**Existentialism and War in Ghāda al-Sammān's Early Short Stories**

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# Mighty eagles and mercenaries: existentialism and war in Ghāda al-Sammān's early short stories

Abstract: This article looks at the existentialist nature of Ghāda al-Sammān's early short stories, with a particular focus on her very first collection, *Aynāka qadarī* (Your eyes are my destiny), published in 1962. Ghāda al-Sammān was born in Syria and widely celebrated for her novelistic career: this article gives centrality to two of her early short stories as they present narratives that intricately weave individual and collective struggles within the context of the Algerian War of Independence. Analysing the interplay between overarching Arab causes, feminism, and existential themes, this study explores the nuanced portrayal of characters grappling with the complexities of war, morality, and personal redemption. The protagonists, often embodying dichotomous perspectives, symbolize dignity and barbarism, echoing existentialist principles. The article examines how al-Samman's youthful perspective and Sartrean influences shape the narratives, offering readers a unique lens into the psychological and moral dimensions of conflict. By unravelling layers of existential struggle and political engagement, this analysis sheds light on the richness and relevance of al-Samman's early works within the broader literary and philosophical landscape.

Keywords: Ghada al-Samman, Syria, Lebanon, existentialism, nationalism, Algeria, feminism, short stories

> *Sometimes I feel that murder is the only alternative to art. Art is an attempt at changing the world, but sometimes I'm overcome by a sense of despair about the benefit of writing* [جدوى الكتابة] *and I feel that planning the assassination of an enemy of the people might be more useful for the people than writing a novel… Sirḥān Sirḥān is, in his own way, a great artist.*[1] (Ghāda al-Sammān, 1974)

This article examines Ghāda al-Sammān's (b. 1942, from now on al-Samman) early short stories, in particular, two stories from her very first collection *'Aynāka qadarī* (Your eyes are my destiny, 1962),[2] unearthing previously uncharted and largely overlooked aspects of her early writing such as existentialism and pan-Arab nationalism. The analysis focuses on the interplay between overarching Arab causes and feminism in al-Samman's works, as exemplified by two stories: "Maghārat al-Nusūr" (The Eagles' Cave, pp. 65-74), henceforth referred to as The Eagles' Cave, as well as the barbaric vs. dignified models of masculinity as exemplified by "Barārī shaqā'iq al-nu'mān" (براري شقائق النعمان, Poppy Fields, pp. 171-179), from now on Poppy Fields, both from her first collection.

This interplay highlights the ways in which al-Samman's narratives intersect with both political and gender dynamics at an early stage in her career, something that would become a trademark of her most celebrated works, i.e. the Lebanese tetralogy consisting of four novels published between 1975 and 2003: *Bayrūt '75* (Beirut 75, 1975), *Kawābīs Bayrūt* (Beirut Nightmares,

[1] Muḥyī al-dīn Ṣubḥī, Liqā' ma' Ghāda al-Sammān, al-Ma'rifa, n. 145, March 1974, p. 124. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. Sirhan Sirhan, a Palestinian-Jordanian living in the United States, was found guilty of the assassination in June 1968 of Senator Robert F. Kennedy, the younger sibling of American president John F. Kennedy.

[2] Ghāda al-Sammān, *'Aynāka Qadarī*, Manshūrāt Ghāda al-Sammān, 1993 [first edition 1962]. Since 1977, all of al-Sammān's works have been reprinted several times following the establishment of her own publishing house Manshūrāt Ghāda al-Sammān (Arabic for Ghāda al-Sammān Publications).

1976), *Laylat al-Miliyār* (The Night of the First Billion, 1986) and *Sahrah tanakkuriyyah lil-mawtā* (Masquerade for the Dead, 2003).[3]

Apart from *'Aynāka Qadarī*, prior to the publication of the abovementioned novels, al-Samman's production consists of three more collections of short stories published between 1963 and 1973: *Lā baḥr fī Bayrūt* (There's No Sea in Beirut, 1963), *Layl al-Ghurabā'* (The Strangers' Night, 1966) and *Raḥīl al-Marāfi' al-Qadīmah* (The Old Ports' Departure, 1973). While the focus of *'Aynāka Qadarī* rests consistently on the existential dilemmas that an array of different protagonists face at a crucial moment in their lives, *Lā baḥr fī Bayrūt* reveals a growing concern for the condition of women specifically in patriarchal societies. The stories of *Layl al-Ghurabā'* on the other hand, published in 1966 following al-Samman's relocation to London, revolve consistently around a sense of alienation that male and female protagonists equally experience both abroad and in the Arab homeland. These first three collections present formal and stylistic similarities in their exploration of the inner conscience of the protagonists, often through the stream of consciousness, as well as through dialogues. The less sophisticated and more matter-of-fact linguistic choices make *Raḥīl al-Marāfi' al-Qadīmah* stand out for the explicit mention of the 1967 defeat, its effects on the Arab self-perception, and a much close similarity with al-Samman's novelistic production.

The two short stories in question, in turn, demonstrate an acute sensitivity for the towering Arab cause of the early 1960s, namely, the Algerian war of independence. Both stories highlight the brutality and the violence as well as the morally compelling nature of the struggle in the perception of the young al-Samman, who was twenty years old at the time of publication. An early preoccupation with the connection between societal ills, politically instability and

[3] I borrow the definition 'Lebanese Tetralogy' to refer to al-Samman's war novels from Kifah Hanna's 2016 monograph. Kifah Hanna, *Feminism and Avant-Garde Aesthetics in the Levantine Novel: Feminism, Nationalism, and the Arabic Novel*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016.

racial/class inequity, allows us to situate these short stories in al-Samman's trajectory as both an exception in terms of setting and an anticipation of what would become the central tropes of her novelistic production. In addition, analysing these stories from a feminist perspective, to explore how her narrative both challenges and reinforces traditional gender norms, reveals the author's concern with the agency and empowerment of female characters (The Eagles' Cave) as well as with the interplay between masculinities, war and gendered violence (Poppy Fields). In this sense, from a strictly stylistic point of view, these two short stories present symbolic and allegorical elements that do not feature in the novels that al-Samman published after 1974.

