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A Literary Heroine of Selected Fictional War Narratives by Arab Women Writers

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The series of armed conflicts that the Middle East has been afflicted with from the past century up to the present day has inevitably led to an explosion of literary creativity thematizing these tragic events. A considerable number of Arab writers, both men and women, have transformed the experience they endured into fictional narratives of war. The primary motivation of many has been the cathartic effect of writing: the catalyst of their creation was the urgent need to testify to what they witnessed and thus, by means of the organized structure of narrative sequences, search for the order in the enveloping chaos.[1] The body of literary works creatively reflecting on the war experiences penned by Arab writers is incredibly rich both qualitatively and quantitatively. Bearing in mind the aims of the present study, we decided to limit our focus to the corpus of prose works spatially anchored in three countries of the Arab region: Lebanon, Iraq and Kuwait. Drawing upon previous theoretical research and readings of this corpus, our focus lies on the female protagonist – the literary heroine of these literary creations is analysed from various perspectives in an attempt to understand how she is modelled in the fictional and semi-fictional war narratives. While the richness of the fictional worlds of these complex characters undoubtedly enables a multi-layered analysis, the heroines are predominantly examined from two angles: **a)** *the spatial aspect*, in relation to which we examine the protagonists' position vis-à-vis the epicentre of conflicts,[2] and **b)** *the aspect of participation* – regarding this perspective, we examine in what form and to what extent the heroine participates in warfare.[3]

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1 ČIŽMÍKOVÁ 2012, 146.

2 When examining how the literary heroine of war novels is created in regards to the *spatial aspect* (her geographical position in relation to the epicentre of the war), we are building upon the theses formulated predominantly in the publication *War's Other Voices* (1988), Miriam Cooke's complex treatise on the literature of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990).

3 In the attempt to categorize the heroine according to the form and the extent of her participation in war conflicts we were relying on the classification presented in the thoroughly researched study entitled *Gendering the Iraq-Kuwait Conflict: Representations of Kuwaiti*

1. The Spatial Aspect: The Protagonist's Position vis-à-vis the Epicentre of a War

1.1. The Heroine in the Centre of a Conflict

The insistence on 'being present' is considered a major thematic concern of *Beirut Decentrists*.[4] It is equally projected on the female protagonist of Ghāda as-Sammān's critically acclaimed novel *Kawābīs Bayrūt*[5] (Beirut Nightmares, 1976).[6] The heroine, a young intellectual, journalist and writer, who remains unnamed throughout the story, is moulded as a markedly fearless and active character already in the initial stages of the narrative. At the very first signs of the deterioration of the situation, she moves 'those [of us] least capable of enduring the terror'[7] to a safe place in the countryside, while she herself decides to *remain* in the warzone on her own. On several occasions in the narrative the heroine emphasizes the importance of *staying* in Beirut, despite the battles being fought and civilians being killed. The heroine's insistence on staying, as well as her conviction about the necessity of protecting their city, 'each of us with his own type of weapon', appears to stand in contrast to her nature. Based on the reminiscing passages of her internal monologues, she has always considered herself a globetrotter 'a homeless refugee wandering back and forth among continents, cities, streets and friends',[8] 'with [my] hair for a pillow and [my] body for a travelling bag'.[9] Her decision to return to her homeland is motivated almost nationalistically, kindled by a moment of awakening amidst her search for (national) identity. In her quest to find her place in the world, she suddenly recognizes a 'new commitment [I] felt to [my] homeland, a commitment which had come as a conscious reaction

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Women's Resilience and Resistance (2008) by Ishaq Tijani. The present article is concurrently a review of Tijani's study, since it outlines its findings and applies them to a larger corpus of literary works, thus further stratifying the main categories proposed by Tijani.

4 The term was coined by Miriam Cooke, who conceived of these Lebanese writers as having been 'decentred' in a double sense: first, they were scattered all over the self-destructing capital, which accounted for them being decentred physically, and, in addition to their isolation in the physical world, they inhabited separate intellectual spheres. See Cooke 1988, 3, Čižmíková 2012, 150.

5 As-Sammān, Ghāda: *Kawābīs Bayrūt.* Bayrūt: Manshūrāt Ghāda as-Sammān 2000.

6 While examining the literary heroine in the studied novels, we were primarily relying on the Arabic editions. The bibliographical information about the respective editions is given in the footnotes when a literary work is first mentioned in the article. In the brackets, the title of the English translation (if applicable) and the year of publication (in Arabic) is indicated. Throughout the study, we are quoting from English translations of the novels, if not stated otherwise.

7 Samman 1997, 2.

8 Samman 1997, 96–97.

9 Ibid.

against what [I]'d discovered to be a mere pseudo-attachment to Europe.'[10] The acknowledgment of 'the belonging' as well as the obligation towards her country compels her to conclude that to stay is the only possible way to face the war: 'Life had taught me that it was no use running away from where I truly belonged. I was a daughter of this land, a daughter of this Arab region…. I was also a daughter of this war.'[11] As perceived by the heroine, the decision to stay at the very centre of the raging battles is a form of resistance: for an individual, the only way to come out victorious is to survive.

