

**IF WE ALL LEAVE, WHO WILL CUT THE STRING:
EXILED INTELLECTUALS IN
GHADA AL-SAMMAN'S THOUGHT**

By Louis Yako

In a 1978 interview, the Lebanese poet, journalist, and artist Zainab Hamud asked Ghada al-Samman, “What is your philosophy in life?” Samman responded: “There is no individual salvation. The salvation of the self must go through the worlds of others. There is no freedom in an enslaved society. There is no joy in a wretched community. Connecting with others is not merely a national duty but an individual necessity.”¹ Connecting the fate of the writer with people, merging the intellectual’s well-being with that of others, and linking national duty to individual freedom are recurring themes in Samman’s writings. They encapsulate the author’s unique vision of the role of intellectuals. For Samman, since “salvation” is a collective effort, the intellectual cannot be disconnected from the collectivity. This philosophy is especially prominent in her writings after the Arab defeat at the hands of Israel in 1967. Most Arab thinkers agree that the defeat of 1967 “was a turning point in Arab popular and intellectual consciousness.”² Scholars and critics who focus on Samman’s post-1967 works observe that her writings shifted from romanticized, individual reflections on the Arab

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world to a refined vision of how literature can contribute to rethinking and reimagining political and social conditions.³

Ghada al-Samman was born in 1942 in Damascus into a bourgeois family. She became a prominent novelist, journalist, and feminist whose work consistently dealt with the struggles of the Arab world. She is a writer produced through multiple exiles, moving between Syria, Lebanon, and Switzerland, before eventually settling in France. Though scholarly works addressing the role of intellectuals in Arab literature and philosophy disproportionately focus on men, Samman is a woman who has written extensively about the importance of the intellectual in her fiction and nonfiction, as well as spoken about it in her published interviews. This article focuses on Samman's unique vision of the intellectual's movement between home and exile, and her experience as a feminist writer of multiple exiles.⁴ Examining the role of Arab intellectuals torn between home and exile in a selection of Samman's fiction and nonfiction works, I provide a nuanced understanding of her philosophy about the role of exiled intellectuals in the political and social struggles of their home countries. I argue that Samman sees home and exile as dialectically related and intertwined, making the contributions of intellectuals in these spaces similarly dialectical. For Samman, the life of an exiled intellectual is a circle that remains incomplete as long as he or she is unable to return to home.

This article traces Samman's vision by examining three thematic components of her writings. First, because many intellectuals are torn between home and exile, and since the relationship between these spaces is dialectical, I look at how Samman complicates and refines the notion of intellectual "commitment." Second, I examine how and why Samman considers "safe harbors" impossible to find either at home or in exile. For her, no "harbor" that asks intellectuals to compromise creativity is "safe." Third, I show how exiled intellectuals in Samman's fiction and nonfiction constantly struggle in the frightening gap between theory and practice. In tracing these recurring themes, I show that, for Samman, the "individual salvation" of an intellectual is hardly a solution. "Escape" through the bottleneck into exile is impossible, because intellectuals never lose their sense of responsibility to the people and the places left behind.⁵ This vision remains present in Samman's most recent works, as she reminds readers, "You can get a new citizenship, but you can't obtain a new memory."⁶ Samman's works

bear witness to critical periods in contemporary Arab history, beginning with her first collection of short stories, published in 1962, *Aynaka Qadari: Qisas* (Your Eyes Are My Destiny: Stories).⁷ With the ongoing refugee and displacement crisis in the Middle East, Samman's vision about exiled intellectuals is more timely than ever.

Selected Works

Samman has noted several times that she first learned the meaning of "being alone" in the world during the summer of 1966. She was living in London pursuing a PhD in English literature, but she was forced to discontinue her studies due to the death of her father. At the same time, she was fired from her job at a London-based Lebanese magazine.⁸ These experiences taught Samman the necessity of struggle and the importance of economic independence, lessons that she applied to her fiction and journalism in Lebanon and Europe.