Considering her choice of Algeria as the setting of these two stories is useful for several reasons. It grants readers the opportunity of thinking of al-Samman's early writing as firmly rooted in the political and artistic debates of 1950s and 1960s Mashreq literary circles, particularly, under the influence of Jean-Paul Sartre and his understanding of commitment and existentialism. In the stories in question, the representation of the two sides of the Algerian conflict, namely the French military and the local Algerian resistance movement, contribute to the layers of interpretation within the narrative, as they incarnate respectively indiscriminate and brutal physical violence perpetuated by the French colonial powers, on one hand, and steadfastness in the face of indignities, humiliation and injustice, on the other.

Supplying a similar setting as the Lebanese civil war, which serves in her novels as the ideal universe to unpack issues such as class conflict, alienation, homophobia and patriarchal violence, the Algerian war of independence acts, within the obvious constraints of time and space of the short story, as a microcosm reflecting broader concerns which contribute to al-Samman's overarching literary agenda. In this sense, there is noteworthy evidence that al-Samman remained generally critical of the institutionalised conceptualisation of commitment

that became predominant in Syria.[4] In her 1974 interview with Muḥyī al-dīn Ṣubḥī, when confronted about the committed nature of her short stories, she expressed in assertive and unambiguous terms her rejection of the socialist realist notion of commitment endorsed by the Arab Writer's Union. She did not "decide to write and *commit* just because commitment was trendy among critics"[5], al-Samman stated, instead she reiterated her position as a form of commitment to the concept of absolute freedom for the writer, which, in turn, aligns with the Sartrean conceptualisation famously popularised in the Arab World by Suhayl Idrīs's magazine al-Ādāb.[6]

Al-Samman's works have historically elicited scholarly interest in Europe and North America, and a great deal of scholarship published in the last decade testifies to the renewed and increased interest in her novels, particularly, their representations of female protagonists.[7] Hanadi al-Samman's *Anxiety of Erasure* looks at al-Samman's (and other female Arab authors') autobiographic production employing the concept of *wa'da* i.e. female infant burial, as well as through Shrahrazad as a key narrator figure whom female Arab writers have appropriated and transformed from an exclusively oral narrator to an engaged writing figure with agency in regards to race, class and gender. Specifically, *Anxiety of Erasure* deals with Al-Samman's

[4] Wail S. Hassan, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Arab Novelistic Traditions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 443-448.

[5] Ṣubḥī, Muḥyī al-dīn. Liqā' ma' Ghāda al-Sammān, al-Ma'rifa, n. 145, March 1974, p. 121.

[6] Verena Klemm, "Ideals and Reality The Adaption of European Ideas of Literary Commitment in the Post-Colonial Middle East - The Case of Abdalwahhab al-Bayati" in Guth, Stephan, Priska Furrer and Johann Christoph Bürgel, eds. *Conscious Voices: Concepts of Writing in the Middle East: Proceedings of the Berne Symposium*, July 1997, Stuttgart: Steiner, 1999, p. 147.

[7] In English, see Hanan A. Awwad, *Arab Causes in the Fiction of Ghada al-Samman (1961–1975*), Sherbrooke, Québec, Canada: Editions Naaman, 1983; Margot Badran and miriam cooke, *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing. Bloomington*, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990; Pauline Homsi Vinson, Ghada Samman: A Writer of Many Layers, Al Jadid Magazine, Vol. 8, no. 39 (Spring 2002). In Arabic, see Nabīl Sulaymān's and Bū 'Alī Yāsīn's *al-Adab wa al-idıyūlūjıyā fī Sūriyya 1967– 1973,* Bayrūt: Dār Ibn Khaldūn, 1974; Ghali Shukri, *Ghāda al-Sammān bi-lā Ajniḥa*, Bayrūt: Dār al-Talī'ah, 1977.

1990s novels and short stories as testimonies set in radically different contexts, that reveal a widespread female preoccupation with the prospect of erasure, symbolised by the practice of *wa'dah* and its respective passive participle *maw'udah*.[8] More recently, an article by Renée Ragin Randall has looked at the supernatural in al-Samman's novels and essays employing Arabo-Islamic cosmologies, Euro-American psychoanalytic notions, and Shakespearean aesthetics.[9]

Most works, however, seem to completely overlook the pre-1975 short-story production of this writer, putting particular emphasis on al-Samman's feminist *j'accuse* and viewing her early stories exclusively as a denouncement of women's inferior position in Arab societies.[10] This has been generally, and rightly so, understood to be a major concern for the young al-Samman, however her short stories, with their thematic and stylistic evolution, merit a specific connection to the major historical events of the 1950s and 1960s, particularly, in the way they foreshadow the distinctive themes of her novels.

While not an exception to this trend in terms of focus, Kifah Hanna's monograph on feminism and avant-gardism in the modern Levantine novel supplies a useful methodological terrain in the way it explores al-Samman's novelistic production as an original existentialist viewpoint regarding the human experience, especially that of women, in times of national upheaval. Al-Samman's existentialist avant-garde writing, according to Hanna, comes as the maturation from an inward looking, individualistic style of feminist writing to one that engages with feminist

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[8] Hanadi Al-Samman, *Trauma, Authorship, and the Diaspora in Arab Women's Writings* New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015.

