

The X and Y chromosomes of displacement : an analysis of narrative voices in *The Square Moon* by Ghada Samman

Autor(en): **Vogel, Christina**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asien-gesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie**

Band (Jahr): **62 (2008)**

Heft 4

PDF erstellt am: **04.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147809>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern.

Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden.

Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

Haftungsausschluss

Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

THE X AND Y CHROMOSOMES OF DISPLACEMENT

An Analysis of Narrative Voices in *The Square Moon*

by Ghada Samman

Christina Vogel, Nijmegen

Abstract

In 1994, two years after the end of the Lebanese Civil War and ten years after she herself left her second homeland Lebanon, the widely known author Ghada Samman published a collection of short stories about Arabs living in exile, *al-Qamar al-murabba'* (The Square Moon). In these stories Samman offers a literary construction of the complex reality of displacement, by inventing an even complex narrative mode. By using different narrative voices in combination with recurring shifts between "I"-text and "he/she"-text, Samman makes the form of her tales meet its content: the agony of the exiled soul.

Being member of a generation of Arab female writers who found their new literary and critical voices in the 1970s, Samman's work is often studied from a comparative point of view, mainly in the context of the Lebanese Civil War, on which she wrote her major novel *Kawābīs Bayrūt* (Beirut Nightmares, 1976). Today, Ghada Samman is considered an outstanding author of modern Arabic literature, with an oeuvre of more than forty titles in fictional and non-fictional genres, as well as in poetry. This article hopes to add to the still small field of research by focussing on Samman's intriguing use of uncommon narrative techniques.

In 1984, after having lived through the Lebanese Civil War for more than nine years, the Syrian-born writer Ghada Samman (Ghādah Aḥmad al-Sammān, b. 1942) left her second homeland Lebanon, and moved to France. The rhetoric question she had asked in an essay of 1982, "And we, when will we emigrate and won't come back?" was finally answered by the author, known herself for a critical attitude towards fellow-writers and intellectuals who chose to desert the mortally infected country in its agony.¹ Eight years after the publication of her major work *Kawābīs Bayrūt* (Nightmares of Beirut, 1976), the fragmentary and haunting surrealistic novel-diary she wrote about the notorious Hotel Battles in

1 'Wa-nahnu, matā nuhājiru wa-lā na'ūd?', in: Ghāda al-SAMMĀN, *Ghurba taḥt al-ṣifr* (Exile below zero), Beirut: Manshūrāt Ghāda al-Sammān, 1986:93–97.

Beirut, of which she was an eye-witness,² Samman at last turned her back on “beloved Lebanon”.³

This essay does not aim to explore the personal reasons for Samman’s final move to the West. However, the author’s personality, and the original way in which she has constructed her writer’s image during forty years of literary publications, aroused my interest in her, and in her large and diverse oeuvre. For this paper I chose to analyze a collection of short stories Ghada Samman published in 1994, ten years after she left Lebanon: *al-Qamar al-murabbaʿ* (The Square Moon). In it the author combines an intriguing narrative technique with topics of displacement and identity. After a brief introduction of some relevant characteristics of the writer, I will present my questions of research.

In works on modern Arabic literature Ghada Samman is often described as an innovative, feminist writer whose contribution to the development of the Arab literary landscape is regarded as of high value. She started her writing career in the early 1960’s as a journalist and a writer of short stories, which from the very beginning revealed her engagement with issues concerning the lack of freedom for the Arab woman in the male-dominated eastern culture. She has been pictured as ‘one of the most outspoken literary figures in the Arab world’ and ‘the best-known and most widely read’ of Lebanese women writers.⁴ In this respect it is interesting to observe that Samman’s oeuvre, consisting of more than 30 titles, covering the whole spectrum of prose and poetry, has hardly found its way to a Western public, in spite of the fact that she has travelled a lot through Europe as well as the USA, and has been living in France for more than 20 years.⁵

In contrast to her modest reputation in the West, Samman’s almost exhibitionist performance directed to the Arab public stands out. As a young female author, Samman was one of the first whose photograph appeared alongside her publications in journals and magazines.⁶ Since 1976, the special circumstance that Samman owns a private publishing house, offers her the

2 The notorious Battle of the Hotels in the centre of Beirut took place in October and November 1975; in a subscript to *Kawābīs Bayrūt*, Samman claims to have written the novel between November 13, 1975, and February 27, 1976.

3 “Uhdī hādha ’l-kitāb ilā Lubnān al-ḥabīb, liʿannahu [...]”, dedication to *Ghurba taḥt al-ṣifr*.

4 Hanan AWWAD (1983):14; Miriam COOKE (1987):5.

5 Translations into English are included in the list of references at the end of the essay.

6 In his monograph on Ghada Samman, Shākir al-NĀBLUSĪ reports how young men like he, at the time, were addicted to Samman’s beautiful picture, cut out from magazines, “resembling the pictures of movie-stars”. al-NĀBLUSĪ (1990):5.

possibility to put a personal mark on her books, which distinguishes them from the normally sober make-up of Arabic literary publications, through a larger-than-average book format, eye-catching surrealist paintings on the covers, and carefully styled pictures of the author on the back cover.⁷ Furthermore, Samman appears to be a willing and sought-after object for Arab journalists, as is proved by the nearly 150 interviews held with her in the first 25 years of her writing career, although there is evidence that she is rarely interrogated vis-à-vis, and only consents to publication after having edited the text herself.⁸