In this regard, the two protagonists of the war novel *Bāʾ miṯl bayt… miṯl Bayrūt*[12] (B as in Beirut, 1997), by the Lebanese writer Īmān Ḥumaydān Yūnis, are drawn to the very heart of the war in a similar manner. Kāmīliyā and Mahā, two literary characters purposefully sculpted in the narrative as opposites of one another, differ in their modalities of living the war experience, as well as their sentiments towards both the city and the nation. The literary character of Kāmīliyā, similarly to the heroine of *Kawābīs Bayrūt*, is constructed in accordance with the prototype of a modern female-nomad, with no fixation whatsoever to one particular place. Thus, her decision to settle down in a warzone is a motivationally accentuated deviation from the behavioural pattern imagined with regard to this archetype. As for Kāmīliyā, this motif is slightly varied and reflected in the narrative in the form of recurring *returns* to the war-torn capital. The designation *ibnat al-balad* (a daughter of this land), employed in the account of the *Kawābīs Bayrūt*'s heroine, echoes once again in *Bāʾ miṯl bayt… miṯl Bayrūt*. It is utilized as a reference to Kāmīliyā by her friend Ibrahīm, whose intention to film a documentary on Beirut's street combatants serves as an excuse for her to return to her homeland after many years of living in London, the Western metropolis that only served to highlight her sentiments of estrangement. As implied previously, Kāmīliyā and as-Sammān's heroine share many character traits. They are, each in their respective narratives, stylised as anticonventional, 'untameable' personas, whose decision to suddenly settle down in Beirut comes across as being in conflict with their nature. However, while the resolution of the latter can be described as beyond-personal and nationalistic, Kāmīliyā is lured close to the battlefield by the subjective desire to awaken both 'her body and her soul', hoping that the intensely emotional contact with the reality of war will draw her out of her constant lethargy: 'Maybe, in that way, my soul would awaken from its deep malaise and I might begin to feel my body again, the body I sometimes had to pinch just to remember it was still there.'[13] Her personal interests are placed above the national-collective

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10 Ibid.

11 SAMMAN 1997, 47.

12 YŪNIS, Ḥumaydān, Īmān: *Bāʾ miṯl bayt... miṯl Bayrūt.* Bayrūt: Al-Masār li 'n-nashr wa 'l-abḥāṯ wa 't-tawṯīq 1997.

13 YOUNES 2008, 125.

ones: the *ibnat al-balad* denomination is attributed to her externally, without her necessarily identifying with it.

The fictional character of Mahā, one of the four protagonists of the *Bāʾ miṯl bayt...miṯl Bayrūt* novel, is formed as an opposite to Kāmīliyā in many aspects. In the initial stages of the narrative, she appears to be passive and resigned. It is when the storylines of the two heroines collide that Mahā's character gains a much stronger momentum. Nonetheless, she commences her initial reflections on events[14] by the following utterance: 'There was nowhere left for me on the face of the earth but my apartment.'[15] She is the last to remain in the building in West Beirut, which serves as the background for the events of the novel. Mahā does, however, resort to exile seeking refuge from the enveloping violence. Her brief stay at her sister's house in New York only strengthens her desire to *be present, to bear witness* to the reality of war. Her day-to-day reality is restricted to desperate attempts to keep updated on what is happening in her country: 'That summer, I spent my days fixated on televised images of the Israeli invasion. At night I waited moment by moment for dawn to come so I could call Lebanon.'[16] On the first occasion she flees back to her homeland, persuaded that those who have not lived the reality of war would never understand the urgent need to be present.

The gravitational power of the war has a similar effect on Zahra, the heroine of Ḥanān ash-Shaykh's acclaimed novel *Ḥikāyat Zahra*[17] (The Story of Zahra, 1980). After a brief period when she takes refuge in the countryside, she is pulled right back into the heart of the struggle. This is incited neither by national sentiment (as was the case with both Mahā and as-Sammān's protagonist) nor by the necessity of an emotional stimulation (as in Kāmīliyā's case). In Zahra's instance, the attractive force is perceived more enigmatically. The fact that she compares it to a parasite may suggest that she understands its pathological nature: 'I would return to Beirut at the first opportunity, to be overtaken by the same weevil, back in the midst of fighting.'[18] What is stressed by all of the heroines is the impossibility of a return to normality for those who have witnessed the violence of the war themselves; 'an exile' ceases to be analogous to 'a refuge'.

1.2 The Heroine Fleeing a Conflict

The female protagonists discussed earlier, in their respective narratives, emphasized their attachment to the wartime hometown and articulated their need to stay even though such a decision might prove to be fatal. Nonetheless, in this type

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[14] Her account of fictional events is placed after Kāmīliyā's narrative and further develops the latter's character.

[15] Younes 2008, 155.

[16] Younes 2008, 195.

[17] Ash-Shaykh, Ḥanān: Ḥikāyat Zahra. Bayrūt: Dār al-Ādāb 1998.

[18] Al-Shaykh 1991, 139.

of literary heroine one can identify several instances of a protagonist, inhabiting the fictional world of Arabic war novels, who are modelled in a way that contrasts with the stance of the characters presented above. The gravitational force functions as a repulsive one, the sentiments of belonging (to the city or nation) are substituted by those of alienation. Such is the character of Liliane, one of the voices of the polyphonic mosaic of Ḥumaydān Yūnis's *Bāʾ miṯl bayt...miṯl Bayrūt*. Her growing desire to leave the country is predominantly motivated by the need to protect her young children. However, it is the feeling of *estrangement* that seems to be a central motif of her narration. In the story, this becomes explicit on two levels: in the intimate sphere she suffers from the alienation of her husband Ṭalāl, who loses his hand in an explosion in the streets of Beirut. In addition, she feels estranged in her relation to her homeland, which she perceives as 'desolate earth'[19] This twofold alienation may be associated with the heroine's distinct identity – in the novel, one of its aspects is repeatedly pointed out: her affiliation (albeit formal) to two different religious denominations. Her family is Christian, while her husband's family is Muslim. The war, which is viewed externally as a religious conflict, accentuates the boundaries (both physical and imagined) between the two communities: either by the actual division of Beirut with the predominantly Christian East and Muslim West, or by the continual evocation of the binary opposition '*us-the others*' that infiltrates, at an increasing rate, the discourse of her relatives on both sides. The heroine thus verbalizes the growing need of a 'third space' that would become '[hers] alone'.[20] Within the bounds of the reality of war, the heroine sees no other solution than to escape: hence, exile comes to be the alternative 'third space'. In the final passages of her narrative she points to the fact that her escape was indeed the outcome of the prevailing feelings of alienation, whilst her attitude towards the nation is in direct opposition to the nationalist sentiment of some of the other heroines.