[9] Renée Ragin Randall (2022) Lebanon in the Devil's Waters: the literary supernatural in Ghada al-Samman's civil war trilogy, Middle Eastern Literatures, 25:2-3, 150-167.

[10] With regards to this, see, for example, Roger Allen, "The Arabic short story and the status of women", in *Love and Sexuality in Modern Arabic Literature*, Roger Allen and Hillary Kilpatrick eds., London: Saqi Books, 1994, pp. 77-89.

Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, and Basima Qattan Bezirgan, eds., *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977, pp. 391-399.

issues in the context of broader, overarching Arab struggles.[11] In particular, Hanna follows the trajectory of what she calls al-Samman's "Beirut tetralogy": from anticipation of the tragedy to come in her first novel, *Bayrūt '75* (1975), to *Kawābīs Bayrūt* (1976) as representation of the conflict in Beirut which al-Samman witnessed first-hand, to an examination of the historical factors contributing to the war and the consequences that followed, as Lebanon navigated its challenging and tumultuous journey towards post-war reconstruction in *Laylat al-Miliyār* (1986) and *Sahrah tanakkuriyyah lil-mawtā* (2003).

The focus of Hanna's study rests on nationalism as a key context for Arab women's writings, as well as the novels' profound and stylistically pioneering emphasis on the consequences on individuals of political and ideological fragmentation, in addition to the disintegrating social and national frameworks.[12] In this sense, Hanna's methodology and theoretical framework to analyse al-Samman's novels, and the concept of Levantine feminist aesthetics as being closely intertwined with existentialism and Arab nationalist causes, provide a useful background to trace this trend back in al-Samman's short stories too. The following pages show how, from a very early stage in al-Samman's production, the intersection between broad collective causes such as feminism, existentialism and anti-colonial violence emerges as a key element of literary analysis of her early works. This contradicts the argument, proposed by Hanna herself, that understands such themes as an evolution towards relational feminism to have materialised in al-Samman's novels in the context of the Lebanese civil war which lasted from 1975 to 1991[13]. Borrowing her definition from Karen Offen, Hanna elucidates relational feminism as a gender-centered yet egalitarian perspective on social organization, emphasizing the importance of a companionate, non-hierarchical male-female couple as the fundamental societal unit.[14] Indeed,

[11] Hanna, *Feminism and Avant-Garde Aesthetics*, pp. 39-67.

[12] *Ibid*., pp. 28-33.

[13] *Ibid*., p. 47.

[14] Hanna, *Feminism and avant-garde aesthetics*, pp. 32-33.

far from being merely individualistic, the two stories in question capture the personal experience of the protagonists and understand their trajectory and life-changing transformations as a direct consequence of their diametrically opposed experiences of violence in Algeria. In this sense, the violence witnessed by the protagonists during the Algerian war of independence serves as the "limit situation", the pivotal moment of awareness, which in turn is typical of existentialist writing, that alters the circumstances of the protagonists bringing them face to face with a crisis of values.[15]

In summary, while al-Samman's novelistic production has elicited strong and continued interest at least since the 1980s, her beginnings as a young short-story writer have received close to no attention. The following pages provide fresh insights into the literary prowess and the breadth of al-Samman's thematic exploration, hoping to serve as a valuable contribution to a broader understanding of her complete body of work. This article begins to fill this gap in the knowledge of this author, highlighting its stylistic originality and researching in her early short stories the recurring themes and motifs that have made al-Samman's novels so prominent, such as identity, gender roles, social norms, cultural clashes, personal freedom, and the human condition. In particular, the analysis charts the narrative techniques employed by al-Samman, her use of point of view, narrative structure, symbolism, and allegory.

## The Eagles' Cave: a sanctuary of manliness and civilization against colonial barbarism

The Eagles' Cave revolves around the female protagonist Basma, her role as a spy working undercover as a maid for a French general, her love relation to a guerrilla fighter as well as her experience of agency and empowerment. The setting is the Aurès mountains in Eastern Algeria and the story follows Basma's attempt to reach the eponymous cave, situated at the top of the

[15] Same as Hanna, I borrow the concept of limit situation from Hans Van Stralen. See Hans Van Stralen, *Choices and Conflicts: Essays on Literature and Existentialism*, Brussels: P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2005.

Aurès peaks, to inform her husband Ḥanafī and his fellow fighters that a new supply consisting of two hundred cases of explosives has been delivered to the French. By tipping the fighters about the explosives, she contributes to the success of a night-time guerrilla operation at the hands of her husband and his men, which leads to the complete destruction of a French military stronghold. Written in a highly evocative and rich style, the language delves deep into the female protagonist's feelings and struggle for sentimental love, national liberation and personal revenge, while the narrative goes back and forth between Basma's tireless climbing towards the cave and her past as an undercover agent.

The story begins by introducing the protagonist's nighttime escape from a shabby fortress (القلعة المهترئة) inhabited by "tens of pigs and wolves with two hundred terrifying cases in its basement",[16] located at the bottom of a mountain. Her declared aim is to get to the mountain top, to the eagles' cave, but to achieve that she must run in the rain while the wind is blowing, bending the trees and throwing rocks in her face. All the while, the protagonist regularly checks her breasts where she keeps a piece of cartilage with a golden crescent-shaped earring hanging from it and touches it with "the tenderness of a sacrificial offering" (بحنان ذبيح).