It is fascinating however, that Samman's celebrity is not reflected in an equal amount of academic research, neither among Arab, nor among Western critics. Existing critical studies on (parts of) Samman's writings mainly focus on the author's concern with gender issues and war, but hardly start on a coherent structural approach of her texts.⁹ Which is the more surprising, considering Samman's inclination to experiment with narrative structures and the boundaries of literary genres, as well as her habit to add to her writings authorial prefaces, notes, comments and quotes from the Western literary canon. Even the unexpected publication, in 1992, of a small collection of love letters addressed to the young Ghāda by the famous Palestinian writer and activist Ghassan Kanafani, who was martyred in 1972, provoked an expected storm of Arab criticism, but met with a complete lack of reaction in the academic field.¹⁰

- 7 The name of this publishing house is Manshūrāt Ghāda al-Sammān, formally a branch of the publishing house owned by Samman's husband Bashīr Da'ūq, Dār al-Ṭalī'a in Beirut.
- 8 Samman has published three collections of interviews, which formerly appeared in newspapers and magazines all over the Arab world, during the years 1961–1987. *al-Qabīla tas-tajwīb al-qatīla* (The tribe interrogates the killed woman; 1981), *al-Baḥr yuḥākīm al-samaka* (The sea judges the fish; 1986) and *Tasakku' dākḥil jurḥ* (Groping inside a wound; 1988) were all published by Manshūrāt Ghāda al-Sammān, Beirut.
- 9 Exceptions are examinations of the novels *Bayrūt 75* (1975) and *Kawābīs Bayrūt* (1976) by COOKE (1987) and MEYER (2001), as well as the dissertation of KLEINEIDAM (1996), which presents an analysis of four early stories by Samman. NĀBLUSĪ (1990) tries to approach Samman's oeuvre in a more embracing way, paying some attention to her position as a writer in exile as well, but unfortunately his monograph reflects a rather subjective point of view.
- 10 *Rasā'il Ghassān Kanafānī ilā Ghāda al-Sammān*, Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalī'a. Only Nawar Al-Hassan GOLLEY briefly refers to this publication, which she describes as "the brave beginning of a new genre in Arabic literature: literary letters". In: *Reading Arab Woman's autobiographies*, University of Texas Press, 2003:182.

With this paper I will try to add to this still small field of research by embarking on a narratological journey in the stories of *al-Qamar al-murabbaʿ*, or *The Square Moon*.¹¹ In my opinion this book may be considered as an example of Samman's writings after 1984: a set of variations on a theme, which is itself part of a bigger project that aims to penetrate the exile's soul from every possible angle, and to work out these observations in texts.¹² *The Square Moon* is particularly interesting, as the author tries to push the boundaries of narratological rules in her use of different narrative voices that reflect the inner conflicts its protagonists are confronted with. After a detailed examination of the formal aspects of *The Square Moon*, I will present my interpretation of the specific form, working out respectively the dialectics of female and male voices, the interrelation of displacement and identity, and the function of ghosts and magical events in the stories. Finally, I will show how intermediality helps to better understand Samman's work in general, and this book in particular.

Formal characteristics

A work of fiction normally consists of text (the fictional story, or tales) and paratext: the verbal statements that accompany the text in order to present it to the reader.¹³ It is most unlikely to find a modern literary publication without at least a title, an author's name and the mentioning of the publishing company. Ghada Samman, uniting the writer, editor and publisher in one person, attributes to her texts a wide variety of paratexts, ranging from explanatory notes and epigraphs, to back cover comments and interviews.¹⁴ For the interpretation of Ghada Samman's publications it is important to bear in mind Gérard Genette's

11 Throughout this article I will quote from the English translation (*The Square Moon*, transl. Issa J. BOULLATA, University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville, 1998).

12 At least three other titles, each representing a different genre, belong to this period: the novel *Laylat al-Milyār* (Night of the Billion; 1986), a collection of essays, *Ghurba taht al-ṣifr* (Exile below zero; 1986), and a volume of poetical letters, *al-Ḥanīn ilā 'l-yāsmīn* (The longing for jasmine; 1996). All: Manshūrāt Ghāda al-Sammān, Beirut.

13 Gérard GENETTE, *Paratexts*, 1997:1.

14 GENETTE (1997):2–3 differentiates between *peritext* and *epitext*, referring to resp. paratexts adhered to a book (like title, notes etc.) and paratexts that exist outside the book (like interviews and publicity). To maintain the readability of my text, I will use the general term 'paratext' exclusively.

description of paratexts as ‘an undefined zone between the inside and the outside’, and, quoting Philippe Lejeune, as ‘a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one’s whole reading of the text.’¹⁵ As we shall see, Ghada Samman fully exploits this hybrid space, in which author and reader meet, though the way she does it raises questions about her intentions: do Samman’s paratexts support or distort our reading of the text?

It is not possible to examine here all paratextual details of the Arabic and English editions of *The Square Moon*. Before I go deeper into a few relevant details, I would like to observe in general that the English translation has left out most of the authorial ‘adornments’, without offering a justification for it. All 37 epigraphs prefacing the Arabic stories have vanished, as well as the notes at the end of each story, and the dedication.¹⁶ Bearing in mind both Genette’s definition of paratexts, as an antichambre to the text in which the author can still influence the reader, as well as Samman’s undeniable pre-occupation with paratexts throughout her whole oeuvre, the keys to an intelligent interpretation of *The Square Moon* and the author’s intentions with it, might very well be hidden in its paratexts.

In the following I shall give a survey of the paratextual elements in the original Arabic edition that I consider either closely linked to the formal appearance of the text or of importance for my interpretation in the end.