The literary heroine fleeing a conflict is at the centre of several works by displaced Iraqi women authors. In different exilic places, she witnesses modern warfare broadcast life on western television.[21] Such is the case of the female protagonists of two novels by Iraqi writers: *Kam badat as-samāʾ qarība*[22] (A Sky So Close, 1999) by Batūl al-Khuḍayrī and *Mammarāt as-sukūn*[23] (Zubaida's Window, 2006) by Iqbāl al-Qazwīnī. Forced to flee Iraq, they observe the deteriorating situation in their homeland respectively from Berlin and London. Their narratives

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19 Younes 2008, 47.

20 Younes 2008, 46.

21 Masmoudi 2010, 60.

22 Al-Khuḍayrī, Batūl: *Kam badat as-samāʾ qarība.* Bayrūt: Al-Muʾassasa 'l-ʿarabīyya li 'd-dirāsāt wa 'n-nashr 1999.

23 Al-Qazwīnī, Iqbāl: *Mamarrāt as-sukūn*. ʿAmmān: Dār azmina li 'n-nashr wa 'l-abḥāṯ wa 't-tawzīʿ 2006.

capture just how devastating such ordeal is: through the optics of modern media, the war comes even closer, becoming amplified and magnified. Zubayda spends her nights as a direct spectator of a devastation of Baghdad, the place 'she has been longing for':[24] 'It burns before her eyes and almost disappears in fire. She sees that place as a tongue of flame moving out of the screen and settling in the sitting room. The blazing fire unites with her blazing soul.'[25] The emotional overload the heroine feels, caused by the unceasing images of destruction and reinforced by the sentiments of alienation she feels in 'cold' East Berlin, seems to be unbearable. She articulates the guilt she feels for having abandoned her country,[26] but tries to live on, limiting her life to mundane activities, persuaded that 'that nothing can bring joy back to her soul.'[27] Even though a glimpse of hope can be perceived in her final decision not to give in to despair, in these narratives the exile does not represent 'a third space' with the potential to rebuild oneself. Rather, it represents a 'bit of false security',[28] not an escape from the horrors of war. As Masmoudi observes: '…the authors depict varied and distinct forms of exile, yet all of the female characters share this similarity: they are traumatized and haunted by the history and geography of the space left behind.'[29]

2. The Participation Aspect: A Classification of the Heroines based on the Nature and Extent of their Participation in the Armed Conflicts

As Caroline O. N. Moser and Fiona C. Clark state in the introduction to their publication *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors?: Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence* (2001), the quantitatively important corpus of literature on political violence and armed conflict remains 'largely gender-blind, with women's participation simply not identified.'[30] Furthermore, as Ishaq Tijani observes, it is not only the sociological-anthropological literature, which the above mentioned authors are referring to, that remains indifferent towards the active resistance of women; but also in the mainstream discourse of the media, women are associated with peace and passivity in contrast to war and aggressiveness, which are attributed to men.[31]

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24 Al-Qazwini 2008, 3.
25 Ibid.
26 'Lost in reverie, she sees only the heavy fire on all fronts in Iraq. Why did she leave her home in flames? Could she have helped to put out these fires?' See Al-Qazwini 2008, 26.
27 Al-Qazwini 2008, 15.
28 Al-Qazwini 2008, 6.
29 Masmoudi 2010, 60.
30 Moser – Clark (ed.) 2001, 3. Quoted in Tijani 2008, 250–251.
31 Tijani 2008, 251.

Drawing on their research of actual war narratives, Moser and Clark further remark that political violence and armed conflict are perceived as male domains, carried out by men, as armed forces, guerrilla groups, paramilitaries or peacekeeping forces. Men are thus depicted as the perpetrators of violence in defence of their nations, wives and children, while women are ascribed the positions of victims of the violence, particularly of sexual abuse. The authors then underline the fact that general tendencies within the studied narratives are the insufficient recognition of female participation in armed struggles, while only little effort has been made to problematize the common stereotypes of a peaceful, passive woman.[32]

Referring to the theses formulated by Moser and Clark, Tijani in his study illuminates – through the prism of gender – the literary texts of women authors documenting their direct or indirect experience of the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait (1990–1991). Contrary to the majority discourse, he focuses on the literary representations of the *female experience* in the context of the Iraqi-Kuwaiti conflict. He comes to the conclusion that Kuwaiti women writers do not remain neutral in relation to the gender aspect of the conflict. In the collection of prosaic works by Kuwaiti women, he identifies two types of heroine: a) the resigned Kuwaiti woman-in-conflict, and b) the resistant Kuwaiti woman-in-conflict (within this type, he further differentiates between women's subtle and violent resistance).[33] He then proceeds to examine representations of these types in Kuwaiti short stories, penned by women writers as reactions to the historical events. His study of the literary heroine and the forms of her participation in the armed struggle has served us as a device in our analysis of the female protagonist in fictional war narratives, widening the scope to major literary works that document the armed conflicts in Lebanon and Iraq.

2.1. The Heroine's Passive Participation

As Tijani observes, in accord with the dominant discourse, essentialist – stereotypical – images of women in conflict abound in the Kuwaiti war narratives. These are usually concretized in the characters of 'the weak and helpless woman who, as a wife/mother, single-handedly looks after her children in the event of her (resisting or complying) husband's incarceration or execution by the occupying powers.'[34] While he notes that these images are plentiful, predominantly in the works of male writers, he finds instances of protagonists of this type in female fictional (or fictionalized) narratives as well. Such portrayals are similarly present in the works of Lebanese and Iraqi writers. The personal wartime experience from

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32 Moser – Clark (ed.) 2001, 3. Quoted in Tijani 2008, 251.
33 Tijani 2008, 252.
34 Tijani 2008, 255.

the position of a passive participant is by no means subordinate to that of an active one; quite the contrary, the contrasting perspectives allow us to see the events of the period somewhat holistically.

