her lover. Joshua Pederson claims that the new generation of trauma theorists "emphasize[s] both the accessibility of traumatic memory and the possibility that victims may construct reliable narrative accounts of it" (Pederson 2014: 338). Thus, trauma to them can be narrated and expressed in language not only via alternative means such as dreams and art. The significance of this narrative resides in the fact that speaking "trauma pulls it from the realm of painful obscurity and hastens the process of rehabilitation" (Pederson 2014: 338).

The composition of the protagonist's book projects her fears and frustrations and allows her to confront them. Writing about the atrocities of war, registering the minute details of herdaily routine, and recounting her most fearful nightmares represent an evacuation of her unconscious and this process helps her to heal. Pederson adds that traumatic memories "are potentially more detailed and powerful than normal ones," and they are also "multi-sensory"since "victims may record not only visual cues, but aural, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory ones aswell" (Pederson 2014: 338). Accordingly, "readers looking for representations of trauma may turn not to textual absence but to textual overflow, to event descriptions replete with detail" (Pederson 2014: 338).This description applies perfectly to the protagonist's active memory and her extensively detailed manuscript which help the reader to "read the wound" of theLebanese Civil War, to borrow Geoffrey Hartman's term (Hartman quoted in Pederson 2014: 349).

Al-Samman's unnamed female protagonist functions as a prototype for the intellectual who tries to fathom the various challenges in her society and struggles to define her own role in confronting them. In *Representations of the Intellectual*, Edward Said clarifies the following:

> The intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is

> publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d'etre* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug (1996: 11).

As a journalist, al-Samman's protagonist already assumes the role of the intellectual who analyzes situations, poses questions, and reveals truths. However, the detachment she experiences during her home confinement allows her to see things differently and to evaluate them with a new lens. The benefits of her confinement are equivalent to the advantages of the intellectual's exile Said mentions in his book. He argues that exile opens the intellectual's eyes to the possibility of change due to the realization that things are "the result of a series of historical choices made by men and women, as facts of society made by human beings, and not as natural or god-given, therefore unchangeable, permanent, irreversible" (1996: 60-1).

Towards the end of the novel, the protagonist gets rid of her psychological impairment and puts her traumatic experience behind her as she shoots the image of her deceased lover. Through the healing power of writing, she overcomes her trauma and finally accepts Yousef's absence. Fayad finds that al-Sammān's "protagonist makes a symbolic gesture, shooting at a ghost. [She] reaches her point zero by leaving the past behind her; through the 'shooting,' she is finally able to free herself from the ghost of her bullet-ridden boyfriend who was killed several months earlier at one of the many checkpoints dividing the city of Beirut." (1998: 1) After the soldiers manage to transfer her to a safer place, she discovers that she has forgotten her orange bag in their tank. She insists on getting it back despite all dangers because she keeps the manuscript of *Beirut Nightmares* in it, and not because it contains her lover's belongings.

The protagonist decides to have a new beginning in her life and that is why she shoots theimage of her lover and burns everything that reminds her of him. The novel ends with a note of hope and optimism on the part of the protagonist who says that "bowing to the rain and the sunshine, I lowered my face to the soil . . . a bit before continuing on my way. Meanwhile, the pathway of light in the heavens continued to grow more vivid and intense, and when I closed my eyes I could see it more clearly still" (Al-Sammān 1997: 377). The fact that she clings to her manuscript as well as a revolver indicates that she intends to resume her role in society as an intellectual but with more awareness. The trauma of war broadens her horizons and helps her to grow and leads her to Said's formula of speaking the truth to power which he describes as "carefully weighing the alternatives, picking the right one, and then intelligently representing it where it can do the most good and cause the right change" (Said 1996: 75). Surviving the war trauma enables her to reconstruct her shattered selfhood and to see the light within her. She ultimately finds her path as an intellectual who has a moral responsibility towards her community which prescribes the necessity of guiding and enlightening others through writing.

6. Conclusion

In *Beirut Nightmares,* al-Sammān provides a vivid portrait of the individual and collective trauma of the Lebanese people during the Civil War. The author relies heavily on gothic and magical realist tropes to register her testimony on this critical period of Lebanon's history.The nightmares reveal past events in the protagonist's life and reflect al-Sammān's preoccupation with the gruesome events of the war and their outcome which influence different people in several places like restaurants, hospitals, police stations, prisons, streets, and even the cemetery. Cooke clarifies what instigates these supernatural dreams by saying that each "contact with the outside world brings in its train of fantasy. The fantasy may be graphic or macabre but it is always at onedegree removed, because it becomes clear that it is not part of an external reality" (1996: 44). In fact, Cooke describes the content of the nightmares as "removed" because it does not havea direct relation to the protagonist's personal life. Nevertheless, it provides an indirect yet more inclusive anatomy of the war conditions in Lebanon.

The nightmares have the double merit of reflecting the traumatic experience of war as well as expanding the scope of the narrative. *BeirutNightmares* basically traces the fortunes and the misfortunes of a single character during the war in order to focalize the role of the intellectual during important historical events. However, al-Sammān manages to deal with the various aspects of the Lebanese Civil War through the protagonist's magical nightmares which project her troubled unconscious. These nightmares are the venues al-Sammān uses to overcome the temporal and the spatial limitations of the setting. The action in the protagonist's unconscious transcends her personal affairs, the building where she takes refuge, and the ten-day confinementshe spends at her apartment; moreover, the events elastic oscillation between past, present, and future broadens the scope of al-Sammān's criticism.

One of al- Sammān's major achievements in *Beirut Nightmares* resides in accentuating the focal role of the intellectual in the society. Al-Sammān clarifies this role through the development of the female protagonist of the novel and through al- Sammān's own creative experimentations in narrative techniques. Al-Sammān's novel provides a scathing critique of the Lebanese Civil War in an innovative way which deservedly preserves her position among Arab female authors who wrote about the war and "have been deeply involved in the destinies of their countries and peoples, as well as in their own battles against oppression and discrimination" (Shaaban 2009: 115). Al-Sammān skillfully weaves together different literary modes of writings in a single text to portray the atrocities of war and to expose its real causes and to warn against its dire repercussions. Though magical realist techniques prevail in her text, they artfully give wayto other tropes of gothic and trauma fiction. Her fusion of these techniques offers a creative dramatization of the conflict and enables her to articulate the trauma of its victims and to maintain a satiric tone for her socio-political commentary.

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1. This article is dedicated to Dr. Aida O. Azouqa's soul who mastered the art of sowing the seeds of knowledge.

[2] This nightmare appears only in the Arabic version of the novel and the translation into English is mine.

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