On the front cover, a surrealist painting of a group of five dark owls sitting on rocks against the background of a dawning sky in a mountainous landscape attracts the attention of the reader at once.¹⁷ Apart from the author’s name and publishing house, and the title of the book (*al-Qamar al-murabbaʿ*), a subtitle is printed on the cover: *qīṣaṣ ǧharāʿībiyya*, in the English edition translated as “supernatural tales”.¹⁸ The whole image is not very comprehensible at first sight, at least due to the lack of an obvious connection between the owls and the title of

15 Ibid.:2.

16 It is remarkable that these motto’s, which are taken from the Western literary canon, are omitted from the English edition, while the average English reader is more likely to know the names of Eric FROMM, George SAND and Elias CANETTI than it would for the Arab reader.

17 Nearly all books that are published with Manshūrāt Ghāda al-Sammān bear a surrealist painting or sketch on the front cover. Some are given a title and an artist, but the painting on the cover of the Arabic edition of *The Square Moon* remains anonymous. However, it might be a work of the famous Belgian surrealist René MAGRITTE (1898–1967), who seems to be a favourite of Samman, as a lot of her books show paintings of this artist.

18 The rare adjective *ǧharāʿībī* would normally be translated as ‘exotic’, but as it is connected to the Arabic adjectives *lā-maʿqūl* (non-sensible) and *mā-warāʿī* (metaphysical) in the text on the back cover, the English translation ‘supernatural’ seems appropriate here.

the book.¹⁹ The back cover shows a glamorous picture of Ghada Samman in company of two small statues of grey owls, sitting in an armchair and smiling at the camera.²⁰ The text on the back covers about ten lines, and gives a survey of the topics in the stories, but refrains from biographical information about the author, unlike the English edition. In brief, the outward appearance of *al-Qamar al-murabbaʿ* is well-styled and aesthetic, though unintelligible at first glance, and thus intriguing.

On the inside, *al-Qamar al-murabbaʿ* and *The Square Moon* share one important aspect: the textual lay-out of the stories is unusual and note-worthy. The original Arabic text is divided into two prints: standard and bold. The reader notices a few lines in standard, half a page in bold, then again a paragraph in standard print, and so on. As if to make sure the reader will not miss the difference, the bold passages are put in brackets. There are no other divisions in the text of the different stories, like blank lines, numbering, or paragraphs. Each story in *al-Qamar al-murabbaʿ* has the same formal characteristics, as described above. The English edition follows this division into two prints, but transforms the bold into italics and leaves out the brackets.²¹ As I will refer primarily to the English translation in this paper, I will consequently speak about italic and standard print.

The typographical division in *The Square Moon* reminds us of Samman's earlier experiments with it. In her first publication, *ʿAynāka qadarī* (Your eyes are my fate, 1962), some of the short stories already contain fragments of bold print, but they are scarce, and have not been worked out elaborately, as KLEINEIDAM rightly puts it.²² In *Kawābīs Bayrūt* (1976), the typographical division is carried through more prominently, although the English translation has not copied it.²³ However, studies of this novel do not examine this remarkable aspect of the text, nor did I find any reference to it in reviews of *The*

19 The English edition does not copy the cover image of the owls.

20 For the English edition a different, and much smaller, picture of Samman is used.

21 There is one remarkable difference between the Arabic and the English edition: the last story in *al-Qamar al-murabbaʿ* contains (only) two pages of bold print, but these are not transmitted into italics in *The Square Moon*. I think this is probably due to an editorial oversight or printing error.

22 KLEINEIDAM (1996):185. – A few Arab writers at the time used typographical divisions in their narratives. Well-known is Ṣunʿallāh IBRĀHĪM's *Tilka 'l-rā'iḥa* (1966).

23 *Beirut Nightmares* (London, Quartet Books: 1997), translation Nancy ROBERTS.

Square Moon.²⁴ Starting my analysis with focussing on the printed pattern of the texts might thus seem an adventurous method of research. I am convinced, though, that my explorations can offer new insights in Samman's other works as well.

Relating the visual structure of the stories in *The Square Moon* to some of its narrative aspects reveals that the typographical division in the text (normal vs. italic print) reflects a narratological division that can be categorized into three different types.

Firstly type A (four stories²⁵): the text is divided into a 'He-text' (normal print) and an 'I-text' (italics). In both texts the protagonist is an Arab man (He = protagonist = I). Type B (two stories²⁶) is the female counterpart of A: the protagonist is an Arab woman, and the text is divided into a 'She-text' (normal print) and an 'I-text' (italics). Type C, finally, is divided into two 'I-texts'! The protagonist is an Arab woman and the speaking subject of both texts, the normal and the italic parts. Three stories belong to this category.²⁷ The one remaining, and last, story of the book does not belong to any of these types and must be considered unique.²⁸ In the following section I will examine examples of these three types of stories.

The dialectics of the female and male voices

The ten short stories that form the collection *The Square Moon* share a number of characteristics and themes that draw them together, while at the same time they can be read separately, as they do not refer to each other. Every single story has its own original plot, the characters are not interrelated, the places of action

24 Neither SALEM (2003):122, nor MCCABE (1999) pay attention to the formal structure of the narrative.

25 *Qaṭ' ra's al-qitt* (Beheading the Cat); *Al-timsāḥ al-ma'danī* (The Metallic Crocodile); *Al-mu'āmarā 'alā Badī'* (The Plot against Badī') and *Zā'irāt al-iḥtiḍār* (Visitors of a Dying Person).

26 *Al-Jānīb al-ākhar min al-bāb* (The Other Side of the Door) and *Thalāthūna 'āman min al-naḥl* (Thirty Years of Bees).