Acknowledging the plethora of connections between Samman's fiction and nonfiction on the role of intellectuals, this article will focus on what I consider to be the most representative example of each: *al-Qabila Tastajwibu al-Qatila* (The Tribe Interrogates the Murdered Woman) and *Laylat al-Milyar: Riwaya* (Night of the Billion: A Novel).⁹ *Al-Qabila* was published in 1981 and includes selected interviews with Samman conducted mostly in the 1970s by Arab journalists and intellectuals.¹⁰ The book is significant because it contains a wealth of self-reflexive and critical analyses of intellectuals, exile, and the authorial voice. It opens, "I dedicate this book to the first interviewer: silence." This dedication sets the stage for an important recurring theme in Samman's works: the frightening gap between theory and practice, which for writers is often reflected in the frightening gap between ideas and the language needed to express them.

The introduction opens with yet another recurring theme, death, which Samman sees as a great reminder of how serious the role of the intellectual is. She writes, "With every line I write, I die a little bit." Samman sees that since death is inevitable, writers might as well write and live fearlessly. Moreover, to be aware of one's certain death means to be courageous in opposing every form of injustice. She continues, "From one death to another, their friendly faces appear; their voices come to interrogate the murdered

woman. They know her and they don't; she knows them and she doesn't. But she is sure of two things: that she belongs to them and that she is no longer buried alive."¹¹ Samman challenges gender taboos to remind readers that she is inseparable from them. By writing, she no longer accepts being buried alive and allowing her voice to be silenced. "She belongs to them" is a phrase that appears throughout Samman's works, reflecting her long-held belief that the intellectual's destiny is inseparable from the collective's.

Samman considers *al-Qabila* the work nearest and dearest to her heart. It is, she writes, a "human record of mutual moments of intense, provocative, and creative honesty—the moments of the interviews."¹² I examine this work closely not only because it contains a wealth of information on intellectuals in the author's voice, but also because many of Samman's ideas expressed in these interviews can be put in conversation with her fiction, which allows a more nuanced understanding of those writings.

The second text, *Laylat al-Milyar*, is a 492-page novel published in 1986, the eleventh year of the Lebanese Civil War. The novel is about the Israeli occupation of Lebanon in 1982, the destruction caused by the Lebanese Civil War, and the escape of Arab elites while others stayed behind. The novel opens with Khalil, an organic intellectual, dissident, and revolutionary working-class man, and his wife, Kafa, who is from a wealthy family with a distinguished name, heading with their two boys to the Beirut International Airport to flee to Switzerland. We learn that the family has lost their daughter, Widad, in an explosion. Kafa has already arranged the tickets and an expensive hotel, and she has lined up a job for Khalil at a restaurant in Geneva. The rest of the novel is about this family's struggle in Switzerland and their interactions with Lebanese and Arab elites there. The novel opens with Samman's poetic "dedication":

To the champions of freedom in the Arab lands,
Both men and women
Who have refused to drink from the wellspring of madness
Or the swamps of drug-induced numbness,
Whose sobriety is heroism,
Whose protection of democracy's compass is an adventure,
Whose lifetimes have become a gamble:
To them, wherever they may be, however they may be,

I dedicate this book.
For they are my people,
And to them I belong.¹³

There are several points that deserve attention in this dedication. First, it again articulates Samman's belief that freedom is only possible with a collective work effort, with awareness, sobriety, and the refusal to be desensitized to violence. Second, considering that the role of the Arab intellectual is central in this novel, it is as if the entire novel is dedicated to the efforts of these intellectuals to remain in touch with the pains of their communities at home. More importantly, the lives and ideas of the intellectual characters in the novel, juxtaposed with Samman's personal accounts, provide important clues as to the author's philosophy of the role and the dilemma of exiled Arab intellectuals.

Complicating and Refining Intellectual Commitment

Many of Samman's fictional intellectuals are torn between home and exile and tortured by the genuine desire to remain committed to causes at home without compromising creativity. Some scholars have examined how Samman dealt with urgent political Arab causes in her writings.¹⁴ Others focused on gender and feminism, rebellion, and the complex ways with which Samman dealt with the literary wave of *iltizam* (commitment), which is significant for understanding her vision of the role of the intellectual.¹⁵ I interpret Samman's idea of "commitment" for intellectuals as the refusal to escape from the destruction taking place at home. In fact, for Samman, not only is "escape" impossible, but, if there is a solution for the intellectuals' dilemma, it is not in "slip[ping] out of the bottleneck" into a life of exile. She expresses this position succinctly in a long interview conducted by the Lebanese journalist 'Atif al-Samra in 1973. Al-Samra asks Samman, "How did you manage to slip out of the bottleneck . . . and continue to write and outdo yourself?" She responds,