As the story unfolds, it is revealed how the French military personnel stationed at the fortress discovered that their Algerian maid Basma was a covert informant, feigning obedience while secretly gathering information for the local resistance. In one of the flashbacks, she stays (only apparently passively) at the receiving end of a humiliating attitude, serving and obeying a lame and drunken general's requests for more wine in celebration of two-hundred cases of explosive being delivered to his garrison. The turning point of events comes when, while working in the general's room, Basma notices a golden crescent-shaped earring hanging from a cut-off cartilage inside a box with hundreds of other human ears. She recognises the earring as her daughter's, steals it and runs off with it, but as she is climbing towards the eagles' cave, she is

[16] Al-Sammān, '*Aynāka Qadarī,* p. 66.

shot in her shoulder. She bleeds profusely, yet she keeps running towards the mountain's peak. Once again, the narrative moves back in time and another flashback takes the reader to Basma's three years of service for the French. For three years, she witnessed the French "pirates" profit from boxes of cut-off cartilages, taken from the ears of her brothers and daughters.

> They might tear me apart, they might electrocute me, they might burn me alive in an oven like they did to a brother who refused to inform on the eagles' cave, they might as well kill me, but I won't die. They kill us but we don't die. We don't cry. We all dig graves for the pirates.[17]

The protagonist's monologues are alternated frequently with images of the Algerian landscape and its symbolism to represent the conflict from the point of view of Algerians. So strong is the polarisation between the victimised local resistance and the barbaric colonisers that in these passages, elements of the landscape acquire human senses, incarnating the indignation and the wrath of the indigenous population against the usurpers.

> Our desert has become weary of the pirates, blood is boiling under its sand grains, the light moans in the rocks and wished it could explode…the heart-broken sun wanders and wished it could burn… the earthquake writhes wildly and wished it could destroy… the arms lift the pickaxes and they will soon land into rotten entrails of pigs and wine… the shabby fortress will fall… the damp basements will implode.[18]

[17] *Ibid*., p. 70.

[18] *Ibid*. p. 71.

This is a pivotal moment in the story as Basma recalls the image of her daughter playing in a burning village, mutilated by a white man who cut off her ears for which he will receive financial reward.[19] This is followed by a long description in rather poetic terms of the violence and brutality, of the torture and martyrdom experienced by the Algerians at the hands of the French and the anticipation of the upcoming guerrilla operation that comes as revenge and retaliation for this brutality. The collective indignation and deep sense of injustice are encapsulated from the point of view of Basma by her daughter's cartilage. Luckily, as she realises that she can no longer walk because of her injuries, her husband and his men come to the rescue, and she gives Ḥanafī their daughter's ears to return them to her. She can now accomplish her mission for which she has risked her life, and delivers the message:

> A stick of dynamite will do the job, enough to spread the fire to the dormant boxes in the cellar next to the bottles of alcohol leaning against the wall on the other side of which a brother fell, they emptied a water tap inside of him, electric charges in his skin, and red pins under his nails.[20]

Although she is ultimately unable to reach it, the cave serves as a comforting refuge, symbolising warmth and healing in the face of impending cataclysmic events. The narrator-protagonist paints a vivid picture of turmoil: "flames and storms rattling the Eiffel Tower, red

[19] Although in both stories, al-Samman makes extensive reference to the practice of cutting human ears by the French and to the financial and symbolic reward involved in delivering these to France, and while there is no shortage of testimonies about the brutality of the methods employed by the French during the Algerian war of independence, I have found no evidence of this practice being widespread among French soldiers during this particular conflict. Instead, this practice seems to have been common in the early years of French colonization of the country and there is mention of it in William Gallois, *A History of Violence in the Early Algerian Colony*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 133;

[20] al-Sammān, *'Aynāka Qadarī*, p. 70.

and bloody snow falling. The old belles of the Seine cloak themselves in shadows, revealing the terror beneath. Panic and shame pervade the French winter." A massive explosion shatters the fortress of doom into pieces, and in the tranquillity of closed eyes, a new, bloody dawn emerges. With feverish pleasure, the protagonist declares,

> "Oh, Cave of Eagles, no one dies here in Algeria." [21]

The prominence given to the female resistance fighter, her struggle and her point of view in The Eagles' Cave (the protagonist Basma narrates the story in the first person), reveals the empowering nature of resistance and war, which has typified the Arab female autobiography.[22] Her roles as mother, wife and participant in the liberation movement intersect to shape her experiences and trials informing her motivation and actions. A sense of hesitation and fear pervades the flashbacks to her job as a maid for the lame French general. This only comes to an end upon seeing her daughter's earring hanging from one of the hundreds of human ears in one of the boxes lying in the "shabby fortress". The narrative captures this moment as the tipping point of her process of realization, her *limit situation* which produces in Basma an irresistible urge to face the risks of escape.

The story stands out in al-Samman's first collection for the point of view of a multidimensional female protagonist which anticipates the interplay of gendered resistance and existentialism. In this sense, as Subhi Hadidi rightly noted in what is probably the only study in English to mention this story at all, The Eagles' Cave can be situated in a period of the modern Syrian short story during which socio-political conditions shaped and had a profound impact on the

[21] Ibid., p. 73.