27 *Sajjil, anā lastu 'arabiyya* (Register, I am not an Arab Woman); *Jinniyyatu 'l-baja'* (The Swan Genie) and *Bayḍa mukayyafat al-hawā'* (An Air-Conditioned Egg).

28 *Qal'atu 'l-dimāgh al-mughlaqa* (The Brain's Closed Castle).

differ, and there is no obvious sequence to the stories in the book.²⁹ Roughly, they can be summarized as tales in which an Arab protagonist living in exile in a Western country is confronted with a ghost or with a surrealist event that make him/her reflect on his/her actual life and past.³⁰ As there are some references to the end of the Lebanese Civil War, while we know that the book was published in 1994, it should be safe to suppose that the general time of action lies in the first years of the nineties.³¹

In the first story of the book, *Beheading the Cat*, the principal character is Abdul, a Lebanese young man of about 35 years, who lives in Paris with his parents. His family fled from the civil war ten years before. Abdul's life is French, his friends are French, and his behaviour is French [...] to the extent that he even forgets the traditional Arabic hospitality. So, when an old woman rings at the door and asks to be let in, claiming that she is an old friend of his mother's, he tries to get rid of her at first. His parents not being at home, Abdul reluctantly makes the woman sit down to wait. Instead of waiting, the old woman begins to speak of a young girl of extremely high virtues, beautiful, obedient, Muslim, and of a noble family, whom she can offer him as a bride.

Abdul listened, hardly able to believe that this was really happening to him in the heart of the Trocadéro district in Paris, six years before the year 2000. [...] *What made this match-maker offer her services today in particular, when I had finally decided to ask Nadine this evening to marry me?* The mysterious lady continued, "Abdul Razzaq, my son. This bride worships God in heaven and you on earth."³²

Here, we stumble over the shift between standard and italic print, He-text and I-text. At first sight it may seem that the italic part reports Abdul's thoughts in direct speech, but on closer examination we must admit that this is not a satisfactory suggestion. The fragment starts with text reported by an external narrator describing an event that happens to Abdul. Direct speech in a text is easily identified through report of the exact words uttered by a character. If the

29 From notes we can deduce the sequence in which Samman finished the writing of each story, but unfortunately this does not throw any light on their eventual appearance in the book.

30 There is one exception to this rule: the protagonist in *Thalāthūna 'āman min al-naḥl* (Thirty Years of Bees) does not actually live in the West, but visits Paris in the story.

31 Comparable to the subscript in *Kawābīs Bayrūt*, Samman added in *al-Qamar al-murabba'* (The Square Moon) some information about the creative process of writing. At the back of the book she noted that she had started to think out the stories during 1988, while she wrote them down in less than one month in 1994.

32 *The Square Moon*:1 (Ar. 8).

italic text consisted of words originally spoken by Abdul, transmitted to us by the mouth of the external narrator, then we would at least have expected “make” instead of “made” and “have” instead of “had”.³³ The same applies to the interior monologue, that would represent a literal reporting of a character’s thoughts.

A second possibility could be a shift in focalization, or point of view. In that case the external narrator does not *really* present his (her?) microphone to Abdul in order to register his words or thoughts in direct speech, but only *pretends* to do so, because (s)he wants us to share Abdul’s view of the events. In this instance, there would be a significant difference in focalisation between the two types of text: we would expect the text printed in standard to represent the external narrator’s point of view, while the italic would report Abdul’s vision. However, the following fragment will eliminate this idea as well.

His heart beat like a crazy drum. He was sure of a truth there was no way to prove: the woman who visited them and asked for his mother was his maternal aunt Badriyya or she resembled the woman in the picture very much. *She even wore the same clothes as in the picture and she had the same slanted scarf. I mean she resembles my aunt very much, for it is not reasonable that she is actually herself after her bones had become dust a long time ago.*³⁴

This is strange! While reading this fragment, one is not aware of a change in ‘voice’ until one reads the marker I, followed by the present tense. Both the standard and the italic fragments are focalized by Abdul. In other words: Abdul’s vision on the events colours the story, *whether told by Abdul or not*.

Hence I would argue that the division between He-text and I-text does not represent a shift in focalization, nor, as we have seen, a shift to text in direct speech. It is the *narrative voice* that changes every few lines, like a pendulum motion swinging from the external to the internal, character-bound narrator and back again. This narrator’s shift against a back-ground of fairly constant focalization by Abdul, gives this text its special tension. It is as if someone reports a story, and is interrupted all the time by the character (s)he is talking about, as in a classic Greek play. But then, what is the use of it? Does the narrative structure of the story convey some meaning of which we otherwise would be left ignorant?

33 In the Arabic fragment the use of at least one adjunct of time excludes the possibility of direct speech: instead of *fī hādhihi ’l-amsiyya nafsihā*, one would expect *masā’ al-yawm*.