I didn't leave the bottleneck. Rather, I learned how to live and write from inside the bottle. I discovered that truly creative writers are those who really suffered and became aware of the fact that they are captives inside the bottleneck. They refused numbness. They decided to write about a free home, regardless of how narrow the bottleneck was.... It

is not important that I leave the bottleneck. What is important is to maintain my awareness inside the bottle and to reject—despite all pain—any compromise or individual escape. We should either destroy our Arab dilemma together or we should all stay inside to carry on the battle. . . . My salvation is not to live in Europe, like a lonely stray cat. Salvation is in returning to the bottleneck and breaking the bottle rather than finding a way to slip out of it.¹⁶

This response illustrates how and why Samman questions the safety of exile as a viable long-term solution. It shows why the lives of Samman's fictional exiled intellectuals remain deeply troubled without the possibility of returning home. In fact, even in her most recent writings, she continues to raise the question, "Why are we unable to make our homelands inhabitable? When will our homelands become a place for people to immigrate to rather than be displaced from?"¹⁷ In this sense, escaping through the bottleneck is not a step toward making the homeland inhabitable. It is, rather, the slipping of a few "fortunate" individuals from the bottle, while everyone and everything else continues to suffocate and suffer inside it. Yet those individuals who manage to escape are also shocked to discover in exile that they cannot escape the pain living inside them. This explains why exile for Samman does not make intellectuals forget home but rather makes them feel even more responsible for, and attached to, what is happening there. She notes that the paradox of "home" is that "one only feels its presence once it becomes absent."¹⁸ In this sense, Samman sees the homeland as equivalent to "health" in the old Arab phrase—it is only appreciated and understood by those who no longer have it.

Exiled intellectuals in Samman's fiction and nonfiction go through two equally painful phases once they leave home. The first phase starts when they realize that "escape" is impossible. The second phase comes later as intellectuals tire of exile and fill with despair. It is during this second phase that exiled intellectuals feel that the circle of the intellectual's life remains without closure so long as they do not return. But while Samman does not believe in escaping through the bottleneck as a solution, she equally rejects the notion that intellectuals' role is one of uncritical "commitment" to the causes at home. This point is best captured in an interview with the Palestinian novelist Salwa al-Banna in 1977. Al-Banna asks Samman

whether writing is a national duty. Samman responds, “You may tell me that the visibility of intellectuals at this difficult Arab phase is a national duty. I say that the only national duty for intellectuals is to be creative.”¹⁹ This response encapsulates how creativity and national duty should not be opposed to each other; they only become opposed when certain regimes consider intellectuals to be no more than puppets that produce the desired rhetoric on demand.

In a 1975 interview, the Sudanese writer al-Fatih Mikah asked Samman to evaluate the role of the Arab writer between the 1967 defeat and the 1973 victory. Samman’s response combines Gramsci’s notion of the organic intellectual with Edward Said’s later definition of the intellectual.²⁰ She sees that the role of the Arab intellectual, in relation to the struggle of the *umma*, does not differ from the role of any intellectual anywhere in the world at any given time. She writes: “Genuine intellectuals can’t stand outside of life. They must not force themselves to write a single word just because critics ask for it, or because the wave of the time requires it.”²¹ Samman refuses the idea that writers be turned into tools in the hands of power. In fact, on multiple occasions, she expressed her rage about how different political groups want to use the writer as a weapon in their moral and ideological battles. In one interview, she criticizes the relationship between intellectuals and power. “Freedom fighters expect the writer to write ‘war literature.’ Once they finish fighting and share the war profits, they ask writers to write ‘optimistic literature’ or ‘constructive literature.’ Upper-class ladies ask the writer to shave, wear his fanciest clothes, look like a spoiled dog, and attend their parties to recite poems praising their beauty, and perhaps the women’s liberation movement as well. Religious men ask writers not to forget ‘morals’ as they praise religious institutions that use God to make a living or that kill each other in the name of God.”²² Although coated with cynicism, this response poignantly articulates the troubled relationship between intellectuals and power. Indeed, it raises the question of whether intellectuals could ever assume serious roles without the blessing of a given political system.