[22] Hiyem Cheurfa, *Contemporary Arab Women's Life Writing and the Politics of Resistance*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023.

themes, trends and forms of this genre. Although mostly authored by men, the short story in Syria, before the twenty-year-old al-Samman made her literary debut with the collection in question, had achieved a greater degree of maturity in form, language and narrative technique thanks also to female authors such as Ulfat Idilbī and Salma al-Ḥaffār al-Kuzbarī who lay the grounds for the emergence of the 1960s generation to which al-Samman belongs.[23]

However, in contrast with what Hadidi argues, both The Eagles' Cave, as well as Poppy Fields, reveal al-Samman's capacity to coalesce individual, feminist, political and nationalist into a form of relational feminism since an early stage in her career. Disrupting the predominant trend of female Syrian writers limited concerns with individual issues of love and female (if not feminist) emancipation[24], these two stories brought to the fore the broader, pan-Arab question of Algeria and the Algerian War of Independence against French occupation, which came to an end in 1962, the very same year these two stories were published for the first time. The significance of this page in modern Arab history can hardly be overstated and these two stories substantiate the idea that Algeria and its struggle against colonialism, as well as the 1948 defeat and the loss of Palestine, contributed to the spread of a conceptualisation of cultural creativity that considered literature as organic to the struggle for emancipation of the Arab nation.[25]

If, as Edward Said noted, the Palestinian Nakba represented "a monumental enigma" to which no Arab artists could remain indifferent,[26] in these two stories, al-Samman reinvents the Algerian struggle in terms of a polarisation and incommensurable disparity between honour,

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[23] Subhi Hadidi and Iman al-Qadi, "Syria"; Subhi Hadidi, "The Short Story and Poetry" in *Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide, 1873-1999*. Edited by Radwa Ashour; Ferial J. Ghazoul; Hasna Reda Mekdashi, Egypt: American University in Cairo Press, 2008, p. 69.

[24] *Ibid.*. pp. 64-69. Kifah Hanna, on the other hand, defines this trend in modern Arabic literature as "the inward turn of feminist Arab literature". See Hanna, *Feminism and the Avant-Garde Aesthetics*, pp. 22-28.

[25] Mustafa Badawi, "Commitment in contemporary Arabic literature", in *Critical perspectives on Modern Arabic literature 1945-1980*, Issa J. Boullata ed., Washington: Three Continents Press, 1980, pp. 23-44.

[26] Edward W. Said, "Arabic prose and prose fiction after 1948", in Edward W. Said, *Reflections on exile and other literary and cultural essays*, London: Granta Books, 2001, p. 46.

selflessness, steadfastness and, ultimately, justice, on the one hand; barbarism, brutality, greed and vice, on the other. On these two ends of the spectrum stand the different characters of these two stories: victimised but unyielding and resolute Algerians fighting against brutal and drunken French army officers.

In this sense, visual imagery and symbolism contribute to the overall polarisation of characters and convey intricate emotions charged with specific connotations. The eponymous cave serves as the ideal haven of safety and morality towards which the protagonist tends, both physically and ideally, in the face of adversities represented symbolically by the steep hill leading to the cave and, more concretely, by the French military chasing her in the dark. The same French general, but one may argue the entirety of French forces present in Algeria at the time of the story, act not only, and rather obviously, as mere adversaries for Basma and the Algerian fighters stationed in the cave. Their brutal practices, in particular, the severing of ears from the bodies of their Algerian opponents and their addiction to alcohol, also contribute to refuting orientalist stereotypes of brutality: not the Algerians, in turn honourable and steadfast in their resistance, but the French in this story incarnate indiscriminate violence and barbarity.

## Poppy Fields: an existentialist journey of atonement

The protagonist of the second story, a member of the French Foreign Legion,[27] also narrates the events in the first person offering the opposite point of view, yet ultimately subscribing to the very same polarised glance on the conflict. For the most part of the story, he finds himself at the back of a military vehicle, sitting next to a severely wounded Algerian fighter whom he

[27] The French Foreign Legion is a corps in the French Army that is open to foreign recruits and formed part of the French Army's units associated with France's colonial project in Africa, until the end of the Algerian war in 1962. For general works on the Algerian War of Independence, see Benjamin Stora, *Histoire de la guerre d'Algérie*, La Découverte, 2004; Sylvie Thénault, *Histoire de la guerre d'indépendance algérienne*, Paris: Flammarion, 2005.

captured during a recent military operation in an unnamed village. At the front of the vehicle three generals drink several bottles of wine, heedless to the destruction they left behind in a nameless village, "flames in the sheikhs' beards and bloody meadows like poppy fields".[28] Soon after introducing this setting though, the soldier narrator shifts his focus and engages in a monologue, alternated with a one-way conversation (that reads almost like a therapy session) with the Algerian fighter, whom he has been entrusted to guard. By talking to both himself and to the Algerian prisoner, in a moment of self-reflection and atonement, the narrator reveals how he escaped Germany after he murdered his girlfriend, until he found himself in France and was offered the prospect of redeeming his condition by joining the French Foreign Legion.

The narrative sets into action the moment the moon illuminates the facial features of this "son of the Aurès", i.e. the Algerian prisoner, whom the protagonist addresses with contempt until their eyes meet for the first time and the look on the prisoner's face, his confidence, his calm and his deep eyes initiate a process of self-reflection for the nameless protagonist. The prisoner's composure in the face of his inevitable fate at the hands of a brutal group of drunken soldiers make the protagonist feel like "a failed snake who lost its fangs".[29] He feels inferior, yet he waves away this thought and wonders "why am I so upset when the business I came to this country for has been so profitable. I volunteered to kill, and I did kill ten Algerians tonight".[30] He feels the content of his pocket and again the trope of mutilation and human ears materialises in this story too, as a token of the extreme brutality visited upon the Algerian resistance "in the name of France".[31] He counts twenty human ears in his pockets, and realises he needs as many more to be awarded the French Order of Merit and one hundred thousand Francs. At this point, the story offers the first flashback to the protagonist's origins and past in

[28] al-Sammān, *'Aynāka Qadarī*, p. 172.

[29] *Ibid*. p. 172.

[30] *Ibid*., p. 173.