34 *The Square Moon*:15 (Ar. 21),

Let us go back to the actual story. In the course of the events, Abdul is forced to admit that the old woman who is visiting him is no ordinary woman. She knows things about him which she cannot reasonably know, she moves like someone without a body, in fact she looks more like a ghost than like a human being. She calls him by his full Arabic name, speaks the language of the *Thousand and One Nights*, and in doing so she opens his heart to long-forgotten traditions.³⁵ Abdul, however, is reluctant to see this clearly. He is curious to grasp the phenomenon of this ‘mysterious lady’³⁶, but at the same time he hesitates to take seriously what is happening to him. Abdul’s rational mind is in conflict with his feelings, and he is not able to join these two parts of his until at the very last page of the story. In this respect I disagree with SALEM’s interpretation of the story, in which she claims that Abdul is “left dangling like a yo-yo between his two realities”.³⁷

I would argue that Abdul’s personality is *shifted* into two voices: the voice of his – confused – feelings, and the reassuring voice of his ratio. The first is represented by the *internal or character-bound narrator* (the italic printed I-text), the latter by the *external narrator* (the standard printed He-text). When the external narrator says: “He listened to her and tried to hide his feelings”, the internal narrator subsequently describes these feelings: “*she awakens deep in me another person inhabiting my body who, I used to think, died and was buried in Paris.*”³⁸ This *narrator’s shift* makes Abdul’s confusion palpable for the reader. By creating a permanent tension between two narrators in one story, focalised by one character (Abdul), Samman forces the reader to almost physically sharing Abdul’s confusion.

All four stories of type A are built around the same principle: the dual personality of the male protagonist is represented by two different voices. How about the heroines of type B? Do they experience this duality as well? In order to test this, I will examine *Thirty Years of Bees*, the seventh story in the volume. Again, we notice the same division in voices as in *Beheading the Cat*, made visible through the use of standard print for text uttered by an external narrator (the She-text) and italics for the internal narrator (the I-text). A close reading of this story, however, reveals a slight, but interesting, difference between the

35 Abdul’s full Arabic name is ‘Abd al-Razzāq. In the first half of the story, the external narrator’s text, the protagonist is called Abdul, while in the second half he is called ‘Abd al-Razzāq.

36 In Arabic: *al-sayyida al-ghāmiḍa*.

37 SALEM (2003):122.

38 *The Square Moon*:6 (Ar. 14).

narrative strategy used in *Thirty Years of Bees* and the one that is used in *Beheading the Cat*.

The female protagonist in *Thirty Years of Bees* is Rīm (Reem), an Arab woman of approximately 45 years. Her husband Riḍā (Rida) is a professor, and together they run a publishing house in an unnamed Maghreb country. The principal action takes place in the car of a befriended Arab author (dr. Saduq), while driving across Paris on their way to a celebration in honour of Rida. Sitting at the back of the car, reflecting on thirty years of marriage, Reem experiences a profound suppressed anger. She constantly feels humiliated and outraged in the discussion between the two men during the car drive, a situation she has experienced many times throughout her life. Although Reem is a poetically gifted woman, she has learned to keep quiet every time she wants to contribute intellectually to a discussion, or to write poetry, because of her husband's dislike of it. During the car drive Reem thinks of all the unwritten poems having been transformed into bees that buzz angrily in her head. All of a sudden the bees start to emerge from her mouth:

It is not reasonable that the bees have come out of my mouth. My nerves are tired, but I'm not afraid, for the bees are my friends; they have lived within me and multiplied in my depths.

After they repeatedly fail to kill them, professor Rida and dr. Saduq get out of the car until the bees leave it. Reem insists on remaining in the car. She takes the bees in her hand, one by one, and sets them free into the air.³⁹

In the above fragment we see how an external narrator portrays the woman Reem from an outside point of view. Throughout the whole story the narrator describes feelings that show on Reem's face, like anger or contemplation, but seems not able to really penetrate her deepest thoughts. The parts told by the internal narrator (the I-text), who is Reem herself, give insight in her real, disturbing, feelings. In contradiction to what happens in the A-type stories, it is not the internal voice that complements the text uttered by the external narrator but the external narrator who continually interrupts the internal voice by describing events like "Dr. Saduq stops the car" or "Prof. Rida resumes his conversation".

In the end of *Thirty Years of Bees*, thousands of bees coming out of Reem's mouth try to kill the men present at the ceremony in honour of her husband. Reem herself faints during the event, after having experienced surrealist visions. The moment she recovers nothing has changed. Her husband tries to explain

39 *The Square Moon*:135 (Ar. 143).

away the strange things that happened by stressing Reem's female qualities: "A woman is like a bee. For her, giving is like a secretion she is never thanked for," while Reem continues by telling us "*There is always a honeyed sentence to appease me, which implicitly insults me.*"⁴⁰ Again her inner voice has to give in to the voice of the external narrator, and everything recommences when a new bee starts to buzz ...

I would like to argue that the narrator's shift in the B-type stories represents the schizophrenic situation of a woman that has learned to split herself into two personalities: the loving, humble and adapted wife (as pictured by the external narrator), and the creative, intelligent and angry woman whose inner voice cannot stand up against the voice of society.⁴¹ The question is: what is wrong here? Why can she not change her life? Why does the magic not come to her final aid but, on the contrary, the strange events seem to reinforce the outer voice? Is there a connection between the narrative strategy in the A and B types and the sex of the protagonists? The answer to this question might originate in mere biological factors.

Being a man biologically means to have an equal amount of X and Y chromosomes. A man with too much X in him is normally considered too feminine, while at the other hand too much Y for a man might lead to 'supermacho' behaviour. Supposing the external narrator to be the Y, and the internal narrator to be the X, what do we get? Looking at Abdul, the conclusion would be that for a man it is preferable to find a *balance* between the masculine and the feminine counterparts that form your soul as well as your body. As for Reem, she does better to *reject* the male voice because it suppresses a healthy growth of her X-X femininities. If she fails to do so she remains only half a woman. Thus, what will happen to the man who rejects his X side, and to the woman who isn't bothered by a Y voice? Fortunately, *The Square Moon* provides us with examples to answer these questions as well.⁴²

40 Ibid.:143 (Ar. 152)

41 This conclusion is applicable to the other story in this category as well, but here I will not go into details.

42 Though beyond the scope of this paper, I would like to draw attention to a fragment from one of the 'C-type' stories, *The Swan Genie*, which almost literally confirms my ideas. In it, the female protagonist describes the change of behaviour in her husband's attitude, while living in exile: "Since my husband regained his wealth, he lost that tender feminine quality in his face and conduct. His virility, his passion for possession, and his cockiness returned to him. But I know he is the two men at the same time." *The Square Moon*:113 (Ar. 122).