Yet equally troubling for Samman is that the public does not always believe in intellectuals or take their role seriously. Until intellectuals are taken seriously, she says, there is no point in holding them accountable with meaningless questions such as: “What did you do during the war? What did

you do in peace? What did you do with novels? What did you do to prepare the youth for a better future?”²³ This point is critical because it shows that Samman holds both power and the public accountable for failing to believe in the role of the intellectuals. She rejects any attempt by a powerful regime or the public to impose *iltizam* on intellectuals, especially if the price of that *iltizam* is creativity.

At the same time, for Samman, refusing to be a mouthpiece for power does not equate to indifference toward struggles in the homeland. Rather, she poses a critical question: is it possible to be committed without compromising the mind? In one interview, she clearly articulates this complexity when she states, “I don’t know why discussing writing as a ‘national duty’ is like an accusation. . . . The issue of Palestine, for example, is not the specialty of politicians alone. When my home is threatened and my life is at risk, when my children’s destiny is unknown, I cannot throw all of that out the window and write as if I am on a stroll catching butterflies.”²⁴ In this response, Samman’s understanding of intellectual commitment is that intellectuals should neither be tools in the hands of power nor allow their destinies to be decided by politicians alone. In a sense, Samman’s version of commitment to Arab people and causes, combined with her highly critical view of different regimes of power, inspires her search for a creative commitment that is not performed under political and ideological pressures and obligations.

To this end, in 1980, Samman published a collection of articles, mostly written in the 1970s, titled *Kitabat Ghayr Multazima* (Uncommitted Writings).²⁵ She makes her key point on intellectuals and *iltizam* in the dedication on the first page: “To all those who loved *iltizam* but didn’t marry it... To my comrades in the ‘Party of Searching for Truth’ who are open to their comrades in all other parties.”²⁶ Particularly intriguing is that this dedication mimics a language often used by political parties, but it does so to challenge that language, which Samman considers a blind type of *iltizam* imposed on intellectuals. The first article in the book, “People Don’t Smile with a Decree,” originally published in 1971, criticizes how certain Arab regimes after the defeat of 1967 banned any writings considered “dark” or that could be classified as “defeat literature.” She writes that this prohibition was a “death sentence” for Arab intellectuals, whom she calls on to turn their pens into daggers in the face of such decrees. She writes, “to ban so-called

dark writings is itself a perfect recipe for taking us back to the Dark Ages. . . . Yes, this is not news, it is a death sentence not only for literature, but also for the irresponsible parties responsible for issuing such a decree.”²⁷ After condemning this decree, Samman ends the article, “Sorry, my alphabet cannot be forced to smile with a decree.”²⁸ In doing so, she clearly rejects any *iltizam* that tries to enchain her writing.

Samman’s critical take on “commitment” was part of widespread contemporary debates in the Arab world that sought to define the role of writers in nations going through decolonization and internal upheaval. These debates included many scholarly conversations about how and what to write; how to write purposeful literature without robbing it of its literary and artistic value; and what the role of the writer, whether at home or in exile, should be.²⁹ When situated in these debates, Samman’s vision of commitment for exiled intellectuals is akin to Edward Said’s analysis of the dialectical relationship between nationalism and exile.³⁰ Samman’s intellectuals are constantly torn between the destruction at home and the feeling of being paralyzed in exile, which makes their ties between these spaces equally dialectical. Because of this dialectic, intellectuals’ relationship to commitment becomes slippery and daunting.

Samman’s commitment is also in harmony with that of Elias Khoury, in that she sees commitment as only meaningful when it does not compromise critical thinking.³¹ Like Khoury, Samman’s concern is to avoid turning the realm of Arab writers and intellectuals into a battlefield for various regimes of power. This concern complicates intellectuals’ dilemma. On the one hand, they must account for social struggles. On the other hand, they can easily fall prey to politicization and ideologization under the pretexts of accountability and commitment. This dilemma is demonstrated in the lives of Samman’s exiled intellectual fictional characters in the novel *Laylat al-Milyar*. I now turn to analyze these characters along with relevant journalistic accounts by the author in *al-Qabila*.

Are There Any Safe Harbors for Intellectuals?