[31] *Ibid*., p. 176.

Germany, and to his sentimental relationship with a woman called Susy who "doesn't compare to the stinky women of Paris, […] Susy was pretty before I killed her… do you hear me you savage?"[32] In turn, the wounded prisoner looks at the nameless protagonist with a look of pity and haughtiness.

At this point, the narrator recounts how he crossed the border into France and here, the choice of vocabulary brings to the fore another parallel with The Eagles' Cave, that of France as the source of corruption and brutality which will pay dearly for its actions. Both stories employ similar symbolism to associate France with the widespread moral decay of unscrupulous men and women. In both stories, the greed and cynicism of the French and German characters is incentivised by the allure of the "Seine's belles" (in Arabic: ghawānī al-sayn, غواني السين in The Eagles' Cave; ḥisān al-sayn, حسان السين in Poppy Fields) which, together with the indiscriminate brutality and the addiction to alcohol, contributes to a characterisation of everything French as impious. Against this backdrop, the eponymous poppy fields in the narrator's own rendition, serve as a metaphor for Algeria itself: a green and fertile land stained with blood from the endless massacres perpetrated in the context of the war. Upon crossing into France, the character of the saw-toothed officer comes into the picture, almost an incarnation of French colonialism. A large financial reward and the opportunity of receiving the French Order of Merit eventually lure the nameless protagonist into joining the Foreign Legion in Algeria to fight against the local resistance.

> A saw-toothed officer came and said to me: "You are a fugitive criminal, and we will send you back to your country..."
>
> A bright-browed boy living deep inside me answered, "I hate restraints...I will do whatever you want."

[32] *Ibid*., p. 173.

The officer said to him: “There are deserts of gold... Go hunt rabbits there... Kill, and we will buy your dead to feed on their meat.”

Deep down, I mourned: “I hate the smell of the dead.” The bright-browed boy cried

- The perfume smells from the corpses there
- I hate killing
- Kill in the name of freedom... in the name of the glory of France... in the name of the poor French people whom they want to expel from their lands.[33]

Once again, following this flashback, the protagonist-narrator dismisses the disquieting doubt of being on the wrong side of the barracks. He resists and instead grabs his dagger, he feels its cold handle which brings him back to “what [he has] to be, to what [he has] decided be”.[34] Following a similar narrative technique as in The Eagles’ Cave, the pivotal moment of the story, the “limit situation” to employ Van Stralen’s definition, occurs halfway through. Once again, the shift takes place in strict connection with the horror elicited by the theme of cropping, mutilation and ear cutting which pervades these two stories. The narrator-protagonist turns to the prisoner with the intention of cutting off his ears and putting them in his pocket because, as the general said to him, “they are savages who can’t feel anything”.[35] Disturbed by the calm demeanour of the Algerian prisoner, he attempts an attack but finds nothing: his prisoner is earless and his serenity despite his wound reveals the lies that the protagonist was exposed to in Paris, which in turn led him to ultimately seek redemption in Algeria. Stripped of falsehoods, the protagonist feels overwhelmed, morally inferior, weak and fearful in the face of truth and disgust. He sheds a tear, triggering the return of his inner innocence, embodied by the “bright-

[33] *Ibid*., p. 175.

[34] Ibid., p. 176. "أحس بلمسه البارد الحاد ينتشلني إلى ما يجب أن أكون...إلى ما صممت أن أكون"

[35] *Idem*.

browed boy", highlighting the prisoner's dignified silence against the backdrop of rowdy French generals.

In the final paragraphs, we find the military vehicle stationed outside a military station, and the generals instruct the protagonist to take the perceived "hateful prisoner" to the "ballroom". Having shifted allegiance to the Algerian resistance, the protagonist challenges the generals, defending the purity in the prisoner's eyes and the dignity of his struggle.

> "hateful.. ? can you not see the purity of a tropical lagoon in his eyes? The crazy source of life in the dignity of his struggle?"[36]

Reluctantly, he leads the prisoner to the torture room, fearing the impact of their gaze. The "ballroom", a place of decay and brutality, appears before him. The generals demand the prisoner's confession through nail extraction, but the protagonist, refusing to harm the "lion", as he now describes him, hesitates. The prisoner remains silent. The generals, portrayed as cruel crows, order the protagonist to kill the prisoner, yet he daydreams of peaceful moments with him, walking under the moonlight, surrounded by children with "shoes on their feet".[37] The general shoots the protagonist, who pictures a fading, bright-faced youth and a cellar consumed by the silent roar of worms feeding on France's tarnished reputation.

## Atonement and Martyrdom as Paths of Existential Exploration

Several parallels can be drawn between the two stories, beyond the obvious homogeneity of Algeria as the designated setting of events. In both stories, natural symbolism plays a decisive

[36] *Ibid*., p. 177

[37] *Ibid*., p. 179.

role in heightening polarisation of the coloniser vs. resistance binary, the imminence of the climax and the inevitability of defeat for the colonisers. Both narrators employ animal metaphors to this end: in one of the multiple flashbacks in The Eagles' Cave, Basma remembers how she dreamed of strangling the lame drunken general at one point, how she was going to tear his face with her nails, pressing on his sticky, slimy neck like that *of a frog* in a damp swamp.[38] It is worth mentioning that a number of other stories in this collection employ a similar symbology of animals: cats, snakes and birds embodying a variety of notions including submissiveness, a patronising male look on young women and revenge. It is only in these two stories however that eagles, frogs, dogs and bulls in the first story, lions, rabbits, crows and worms in the second one, are charged with political connotations, specifically, in the context of decolonisation, on the two opposite sides of a struggle for civilisation against barbarism. The *eagles* of the first story are no one but the group of resistance fighters to which Basma's husband Ḥanafī belongs. Clearly, the choice of eagles is not coincidental, and their imposing nature is commensurate with the stature of the Algerian resistance against what was perceived as a superior force.