Identity and displacement

One of the most interesting stories in *The Square Moon* in my opinion is *The Air-conditioned Egg*. It belongs to type C, the category of stories that are divided into two 'I-texts', in alternating standard print and italics. In it the (nameless) female protagonist functions as a 'double' speaking subject who reports events that has happened to her, events that she alone could know of. In the analysis of the narrative voices in the stories of Abdul and Reem I have argued that in both cases the narrator's shift represents a division between male and feminine voices/sides in the lives of the protagonists. If we apply this idea to the stories of the C-type, then we should expect problems if one of the two feminine voices (X-X) is repressed, less developed or disguised. Let's see if this proves to be true.

In *An Air-Conditioned Egg* the protagonist is Syrian-born, forty-odd years old, living in New York and working as a deputy manager of a bank. She leads a life of luxury and behaves like a man, or at least, that is how her male secretary – and lover – regards her.⁴³ Outwardly everything is all right, but inside the woman in this story is tormented by grief and worries, concerning her former life in Syria, that come and haunt her in the night.⁴⁴

I lead a double life. My daily life as I work in the air-conditioned egg seems to be a golden nightmare, from which I do not wake up until I go to sleep and dream. At that time, my other life begins as I escape that suffocating, huge egg and go to other worlds that I have never succeeded in forgetting.⁴⁵

The whole story evolves around this concept of duality: the obscured side of the woman's life and her contrasting daily existence. More than in *Beheading the Cat* (Abdul) or in *Thirty Years of Bees* (Reem), the exilic life of the protagonist in *The Air-Conditioned Egg* seems to cause her sufferings and inner conflict. The fragment above shows how she is able to reflect on this duality, but it is

43 *The Square Moon*:165 (Ar. 177): "You're not an Eastern woman, you're an Eastern man! [...] I'm a desert man, but you treat me as the harem used to be treated. Why have you chosen an Arab to torture?"

44 The protagonist of this story shares with Samman a rather romantic image of her homeland, Syria, and the words used here are sometimes exceptionally close to the expressions Samman has used to describe her own feelings towards Damascus in *al-Ḥanīn ilā 'l-yāsmīn* (1996).

45 *The Square Moon*:164 (Ar. 176).

important to realize that this reflection is provoked by an emotional confrontation with traces of the past, intruding magically into “the golden nightmare” of her daily life.⁴⁶

In the very first part of *The Air-Conditioned Egg*, the heroine meets her fate when she hears the voice of the mother of her first great love ‘Irfān (who died shortly after their wedding day), coming out of the telephone. The mere sound of Maymana Hanum’s voice, after 25 years of separation, is enough to turn her life upside down. The apparition of the ghost-mother-in-law causes a significant and irreversible break to this schizophrenic existence: the protagonist starts to *remember*.

Only love can control that little girl whom I did my best to kill, but who did not die. Here she is, getting the better of me while I am awake, after having defeated me several times in the world of sleep and dreams. *O little girl residing in my depths, I offer you peace and co-existence. Daytime is mine, night time is yours. Work is my kingdom, dream yours. I recognize you, you recognize me.*⁴⁷

The ‘little girl’ whom is referred to here can be considered as the dream-part of the protagonist, the part of life she forgets during the day but that keeps coming back in the night. The girl she once was intrudes into the well-protected life of the grown-up woman she has become, and tells her about the good old days. But who is talking to whom? Is it the woman in exile vs. the girl of her memories? Or should we consider the division between the two ‘I-texts’ as an attempt to create an inner dialogue, like the ventriloquist with his dummy?

Examining the italic parts of *An Air-Conditioned Egg*, we find that most of them report the heroine’s – sometimes romantic – memories of her happy childhood and youth in Syria. But they tell us something else as well: an insight into the duality of the protagonist’s life that is very mature: “*This is my life, moments between fire and ashes. Between the birthplace of my heart in Damascus, and the birthplace of my success in New York.*”⁴⁸ Again we are confronted with a narrative voice in which deep, and probably hidden, feelings and memories resound, gently complementing the other voice, that seems to try to keep some distance to what actually happens to the heroine. Very much reminiscent of

46 Ibid.:same page.

47 Ibid.:168 (Ar. 180)

48 *The Square Moon*:170 (Ar. 183). In Arabic it says *masqaṭ qalbī*, an alteration of the expression *masqaṭ al-ra’s*, meaning ‘birthplace’. It is interesting to note that Samman dedicated *Al-Ḥanīn ilā ‘l-yāsmīn* (1996) to “Dimashq, masqaṭ qalbī”, as well as the first letter in it.

Abdul's story, the heroine in *An Air-Conditioned Egg* must accept the sweet, though disturbing, voice of her memories in order to become a complete woman.

Up till now we have examined the narrative lines in three different types of stories in *The Square Moon*. We might conclude that Abdul, and the unnamed female protagonist in *An Air-Conditioned Egg*, have been alienated from one of the two narrating voices (X-Y and X-X respectively) that together form their identities. Then something weird, something magical happens. The eventual acceptance of the magical event (in this case the appearance of the ghost of a familiar person) first leads to inner confusion, and in the end to recognition of both voices. I would not argue that their lives are *happier* afterwards, but their personalities have developed, and their identities have become stronger. Reem, however, whose identity suffers from a dominant male narrative voice, should destroy the Y chromosome and breed an extra X, in order to become a complete woman. The intriguing question now is: what role do the ghosts play in these developments?