2.1.1. The Victim

One of the most petrifying literary depictions of a victimized female body in wartime can be found in the novel *Sayyidāt Zuḥal*[35] (Saturn Ladies, 2009) by the Iraqi writer Luṭfiyya ad-Dulaymī. The young doctor Manār is threatened by extremist militants and accused of collaborating with the enemy; her only 'crime' is that she has been distributing medicine obtained from the foreign aid sources and charities. She is unwilling to give in and remains true to her vocation, and so her family home is attacked by four masked men. Having killed both her mother and brother, they rape her before shooting her, and then leave her to die. The naturalistic portrayal of the scene, captured by the third person narrative, is reinforced by the evocation of perceptions of all the senses and flashbacks to heroine's childhood. The narrator likens her, as she balances between life and death, to the anonymous victims of the war: 'But what was death if it were not like this? Yes, she was dying – and with no grave, butchered like all those whose bodies one came across on the pavements of Baghdad every night.'[36] Her story is eventually one of survival – she is rescued by her sister Amal, and together they seek refuge in exile.

As an example of a victim protagonist in Kuwaiti war literature, Tijani presents the character of a mother in a short story *Wajh aḏ-ḏiʾb* (The Wolf's Face) by Laylā al-ʿUṯmān.[37] In the story, that is a part of the collection *al-Ḥawājiz as-sawdāʾ* (The Black Barricades, 1994), the events are narrated from the perspective of her young son. His mother, overwhelmed 'by the rampant reports about the various forms of atrocity being perpetrated by the occupying forces',[38] begs her son not to intervene in case the enemy soldiers try to assault her sexually. The boy is subsequently a witness to a rape scene foreseen by his mother. When referring to the son's recollections of the tragic event, Tijani chooses the following passage, depicting the moment of struggle: '[My mother] was pinching her lips (takuzzu ʿalā shaffatayhā), holding them firmly fast together; she did not want to let go her screams, so as not to reach me in my hiding place, which would make me think she was seeking my help; so, I would break the promise and come out to meet my death'.[39] The literary character of the mother is thus created to conform to the stereotype of a submissive, passive woman – through her sexual humiliation, the

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35 Ad-Dulaymī, Luṭfiyya: *Sayyidāt Zuḥal*. ʿAmmān: Dār Faḍāʾāt li 'n-nashr wa 't-tawzīʿ 2012.

36 Dulaimi 2010.

37 Tijani 2008, 255.

38 Ibid.

39 Al-ʿUṮmān 2000, 58. Quoted in Tijani 2008, 256–257.

oppressor/occupier demonstrates his dominance over the oppressed/occupied.[40] What comes to the fore, however, is the other aspect of the mother's assault – her *sacrifice* in exchange for her son's survival. The assault itself is narrated so as to resemble a struggle, highlighting the tremendous effort of the mother not to make her suffering known to her son. What is more, as a reaction to the scene he witnessed, the son (implicitly) kills the attacker-oppressor, which points to the possibility of interpreting the mother's sacrifice as a sacrifice for the sake of the nation.

This kind of interpretation then markedly problematizes the classification of the protagonist in question since her perception, as strictly within the bounds of the type of a submissive and passive victim, may be challenged. Assigning a female protagonist characterized by actions thematizing the reality of war to the prototype of a victimized female seems to be problematic in the entirety of the studied corpus. Conceivably, they are all victims in a way – due to the military conflict, they all end up losing something: husbands and partners, liberty of movement, home and even their lives. They are victims of sexual assaults, suffer from hunger and loneliness, their lives are limited to a comatose existence. Nevertheless, more often than not the protagonists tend to change their passive status into an active one in the course of the narrative under the influence of the direct contact with the reality of war and trauma.[41] Their suffering often takes up a form of sacrifice for a higher purpose. Their passivity, caused by the emotional shock, turns into activity in regard to the fictional events of their respective narratives.

2.1.2. The Woman Waiting

As Čižmíková points out, women fiction writers, displaying a keen eye for capturing the nuances of the human condition, focus on everyday reality: on life that needs to be lived whatever the circumstances one finds themselves surrounded by.[42] Merely to live through times of war, even while being utterly passive, represents a form of participation, the importance of which should be neither neglected nor subordinated to an active involvement. In the perception of Zubayda, the heroine of *Mammarāt as-sukūn*, it is enough to have lived at the mercy of such a (wartime) life to be considered a hero.[43] Ikram Masmoudi deems the protagonists of the war novels 'women who bear witness for those who are

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40 Tijani 2008, 258.

41 This transformation of the self ignited by an external, often terrifying experience and the subsequent emergence of the new perceptions of the self and world are defining features of a *trauma novel.* All of the works analysed in the present study may be characterized as trauma novels, as the term itself refers to a work of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels. See Balaev 2008, 150.

42 Čižmíková 2012, 152.

43 Al-Qazwini 2008, 37.

speechless'.[44] While it was predominantly the male characters who fought on the fronts, the women fought the same war in the private sphere. In fiction they are stigmatized, testifying to their 'unexperienced experiences' of trauma and death which have left them in a state of 'immobility, in *demourance*, waiting'.[45] This is often manifested in a type of seemingly resigned, lethargic protagonist, narrating her almost comatose existence. In exile or in her homeland, she is unable to do much other than wait: in between spaces, unsettled (in exile), she waits for her soldier husband's return, the opportunity to escape or the end of the war (in her homeland).