The spatial constraints of the short story and the *photographic* nature of the genre (to borrow Julio Cortázar definition)[39] put the author in the privileged position of having to capture his or her protagonists in a key, life-changing moment in which he or she develops an awareness of their situation and of the ethical dilemmas involved. Both Basma and the nameless German mercenary find themselves confronted with serious threats to their own existence, yet they cannot be placed on the same level of integrity and morality: while Basma is running away from the French garrison which she has escaped in order to deliver vital information to the

[38] *Ibid*., p. 67.

[39] Zwerling Sugano, Marian, "Beyond What Meets the Eye: The Photographic Analogy in Cortázar's Short Stories, Style", Fall 1993, Vol. 27, No. 3, *The Short Story: Theory and Practice* (Fall 1993), pp. 332-351.

resistance fighters stationed in the cave, the German mercenary ultimately finds himself confronted with the stark choice of having to execute the Algerian prisoner or to be himself killed. Basma's is not a journey of discovery and awareness, but rather a flight for her own life and to return her severed ears and earrings to her daughter.

Not surprisingly for an author widely considered to have been strongly influenced by French existentialism, al-Samman's polarised representation of the Algerian resistance and the French occupiers reflects existentialist themes, particularly, the idea of individuals defining their own essence and the struggle for authenticity. In particular, characters on both sides of the conflict grapple with existential questions related to freedom, choice, and responsibility. The transformation in the German protagonist of Poppy Fields provides a useful example of existentialist inward-looking reflection that leads to his ultimate demise (in a way similar to the trajectory of another widely celebrated existentialist novel, *The Stranger* by Albert Camus). Moved by the Algerian just and steadfast resistance, this protagonist undergoes a process of questioning of his trajectory: the sense of regret for the murder of his girlfriend in Germany, the subsequent flight to France where he is confronted with the luring prospect of escape to Algeria and of financial profit, and ultimately the stark disparity between the beaten, wounded, earless, and yet humane and dignified Algerian prisoner and the contrast with the brutal and "saw-toothed", bloodthirsty French general produce in the protagonist an existentialist conclusion. The protagonist's trajectory develops as one of cowardice and untruthfulness to himself: his escape from Germany and his subsequent transfer to Algeria as a member of the foreign legion apparently define him as a spineless and greedy murderer in search of financial and moral redemption. Yet, through his face-to-face encounter with the Algerian fighter, his nature as a "bright-browed boy who hates killing" eventually prevails.

In the few pages of the story, however, the narrator captures him in a moment of existentialist realisation that his nature is not predetermined, despite what "[he has] to be… what has set out

to be" (ما يجب أن أكون... ما صممت على أن أكون).[40] In this sense, the immense sense of dignity and steadfastness that emanates from his objective correlative, i.e. the Algerian wounded prisoner, grants the protagonist an eye-opening chance of redemption and atonement which finds its ultimate realisation in his refusal to torture and shoot the prisoner, and in his subsequent murder at the hands of the saw-toothed general who had brought him to Algeria in the first place. This nameless protagonist's trajectory puts forward an existentialist humanisation of the villain/coloniser by showing the possibility of redemption that the just cause of decolonisation and liberation can afford them.

This trajectory and the protagonist's journey of dispossession, hope, delusion, and eventual redemption illustrates the anticipation of some of themes and tropes in al-Samman's later novels. Faraḥ, one of *Bayrūt '75*'s two main characters, is a case in point and his story allows to draw a parallel between him and the German mercenary as their flights, to Lebanon and Algeria respectively in search of fame, money and redemption end in similar ways. The protagonists of this novel are haunted at various levels because of their background, homosexuality, poverty or extramarital intercourse. During the course of the novel, Faraḥ moves to Beirut with dreams of becoming a famous male night-club singer, thanks to the powerful contacts provided by his Beirut-based cousin Nīshān. Soon though, Faraḥ realises that Beirut is not the haven of meritocracy and open-mindedness that he had anticipated, and he becomes the target of Nīshān's predatory instincts, who reduces him to a dependent and gullible individual. As a consequence of his departure from his native Syria and subsequent plunging in Beirut's entertainment industry, Faraḥ's ultimate estrangement and mental illness materialise in his loss of sexual prowess. Same as the German mercenary in Poppy Fields, but in obviously less dense terms given the novelistic form of the narrative, throughout the second part of the novel, Faraḥ comes to the realisation of his gullibility and inevitable fate. By way

[40] al-Sammān, *'Aynāka Qadarī*, p. 176.

of illustration, the following passage from *Bayrūt '75* serves to illustrate its protagonist's inner conflict and delusion:

> When Farah woke up he heard a voice deep inside of him screaming: "ran away… run away! Leave everything and go back to your village… run away!". He didn't sleep well, despite the pills. Since he lost the capacity to pray and engage in sexual intercourse with women, he hadn't been able to sleep. He also heard inner voices which sounded somehow like his voice, but not exactly.[41]

The Eagles' Cave, on the other hand, echoes another key tenet of Sartrean existentialism that was circulated and made popular in Lebanon and the wider Levant region thanks to al-Ādāb's editor Suhayl Idrīs: the staunch support for the Algerian national cause and the endorsement for the use of violence against the French Army by the Algerian resistance. The immense influence that Jean-Paul Sartre exerted on Arab writers and intellectuals can hardly be overstated. As Yoav Di-Capua has shown, an entire generation of Lebanese and Syrian (and beyond) artists were inspired by and adopted Sartre's notion of existentialism as well as of commitment for the sake of sacrificial politics.[42] Sartre's support for the Algerian National Liberation Front and for the legitimate use of violence against colonial occupation has been widely addressed in a variety of academic studies.[43] In this sense, the Eagles' Cave reflects a widespread perception of the Algerian War of Independence as a fundamental part of the Pan-Arab cause as well as of the broader battle against colonialism in all of its forms, in the way it

[41] Ghāda al-Sammān, *Bayrūt '75*, Beirut: Manshūrāt Ghāda al-Sammān, 2004 (First edition 1975), p. 82.