Ghosts provoke memories

One of the remarkable aspects in *The Square Moon* is the occurrence of a magical, or surrealist, event in every story. These events always surprise the protagonists, as they seem to occur at unexpected moments. In both *Beheading the Cat* (Abdul) and in *An Air-Conditioned Egg* (the New York lady) a ghost appears out of thin air, apparently of its own free will and with only one objective: to confront the protagonists with a carefully hidden part of their identities, related to their pasts. The question is: why in this very moment? Was the ghost 'listening at the door', and chose the best moment to intrude? Or was the ghost 'summoned' by some event in the protagonist's lives? And what about their nature? Are they Eastern-shaped, jinn-like, or rather constructed along Western lines of bodiless figures that inhabit desolate places in order to haunt us. Are they out to help the protagonists pass through a difficult phase in their lives, or do they have a goal of their own? A brief examination of two other stories in *The Square Moon* teaches us more about the personality of ghosts.

In *Visitors of a Dying Person* the male character Ra'if (Ra'if) is savouring his life of luxury in Paris as well as reflecting on the start of it in poverty, back in

Lebanon, many years before.⁴⁹ It is an early autumn evening, prior to his 55th birthday. Ra'if is in a nostalgic mood, thinking of "those days of moonlight, poetry, dreams", that represent his former life in Lebanon. But his sentiments prove to be false and worthless when it really comes to a test. Upon returning to his splendid studio in the centre of Paris, Ra'if feels physically un-well: he suffers from pains in his chest. Then the – broken! – doorbell rings, and a woman in black appears. She turns out to be his first ex-wife, having come to remind him of the injustice he did to her a long time ago. Ra'if, however, does not listen to her and persists in his perception of the events. Then the next ex comes in, and the next, and the next. The women enclose him, describing their terrible feelings, haunt him, and finally kiss him farewell.

Ra'if's 'ghosts' probably are mere shadows of the past, because it is not very likely that all his ex-wives would be dead. The 'ghosts' represent his troupe of betrayed women, clad in traditional black, reminiscent of Shakespearean witches, revengeful and aggressive.⁵⁰

Ra'if's ghosts have a mission to fulfill, and *if* they are summoned, then only by the protagonist's vulnerability, his weakness and a moment of melancholy. Ra'if, however, does not see the bare truth. He is a melancholy dying soul, impressed and haunted by the ghostly women, but he is lost at their revengeful hands, because he does not want to admit he is guilty of having betrayed them.

Register, I am not an Arab Woman tells us more details about the personality of the ghosts.⁵¹ Here the heroine is a recently widowed middle-aged Lebanese woman living in Paris. Her whole life consists of 'ghosts', dead or alive. When she and her husband moved from Beirut to Paris (apparently after the war, because their daughter was killed by "a celebration bullet") they built up a life surrounded by ghosts of exiled artists, like themselves. The Lebanese lady thus is accustomed to living with ghosts, describing it as follows:

*Don't the living have ghosts? Isn't my life haunted by my own ghost (who lives within me, talks to me, and quarrels with my body) and by other ghosts, some of whom died and some of whom are still alive, but enveloped by time and kept in my memory? Aren't my depths a museum of ghosts, who roam cities in which time stopped long ago?*⁵²

49 This is a A-type (He/I) story.

50 Cf. SALEM (2003):122.

51 This is a C-type (I/I) story.

52 *The Square Moon*:56 (Ar. 64).

This quote presents a key to a better understanding of the nature of ghosts in *The Square Moon*. Not all of them are shadows of persons who died. But all of them have a link to human beings who are known to the protagonists. In this respect the ghosts are endowed with mostly Western characteristics: they are obscure figures who resemble real, existing persons, but who do not possess a body of flesh and blood. This last characteristic rules out the possibility of jinns, the Arabic form of ghosts, for these are creatures who can take the shape and body of a human being and as such are not always recognized as a jinn.⁵³

While the heroine of *Register, I am not an Arab Woman* experiences friendly ghosts in all places, and even longs herself to become one of them, her maid Zakiyya-Gloria is frightened by one who haunts her. Zakiyya-Gloria is a young, half French – half Moroccan woman, who has very romantic feelings towards the Arab culture she inherited through her father. Divorced from her traditional first Moroccan husband, she immediately falls in love with a second one, and thinks not marrying him can protect her from more suffering. However, at the same time Zakiyya-Gloria trembles before a ghost she can't see, but whose presence haunts her, and makes her postpone sleeping with her new love. And thus, she yields to the ghost of old customs, in this case her own father.