This ordeal is aptly captured through Zubayda's perspective: 'From time to time, she imagines herself getting ready to return to reality, but mostly she stays suspended between heaven and earth.'[46] Hence, she spends her time aimlessly wandering through the streets of a foreign city she feels alienated from, oscillating between the memories of her past and utopian fantasies of a better future. Similarly, in the case of Mahā from the novel *Bāʾ miṯl bayt... miṯl Bayrūt*, her relation to the events of the novel complies with the stereotype; resigned and grief-stricken by the death of her beloved, she continues to follow the devastation of her city and killing of her people in horror, lethargic and comatose. Articulating the monotony and senselessness, she discloses: 'Every day the sun rises only to show that there is nothing new under it. I would wake up, wash my face, and sit down to wait for evening to arrive.'[47]

In her collection *ʿĀlam an-nisāʾ al-waḥīdāt* (The World of Lonely Women, 1986),[48] Luṭfiyya ad-Dulaymī, from the perspective of an unnamed female protagonist, sensitively captures the world of women waiting for their husbands to return from war, thus fully concurring with the present type. A young heroine narrates her expectations, fears and desires as she prepares for his long-awaited arrival. She describes the lengthy evenings that she spent anxiously watching the news, afraid that she might see his body among the dead. Her account reveals the nature of her story and reflects the collective experience. As the heroine observes the women of the neighbourhood on the evening of a day of battle, she states: 'It wasn't only my sadness, my yearnings, my fear; the desires and anxieties of all the others were roaming in the air above us, fears of wives, mothers and lovers. The thoughts that I never even dared to say out loud tie me to these women I barely know. Our hearts tremble, our patience is tried, our long, bitter waiting terrifies us.'[49]

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44 Masmoudi 2010, 76.
45 Masmoudi 2010, 64.
46 Al-Qazwini 2008, 79.
47 Younes 2008, 201.
48 Ad-Dulaymī, Luṭfiyya: *ʿĀlam an-nisāʾ al-waḥīdāt.* Bayrūt: Dār al-Madā 2013.
49 Ad-Dulaymī 2013, 184, own translation.

2.1.3. The Heroine 'Indifferent' in Relation to the Events of War

As Miriam Cooke points out in her well-known treatise *War's Other Voices* (1988): 'There had never before been such a war, no war myth to which it approximated. The easiest course was to pretend that it did not exist as long as it remained distant.'[50] She further states that it was *Beirut Decentrists* which pointed to this self-delusion and exposed it.

Ghāda as-Sammān is one of those writers who sheds light on this phenomenon in her novel *Kawābīs Bayrūt*. She does so by means of the marginal character of Salwā, who enters the narrative of the heroine trapped in the war inferno in order to expose the ignorance and delusion of the people. Salwā, keeps calling the heroine, who is struggling to survive, asking her to talk, on her behalf, to a certain professor who leads a folk-dance troupe that Salwā is desperate to join. The protagonist is taken aback by an idea that 'the city is going up in flames and she is just aflame to dance the dabka.'[51] Salwā's absolute indifference towards the events of the war is accentuated in her second appearance in the narrative, where she informs the heroine about the death of Maryam, her sister and heroine's colleague and friend. As reported by the protagonist, the information on the killing of Maryam comes only as an addition, a supplementary fact preceded by Salwā's exhilaration about joining the folk-dance group.[52]

In the novel *Kam badat as-samāʾ qarība* by Batūl al-Khuḍayrī, the events of the Iraqi war are documented as viewed by the unnamed heroine, whose coming-of-age is realised simultaneously by the gradual collapse of her war-torn country and the progressive deterioration of her mother's health. In order to recount the traumatic events of the novel and the impact that they had on the lives of the characters, the author opts for a rather original strategy – she lets her heroine narrate the events in a detached, impersonal manner, devoid of any trace of pathos. The war is, nevertheless, omnipresent in the narrative, intruding on any activity in the teenage girl's life in the form of televised news, military communiqués and air-raid sirens. Disturbing news from the fronts interrupts a routine of the heroine as well as of the people who surround her, who seem to be trying their best to get on with everyday life. Thus, she focuses her attention on training in a local ballet troupe, with the sound of military aircraft 'drowning out the melodies from [our] musical instruments'.[53] She tries her best to perfect her posture while 'outside, the war rages on, divided between the battlefront, the television, and the radio … .'[54]

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50 Cooke 1988, 29.

51 Samman 1997, 45.

52 'She said she'd been so worried about it, she hadn't slept the night before. And her sister Maryam? Oh, Salwa had forgotten to inform me that she'd been killed…' See Samman 1997, 108.

53 Samman 2001, 114.

54 Samman 2001, 116.

From the point of view of the heroine, the war becomes almost a habit, as she refers to the images of shelling, the sounds of the sirens, or even to 'death and its tales'[55] as to something they've become accustomed to.[56]

The military communiqué (*al-bayān al-ʿaskarī*) seems to interrupt every key moment of the personal life of the heroine. These announcements, that are promoted to a motif in the narrative, inevitably contain news about military operations, losses, and victims. The heroine, however, remains seemingly indifferent to this news. She does not reflect on it in her monologues or comment on its effects on other characters. Moreover, her narrative only contains a small number of introspective passages. As a consequence, the way in which her experience is depicted initially creates the impression that she distances herself from these events, that she is unconcerned or even ignorant. However, the absence of her reaction is more indicative of her incapacity, her *inability* to speak about the events witnessed and their traumatic impact. What points to this particular interpretation of the heroine's *silence* and *the absence of a reaction* is the manner in which one of the key moments of the novel is documented: when the heroine finds out about her mother's illness,[57] in a rare moment of introspection she articulates her inability to react: 'I felt completely paralyzed, *unable to respond* to her calamity. I didn't know how to embark on a conversation with her or *what to say*.'[58] Hence, al-Khuḍayrī lets her protagonist 'narrate the trauma through silence',[59] caused by the inability to verbalize the actual horror of the reality of the war. The chosen narrative strategy results in a narrative that appeals to the reader due to its authenticity and 'mute eloquence'.