In her novel *Laylat al-Milyar*, Samman paints a vivid image of wealthy Kafa and her working-class revolutionary husband, Khalil. The two live in Geneva among wealthy Arabs while the Civil War ravages Lebanon. Samman

captures not only the elites' indifference to the war, but also how they profit from it through trading in arms and drugs. Khalil, the intellectual protagonist, wanted to stay in Lebanon and fight, but Kafa insisted on arriving at a "safe harbor" in Europe. Under pressure from his wife, Khalil suddenly finds himself in Switzerland. Samman introduces the "hypocrisy" of Arab elites from the novel's inception at the Beirut International Airport, when Khalil's family is on a bus taking them to board the plane. One passenger, a Lebanese woman "drenched with gold jewelry and plastered with makeup,"³² insists on boarding a first-class bus rather than the one used for economy class. The narrator's voice impatiently intervenes: "Hadn't anyone ever told her that there's only one class for people going to their deaths?"³³ This early moment in the novel expresses Samman's philosophy of the impossibility of "individual salvation." The fires of war do not discriminate between the rich and the poor.

In Geneva, Kafa strives to forget about Lebanon by mingling with Arab millionaires in pursuit of sex, money, and social status. Khalil, however, remains deeply concerned about Lebanon. He becomes increasingly alienated and unable to forget. We learn that he never changes the time on his watch. Kafa reproaches him for responding with the local time in Beirut on each occasion when she asks him about the time in Geneva. In a party at the home of Nadim, one of Raghid Zahran's agents, Khalil meets Nadim's wife, Dunya. He immediately connects with her. Dunya strikes Khalil as a woman who was once full of life, determination, and intellect. He notices a painting of a "beautiful young woman" hanging on the wall. She tells him it is a painting of her many years ago. Impressed with the quality of the painting, Khalil inquires, "So you paint, too?" Dunya responds: "Unfortunately, I don't anymore. It isn't possible to paint 'too.' You either paint or you don't paint. And if you do paint, you don't do anything else. There isn't time enough in a lifetime to paint and to do other things, too. And that's why I haven't painted since I got married."³⁴

This interaction captures Samman's philosophy about the seriousness of the role of the intellectual, particularly the role of women intellectuals like Dunya, which she has expressed in many interviews. In one interview, she asserts, "I am astonished by the number of women writers who constantly try to prove that they are at once writers and housewives. . . . You ask me, 'How do I manage to be a housewife and a writer?' The answer is

simple: I don't manage! I am just a writer who happens to have been born as a female."³⁵ Samman views intellectual life as a sacred full-time dedication that, when taken seriously, leaves room for little else. This sense of duty is particularly challenging for women who cut their intellectual lives short once they marry or achieve fame. In a different interview, Samman expresses Dunya's dilemma once again as she states: "We have become accustomed to the type of women writers whose writings are revolutionary prior to marriage, but who stop writing altogether after marriage. At best, they may publish one book every five years to maintain their 'literary status.'"³⁶ Here, Samman warns against dwelling on past accolades. She shows how mundane daily life can numb promising intellectuals who waste their time and energy on monotonous tasks disconnected from the collective struggles surrounding them.

Later in the novel, the Lebanese revolutionary writer Amir asks Dunya the same question. Amir is in Geneva to escape assassination attempts. He recalls attending Dunya's first gallery show in Beirut years prior, when she was young and rebellious. He asks her: "Do you do any painting now?" Dunya responds, "A few things, the type of things that my present society approves of. I do decorations for the stained-glass windows of the winter flower garden: a swan here, a carnation there. A duck here, a pond there." Amir asks, "And what else?" "Sometimes I draw pictures on silk pillows for the rooms in our house . . . uninspiring decorative designs that make the guests happy."³⁷ Amir enraged, responds, "Damn! You used to be on fire with rebellion!" Dunya bursts into tears as she hears Amir's words. He then kisses her forehead, saying, "I will leave you. . . . Try to cry a little and think a lot."³⁸

Samman's intellectual characters like Dunya, once rebellious and full of life, are constrained by the numbing effects of exile. In this instance, just like home, exile can also limit intellectual freedom. Samman considers freedom as the primary condition for the intellectual to create works that matter: "Freedom is the lung of the intellectual."³⁹ Yet she also asks: What happens when freedom is denied? What happens when the intellectual's very existence is at stake? What happens when he or she is unable to fully contribute here or there? Despite Dunya's pain in the novel, Samman suggests that such dilemmas should provoke rather than discourage intellectuals. They should compel intellectuals to be outspoken and take intellectual life

even more seriously. Indeed, for her, an intellectual is by definition someone who is provoked by injustice and oppression. The moment intellectuals cease to be provoked by injustice, they cease to be intellectuals.⁴⁰