Why owls, wonder, and a moon? New questions

Five dark owls, an invisible square moon, ghosts and surrealist events, schizophrenic personalities, and death, form the décor of lives that are lived in exile. It is a haunting, and not very reassuring image Ghada Samman presents to her readers. Characters are confronted with hidden parts of their identities, which they have tried to ignore, but which return to them like a boomerang. Ghosts are the shadows of real persons, dead or alive, they speak, but do not offer solutions, although sometimes they literally give voice to obscured memories. But, there is

53 There are no descriptions in *The Square Moon* that refer to jinns with respect to the ghosts that appear. The Arabic word used is *shabah/ashbah*. BUITELAAR (1996):126 refers to the fear of jinns to appear in places that represent liminality, like a cemetery or a hammam. The vulnerability of the human being while in an impure state would attract jinns. The only link I can see between the liminality of Buitelaar, and the appearance of ghosts in *The Square Moon*, is the circumstance that all protagonists are alone and unprotected when the ghost appears.

no single owl *inside* the book, and the few moons that are referred to aren't square, but at best broken, or unknown.⁵⁴

In this paper I have explored how the formal appearance of the stories in *The Square Moon* is reflected in their narrative voices. I have given a possible interpretation, while trying not to interpret beyond the visual text, beyond what is given the reader in hand. Although I am convinced that this exploration has been a fruitful exercise, I am very much aware of the fact that it is only a small part of the whole. Baring the construction of narrative voices does not throw any light on the verbal and pictorial illustrations, the paratexts Samman chose to adorn this book with. They still hide from a sensible interpretation that would start within the text of *The Square Moon*. Thus, I think we have to broaden our view.

In the beginning of this essay, I emphasized the author's original construction of authorship, uniting the writer, editor and publisher in one person. I doubted her intentions, and I still do. Reading more and more of Samman's publications shows me how intertwined her texts are. A first reading of *Rasā'il al-ḥanīn ilā 'l-yāsmīn* makes me note tens of references to earlier works. And vice versa. The prominent owls on the cover of *al-Qamar al-murabba'* probably are an homage to the owls in Samman's life, the owl statues she lost in the bombing of her Beirut residence, the owls that are neither ill- nor well-fated, owls that accompany her since her youth.⁵⁵ If so, then the owls on the cover might point to other, still hidden, autobiographical traces of the writer *within* the texts.

Perhaps a key to further exploration in this direction is the *ihdā'* to the original Arabic edition of *The Square Moon*. Samman dedicates the book to "a lover who has not left me a single day, whose name is wonder".⁵⁶ The Arabic word *dahsha* she uses here refers to amazement or wonder, as well as to astonishment, and it is difficult to tell which meaning Samman likes us to read. Of course, this wonder is a characteristic of the events in *The Square Moon*, but I think there is more to it. In one of the letters in *Rasā'il al-ḥanīn ilā 'l-yāsmīn*,

54 In *Thirty Years of Bees* the moon is compared to "a mirror that has fallen on the ground" (p. 143); in *An Air-Conditioned Egg* the protagonist asks her dead beloved "What is the shape of the moon in your sky?" (p. 197). Both quotes occur at the end of the stories.

55 Ghada Samman has written about her relationship with owls in different places of her oeuvre. A particularly informative essay is published in *Ghurba taht al-ṣifr* (Exile below zero):304–307. In addition, she has answered quite a few questions on the subject in interviews she has published in her own publishing house (see note no. 8 for details on the titles).

56 In Arabic the dedication is: "Uhdī hādha 'l-kitāb ilā ḥabībin lam yughādirnī yawman, is-muhu al-dahsha!"

that appeared in 1996, two years later, a female narrator tells an unknown addressee how she changed into a cheerful owl after he had left her, and that she found a new lover afterwards: *al-dahsha*, wonder [...] ⁵⁷

A new horizon emerges from the first, but we are still waiting for the square moon to rise.

References

AWWAD, Hanan

1983 *Arab Causes in the Fiction of Ghādah al-Sammān 1961 / 1975*.
Sherbrooke: Editions Naaman.

COOKE, Miriam

1988 *War's Other Voices. Women writers on the Lebanese civil war*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

KANAFĀNĪ, Ghassān

1992 *Rasā'il Ghassān Kanafānī ilā Ghāda al-Sammān* (Letters of Ghassan Kanafani to Ghada Samman). Published by Dār al-Ṭalī'a, Beirut.

KLEINEIDAM, Ursula

1996 *Vier arabische Kurzgeschichten. Kritische Untersuchungen zu frühen Werken von Ghāda al-Sammān*. Peter Lang, Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften.

MEYER, Stephan G.

2001 *The Experimental Arabic Novel. Postcolonial literary modernism in the Levant*. New York: State University of New York Press.

NĀBLUSĪ, Shākir al-

1990 *Fuḍḍ dhākirat imrā'a. Dirāsa fī adab Ghāda al-Sammān* (A woman's memory is breached. A study of literary work by Ghada Samman).
Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'arabiyya li'l-dirāsāt wa'l-nashr.

SALEM, Elise

2003 *Constructing Lebanon. A Century of Literary Narratives*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Selection of works by Ghada Samman (in Arabic)

1986 *Ghurba taht al-ṣifr* (Exile below zero). Essays.

57 "Risāla min būma mutafā'ila" (Letter from an optimistic owl):53–54.

- 1994 *al-Qamar al-murabbaʿ. Qiṣaṣ gharāʾibiyya* (The square moon. Supernatural tales). Short stories.
- 1996 *Rasāʾil al-ḥanīn ilā ʾl-yāsmīn* (Letters of longing for jasmine). Prose-poems.

Translations into English of works by Ghada Samman

- 1995 *Beirut ʾ75* (Bayrūt 75, 1975). Novel, translation: Nancy N. Roberts. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press.
- 1997 *Beirut Nightmares* (Kawābīs Bayrūt, 1976). Novel, translation: Nancy N. Roberts. London: Quartet Books.
- 1998 *The Square Moon. Supernatural tales* (al-Qamar al-murabbaʿ. Qiṣaṣ gharāʾibiyya, 1994). Short stories, translation: Issa J. Boullata. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press.
- 2001 *The Night of the First Billion* (Laylat al-milyār, 1986). Novel, translation: Nancy N. Roberts. Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press.