2.2. The Heroine's Active Participation

According to Cooke, Lebanese women were involved in their country's civil war of the 1970s at the level of 'maternal thinking', since 'the women were involved in the war not as fighters but as conflict resolvers and as mothers, both real and potential.'[60] Tijani discloses that the opposite is almost the case in Kuwait. As is evident in some of their war narratives, Kuwaiti women were involved in

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55 Samman 2001, 130.

56 Samman 2001, 130, 133.

57 The breast cancer progressively destroys the body of her mother in a way that is analogous to how the war destroys her country.

58 Khedairi 2001, 154, my emphasis.

59 Balaev argues that silence and narrative omissions are instances of narrative innovations through which a diversity of extreme emotional states are conveyed in the trauma novel. They are employed to emphasize mental confusion, chaos or contemplation as a response to the experience. 'The narrative strategy of silence may create a 'gap' in time or feeling that allows the reader to imagine what might or could have happened to the protagonist, thereby broadening the meaning and effects of the experience.' See Balaev 2008, 159.

60 Cooke 1988, 166.

the conflict at the levels of both 'maternal thinking' and female militancy. Their acts of insubordination during the war are portrayed either as 'subtle' (not noticeable and non-violent) or as 'violent'.[61] Similarly, and despite the general predominance of portrayals of passive participation, we found instances of what can be deemed active participation in the studied works by Lebanese authors as well. As for the works by Iraqi writers, this modality of participation was absent.

2.2.1. The Active Heroine: Indirect (Subtle) Participation

The war figures as a trigger in the process of the re-evaluation of the moral and societal values belonging to the pre-war reality. In the case of the *Kawābīs Bayrūt* heroine, this is reflected in her constant questioning the role of writers in the conflict. As Cooke explains, the Lebanese conflict was one that everyone was involved in.[62] The heroine, being a writer herself, is not only conscious of her involvement in the war, but she even feels *responsible* for it. As she sees it, the lines that she penned always 'conveyed a call for change, a call to cleanse the face of this homeland': 'These were my words. They had emerged from inside my books to take on flesh as human beings who were now bearing arms and fighting.'[63] Under the influence of the unimaginable violence that envelops her, she soon begins to doubt the power of the written word and underestimates her role as a militant author in a world ruled by arms. Initially condemning violence, she is persuaded that the role of a writer in a war is to stay alive in order to bear witness and denounce its terrors, thus joining a movement of 'non-violent resistance', as defined by Evelyn Accad in her work *Sexuality and War* (1990).[64] However, her attitude toward the violence changes in the course of the narrative. First, she feels remorse for not 'taking up arms' like her friend Maryam has. Later in the novel, she senses a strange fascination when holding a revolver, a symbol of violence, which recurs predominantly in the second half of the account.[65] When the tensions around her escalate, she fires it, killing a dog that she mistook for an intruder. Profoundly startled by the realisation that she was 'capable of murder',[66] she defines her relation to the firearm as 'a sort of forced marriage',[67] determining that even though she loathes it, her survival depends on it. The *Kawābīs Bayrūt* protagonist does, however, consciously accept violence – even though with the aim

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61 Tijani 2008, 259.
62 Cooke 1988, 31.
63 Samman 1997, 47.
64 Accad 1990, 7.
65 'But now, after having passed through the city of hunger, terror, hysteria and violence, I found myself contemplating the gun before me with fascination and even delight.' See Samman 1997, 304.
66 Samman 1997, 354.
67 Samman 1997, 352.

of defending herself, and not eradicating the enemy. She is modelled as a character that transgresses the fixed frames of a conventionalized type of passive and peaceful woman, to which she has been confined by the general discourse. By means of her actions, a dividing line in the binary opposition *violence* (as a traditionally male domain) and *peace* (as a female one) is blurred: in order to survive, she accepts the use of violence, conventionally attributed to men.

The gender binary that Ḥumaydān Yūnis constructs is considered by some critics as the deepest flaw of the novel *Bāʾ miṯl bayt...miṯl Bayrūt*.[68] It is also reflected in the characters' attitude towards the war and the violence, which only seem to have an indirect impact on their lives. As Mikdashi aptly observes in her review of Yūnis's work, 'female characters do not accept any responsibility for the war around them, which they often explicitly attribute to men. They seem to float (and sometimes sink) on the surface of a violent world not of their own making.'[69] According to the critic, the world Yūnis portrays is one where men occupy the space of politics, danger, and violence, while women are tasked with trying to love, live, and find peace in a chaotic world. She thus relies on 'tired gender stereotypes' to narrate the war.[70]

This dichotomy is, however, disrupted towards the end of the novel – in a dramatic scene, depicted with the sounds of a final battle of the war in the background, Kāmīliyā and Mahā tie down and kill Ranger, Kāmīliyā's lover, who figures in Mahā's narrative as the personification of the war. He quickly finds his way into the two women's lives and becomes, as Mahā describes him, 'a master of the house, the absolute master'.[71] After he kills Muḥammad,[72] the heroines trespass the borders of this strictly 'women's world' constructed by the author and decide to avenge violence by violence. In her account, Mahā relates the moment of this 'inversion' of the two separate worlds as follows: 'The two of us were masters of the situation, queens without a kingdom, without crowns.…Horror surrounded us but still we were two queens. The king's throne collapsed, the king we had loved ardently until the bitter end, until the desire to annihilate took over.'[73] By resorting to violence (as one of the main devices of war) against a militiaman (as its main perpetrator), the protagonists situate themselves apart from the 'women's world' and become a part of the mechanism of war. Mahā's words hint at the possibility of interpreting their act as a protest against the culture of war that Ranger embodies: 'I can see myself hitting him. I can see her beating him. Take

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68 See MIKDASHI 2009, 196 and SCHADER 2008.