[42] Di-Capua, Yoav. *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Decolonization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. Pp. 113-114.

[43] See, for example, Drake, David. "Sartre, Camus and the Algerian War." *Sartre Studies International* 5, no. 1 (1999): 16–32; Le Sueur, James. *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics during the Decolonization of Algeria*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

encapsulates also a notion of violence (and of its representation) as a legitimate form of resistance against a brutal and barbaric occupation. However, there is in al-Samman's stories, too, a celebration of anticolonial violence that amounts to idealisation, considering that, same as Sartre, al-Samman never lived in Algeria and possessed an outsider's point of view on the ongoing events at the time these stories were put together.[44]

## Conclusion

In conclusion, al-Samman's early short story production seems to deserve better attention, particularly, if situated against the backdrop of the major historical events of the 1950s and 1960s, i.e. at the time of their publication, insofar as they anticipate the themes and tropes that make her post-1975 novels stand out. This indicates the development from an highly polarised understanding of existentialism that her early stories manifest to a more nuanced and self-critical one that characterises her tetralogy. While al-Samman's novels, all published after the 1967 traumatic defeat, capture the protagonists' subjectivity, as traumatized, alienated, self-divided,[45] the unfinished and eminent struggle for decolonisation in her early stories afforded her protagonists the privilege of moral superiority over their adversaries. The Eagles' Cave and Poppy Fields deliver a sense of harmony with the justness of their struggle that remains an exception in this author's oeuvre. Both stories put emphasis on the colonial, belittling and humiliating glance that the French and German characters direct towards the native population of Algeria whom they perceive as inferior and dependent, a submissive source of services in the case of Basma by the drunken, lame and nameless French general; a source of body parts

[44] There is no mention of Algeria in al-Samman's autobiographical interview with Ghālī Shukrī in his 1977 book, *Ghāda al-Sammān bi-lā Ajniha*, pp. 42-66.

[45] Hanna, *Feminism and Avant-Garde Aesthetics*, p. 40.

(specifically their ears) to be collected in order to receive financial and symbolic reward from his superiors in France by the German mercenary.

In this vein, the dignity of the two protagonists stands out as a key element in the existentialist struggle portrayed in the narrative. The photographic shot of Basma's and the nameless German mercenary's limit situations transcends the collective Algerian nationalist battle for freedom, but their ultimate martyrdom is coherent with a portrayal of the same struggle as a fight for justice and dignity. Their disparate trajectories result in existentialist notions of moral responsibility playing out in diametrically different ways through their decisions and actions. If, on the one hand, the German mercenary must necessarily grapple with the inherent ambiguity and complexity of moral choices he has made before mutinying and embracing dignity, Basma stands on the opposite end of this spectrum. Her monologues, flashbacks and moments of introspection shed light on her existential struggles but paradoxically in more straightforward terms in comparison with that of those of the German mercenary. The key, life-changing moment in which the story captures her is more akin to a notion of moral responsibility that is strictly related to her predetermined role as a mother and a wife: her duty as a guerrilla fighter becomes indispensable insofar as her daughter's mutilation must be avenged. In this sense, Sartre's ideas, such as the concept that "existence precedes essence" or the responsibility of individuals for their actions, becomes more evident in the mercenary's experience of atonement and his choice to mutiny at the risk of his own life. In other words, whereas the German protagonist makes choices that diverge from the group's beliefs, following personal values, Basma paradoxically sacrifices herself by succumbing to the expectations of her group.

The stories in question are framed by an acute sense of anguish towards the brutality endured by the Algerian resistance and testify to the author's early intellectual exposure and seemingly strong emotional investment in a towering pan-Arab cause. The degree of emotional investment

remains the same, if not more acute, in the short stories and novels published following the 1967 defeat, and by the early 1970s the disbelief for the causes of nationalism and socialism had been partially replaced by the concept of self-criticism. This was first introduced by Sadiq al-Azm in 1970, as al-naqd al-dhātī, which aimed at exposing the Arab governments' direct responsibility for preventing the ideals of commitment from materialising.[46] In this sense, the stories of *'Aynākā Qadarī* stand in stark contrast with al-Sammān's first novel *Bayrūt '75*, whose protagonists grapple with death and helplessness in the face of class and gender hierarchies of Beiruti society, while the two protagonists of The Eagles' Cave and Poppy Fields are represented as heroic existentialist martyrs of the injustice embodied by the French practices of counterinsurgency in Algeria. Through their trajectory, they gain insight into the human condition making their martyrdom morph into an existential quest for freedom.

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[46] See Verena Klemm, "Ideals and Reality: The Adaption of European Ideas of Literary Commitment in the Post-Colonial Middle East - The Case of Abdalwahhab al-Bayati" in Guth, Stephan, Priska Furrer and Johann Christoph Bürgel, eds. *Conscious Voices: Concepts of Writing in the Middle East: Proceedings of the Berne Symposium*, July 1997. Stuttgart: Steiner, 1999, p. 148.

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