69 MIKDASHI 2009, 196.

70 Ibid.

71 YOUNES 2008, 213.

72 Kāmīliyā's ex-lover and protector and Mahā's friend, who, as Mikdashi states, is presented as one of the two cliché types (a passive, contemplative man), the opposite of Ranger (a violent, fanatical man). See MIKDASHI 2009, 196.

73 YOUNES 2008, 221.

that for the years we weren't allowed to enjoy. For the emptiness we suffered through. For our illusions. For all our fear. For our humiliation.'[74] Mikdashi describes this moment of a narrative as 'a climactic scene that suggests she is aware of, and frustrated with, the gender politics of her novel, and perhaps, her world.'[75] On that account, the heroines' violent 'rebellion' against the man who demonstrated his dominance over them may additionally be viewed as an allegorical liberation from the patriarchal dominion as a control mechanism in the pre-war reality.

As for the Kuwaiti writers, Tijani chooses a heroine of the short story *Zaman al-inḥidār* (Time of Decline) as a suitable representative of women's subtle resistance in literature. The story in question, authored by Ṯurayyā al-Baqṣamī, is a part of the collection *Shumūʿ as-sarādib* (Cellar Candles, 1992), which in its entirety thematises the Iraqi military intervention in Kuwait and deals with various aspects of the life of civilians under the occupation.[76] Appearing first in the collection, and filtered largely through the third person narrative (interspersed occasionally by a few dialogues between the characters in the story), *Zaman al-inḥidār* is the story of a young, middle-class, working-class Kuwaiti woman, who is nauseated by the Iraqi invasion of her 'motherland.'[77] She joins a secret resistance group, where her task is to distribute anti-Iraqi pamphlets disguised as a pregnant woman, carrying them in her mid-riff. The female protagonists of the story are constructed with the objective of highlighting the active role of women struggling to preserve their national identity. However, Tijani points out that their voice as representatives of female empowerment and strength may be muted by the fact that the author 'advertently or inadvertently, emphasizes men's indispensable roles as motivators of women's resistance activism',[78] portraying men as leaders and commanders. In spite of this, the key role that the female protagonists play cannot be diminished. Moreover, the story underlines the effective utilisation of certain feminine qualities and attributes in the face of masculine strength and power. For instance, the heroine's friend Nawāl encourages her to smile at the (Iraqi) soldier, or touch her belly. Through the pregnancy, 'as a feminine (rather than masculine) attribute',[79] al-Baqṣamī creates the image of the female body as a vehicle of resistance, in contrast to prevailing images of this body as an object of victimization in both fictional and factual war narratives.[80]

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74 YOUNES 2008, 224.
75 MIKDASHI 2009, 196.
76 MICHALAK-PIKULSKA 2009, 35.
77 TIJANI 2008, 260.
78 TIJANI 2008, 261.
79 Ibid.
80 TIJANI 2008, 262.

Zahra, the protagonist of al-Shaykh's *Ḥikāyat Zahra* novel, similarly utilizes the attributes from the traditional 'women's domain' as a vehicle to confront the culture of war and violence that she despises, regardless of the fact that, as she articulates in her narrative, the war came 'to her rescue'.[81] The depiction of her ambiguous intimate relationship with a sniper, who, in the context of the Lebanese conflict, symbolises the culture of violence, takes up a significant portion of the second part of the novel. While the motifs for her carrying out this affair that starts off as a sexual assault are difficult to determine, one of the possible interpretations suggests that the heroine is using her body as a weapon against the violence of the sniper, by distracting him from the killing. She explicitly articulates her intentions to do so in her narrative: 'I wondered what could possibly divert the sniper from aiming his rifle and startle him to the point where he might open his mouth instead? … [Or] perhaps a naked woman, passing across his field of fire? Maybe if such a sight would cross his vision he would pause for just one moment…'.[82] Or elsewhere: 'My reason for coming to him was that I might put a stop to the sniping.'[83] While in the case of al-Baqṣamī this strategy of resistance proves to be effective, Zahra soon realizes that she might not have saved anyone since 'her visits only replaced his siestas.'[84] Unable to prevent the sniper from killing, she even starts to feel responsible for his murders.

2.2.2. The Active Heroine: Direct (Violent) Participation

In the scope of this category we intend to focus on those female protagonists of novels documenting the events or war, who are depicted in the roles of direct participants of armed military operations in the conflicts. Even though the violent and confrontational approaches to resistance are mostly associated with the male actors, instances of a female violent resistance are present in the narratives of the studied corpus.

As a representative of this type of a heroine, Tijani selects Najma, a militant protagonist of Fāṭima Yūsuf al-ʿAlī's short story *Dimāʾ ʿalā wajh al-qamar*[85] (The Bloody Side of the Moon). The story captures a metamorphosis of a heroine from a small girl to a heroic female leader. Her arrival to the world is accompanied by her father's disappointment since he yearns for a son. She not only becomes a guerrilla fighter for a resistance group, but soon takes up a leadership role. Once incarcerated by Iraqi soldiers, she decides to commit suicide 'in the interest of her nation as well as in defence of her honour'.[86] Tijani considers the short story an

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81 See Al-Shaykh 1991, 164.
82 Al-Shaykh 1991, 157.
83 Al-Shaykh 1991, 156.
84 Al-Shaykh 1991, 160.
85 Al-ʿAlī 1998, 44. Quoted in Tijani 2008, 265.
86 Tijani 2008, 265.

'overly feminist text' since it situates women directly at the centre of the resistance activity: by highlighting her leading position in the structure of the gender-heterogenous organisation, the author deconstructs the dominant notions of male superiority.[87] Moreover, her death by suicide in the final part of the story is constructed as a symbol of the ultimate sacrifice of the heroine, who prioritizes the interests of her comrades and nation over her own survival. As Tijani concludes, the conventional gender roles are reconstructed even more strikingly in al-ʿAlī's short story, with a protagonist who 'thinks and behaves more in conformity with the patriarchal social construction of masculinity (activity, aggressiveness, decisiveness) than of femininity (passivity, submissiveness, indecisiveness)'.[88]

In the selection of studied works we were not able to identify many heroines whose participation in the conflict could be described as a direct (violent) resistance. Although Mahā and Kāmīliyā's final act could be classified as such, due to the symbolic nature of the narrative it seems more fitting to deem it 'subtle'. Additionally, as-Sammān does create a female character who directly participates in the battles by joining the armed forces of the Lebanese conflict in *Kawābīs Bayrūt*. Maryam, the heroine's colleague and friend, enters the narrative as an episodic character. While her exact motivation and the reason for her decision to 'take up' arms remains unknown, she serves the narrative since she kindles the heroine's reflection on a writer's role in a conflict.[89]

Conclusion

In her study, Miriam Cooke reflects on why the women writers do not write about women warriors, while many male writers do. This is even more surprising in view of the fact that, for instance, in the context of the Iraqi wars, thousands of women enlisted in the militia forces. Cooke suggests that this is the case 'because women soldiers, after all, are doing what the men are doing.'[90] The women write about what the women are doing *as women*. In the context of the Lebanese and Iraqi wars, in particular, they write through and on the war, but often *against* it. The literary representation of the violently participating heroine is thus quantitatively less important; however, its importance lies in the fact that it refers to the actual active participation of women in conflicts, which is often omitted in the historiographical discourse.

Similarly, the instances of a purely victimized heroine were difficult to identify in the studied corpus. This was due to either the fluctuating status of the protagonists, which often changed from passive into active in regard to the fictional

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87 Ibid.
88 Tijani 2008, 266.
89 See in Samman 1997, 63.
90 Cooke 1995, 24.

events of their respective narratives, or the fact that their suffering took the form of a sacrifice for a higher purpose. In most of the cases, the heroines' participation may be described as active, indirect and subtle. This is reflected in the characters' conduct and actions that could be classified as an active resistance (either against the enemy, or the culture of war itself), while the means they resort to in order to achieve their aims are different from violence. The fictional worlds of these works are inhabited by characters who constantly go beyond the bounds of gender stereotypes. The heroine of the war prose is thus depicted in unexpected settings, situations and roles. She is inventively varied in terms of her age, ethnic or religious affiliation, profession and position within the family and social relations. The diversity and variance of the ways these heroines cope with the reality of war reveals the uniqueness and importance of individual stories, capturing the experience from the perspective of women and thus completing the mosaic of a war as a moment in historical memory.

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Abstracts

A Literary Heroine of Selected Fictional War Narratives by Arab Women Writers

Zuzana PRISTAŠOVÁ

The destructive power of armed conflicts within the Middle Eastern region provided thematic material for several important works by Arab female writers. The specific modality of these historical events is carried by the female characters that create these fictional narratives. In our contribution, we will focus on the main aspects of the modelling of the female protagonist in prose works, thematising the war in Lebanon, Iraq and Kuwait. We examine to what extent the position of the female protagonist of the fictional war worlds is identical to the one attributed to her by the mainstream discourse, which often overlooks the participation of women in conflicts or records it as the participation of a monolithic "silenced" group, situated on the edge.

From a spatial perspective, we are interested in how female characters in fictional spaces are positioned in relation to the epicentre of war. In the case of literary heroines in the discussed works, it is the prevailing need to "remain", "endure" and "bear witness", which is presented as one of the options for confronting a culture of violence. In the classification of the protagonists of these works, we focus on the manner in which they are created in terms of their (active/passive) "participation" in armed conflicts, drawing on a study by I. O. Tijani (2008) as a basis for the classification.

[Literárna hrdinka vybraných fikčných vojnových naratívov arabských autoriek]

Deštrukčná sila ozbrojených konfliktov v rámci blízkovýchodného regiónu poskytla tematický materiál pre viaceré významné diela arabských spisovateliek. Špecifická modalita týchto historických udalostí je reflektovaná v postavách nimi informovaných fikčných príbehov. V našom príspevku sa zameriavame na hlavné aspekty modelácie ženskej protagonistky v prozaických dielach, tematizujúcich vojnu v Libanone, Iraku a Kuvajte. Skúmame, do akej miery je pozícia ženskej hrdinky fikčných vojnových svetov totožná s tou, ktorú jej prisudzuje väčšinový diskurz. Ten účasť žien v konfliktoch mnohokrát prehliada, prípadne ju zaznamenáva ako participáciu monolitnej „umlčanej" skupiny, situovanej na okraji vojnových aktivít.

Z hľadiska *priestorového aspektu* nás zaujíma, akým spôsobom sú ženské postavy vo fiktívnom priestore rozmiestňované vo vzťahu k epicentru vojny. V prípade literárnych hrdiniek študovaného súboru diel prevláda potreba *ostať, zotrvať, byť svedkyňou*, prezentovaná ako jedna z možností ako čeliť kultúre násilia. Pri klasifikácii protagonistiek predmetných diel sa zameriavame na spôsob, akým sú vytvárané z hľadiska ich *participácie* (aktívnej/pasívnej) v rámci ozbrojeného konfliktu a ako východisko pri tvorbe klasifikácie nám slúžila štúdia I. O. Tijaniho (2008).