In line with the notion of “no escape” in her journalistic interviews, Samman’s fiction demonstrates how the harbor of safety in exile can become a painful—or painfully comfortable—trap that may undermine creativity, as we see with both Khalil and Dunya in *Laylat al-Milyar*. In a 1978 interview with the Syrian writer, journalist, and critic Yasin Rifa’a, Samman discusses her short story, “A Gypsy Without a Harbor,” at length. Rifa’a inquires, “Why without a harbor?” Samman responds: “The harbor is possessive. . . . The harbor that forces me to stay in it is not a harbor; it is just another spiritual block. . . . Harbors, my friend, force you to pay the price, before they allow you to renovate your broken pieces. And the price is always to prevent you from departing without a prior permission. . . . I refuse to ask for permission in advance, no matter what the form of that permission may be.”⁴¹ Here, Samman is referring to an imprisonment order that was issued against her for leaving Syria without written permission from the state. In the 1960s, when she left Syria to pursue her higher education in Beirut, she was a lecturer at a university in Damascus. In those days, to prevent brain drain, the state required all educators and professionals to obtain approval prior to leaving the country. Samman referred to the incident of “refusing to get permission” multiple times in her interviews over the years. The incident and the circumstances surrounding it are also depicted in her latest autobiographical novel, *Ya Dimashq Wada’an* (Goodbye, Damascus).⁴² In this novel, she shows that neither homeland nor exile are fully safe; they both have the potential to contain intellectuals’ freedom by imposing anti-intellectualism, cooptation, and depoliticization.

In the interview with Rifa’a, Samman continues: “Don’t ask me about harbors. There is an intense hostility between gypsies and harbors.”⁴³ In this sense, if “harbors” represent the conditional safety provided by home or exile, then it follows that uncompromising intellectuals forced out of their homes will definitely express “hostility” to such harbors. Choosing a life of the mind in this case entails accepting the destiny of becoming a transient intellectual who is permanently metaphysically displaced, traveling from one place to another without losing sight of—or insight into—what matters. In a different interview, Samman shares an important personal story about

how she slept without a pillow for many years when she left Syria in 1964 to study at the American University of Beirut (AUB). She could not sleep well until her family finally mailed her pillow from Syria. Years later she decided, “A homeless person like me should sleep without a pillow. A pillow symbolizes stability. It’s where you return every night to the same place to sleep.”⁴⁴ Together these reflections evidence a deep yearning for a lost home (Syria) and an acknowledgement that a safe intellectual refuge, at least for Samman, is impossible to find.

Samman’s writings show that the pain endured at any harbor is inevitable. Therefore, this pain must be turned into a source of creativity rather than one of defeat and despair. Pain is a part of the process, but it carries the risk of producing defeat, as we see with Dunya in *Laylat al-Milyar*, who is no longer able to express her creativity through painting. Samman speaks of pain in a 1979 interview with the Palestinian journalist ‘Abdullah al-Shyti, who asks her: “Pain, does it inhabit you or you it? Is it a possibility, a capability, or a philosophy of yours?” She answers, “I reject the theory of ‘pain for pain’s sake,’ as much as I reject the game of ‘art for art’s sake.’ Yet pain is an inevitable result of awareness.”⁴⁵ “Awareness” is key here. In the novel, Dunya experiences a deep and painful moment of awareness as she reflects on how her life has become a creative void. Alcohol and painkillers sustain her in Switzerland. She ceases to be an intellectual the moment she stops confronting the world around her, the moment she ceases to be provoked by injustice at home, which happens to be the moment she puts down her painting brush and decides to marry for wealth and status. Yet the gap between her old rebellious self and her present numbness remains as big as the gap between theory and practice that we see with many of Samman’s fictional intellectuals. This gap between thinking and doing is another critical component of Samman’s thought.

Between Theory and Practice

For Samman’s uprooted characters in Switzerland, the distance between homeland and exile becomes as wide as the gap between theorizing the “problems” from exile and putting these theories into practice at home. In *Laylat al-Milyar*, several characters, such as Dunya, Khalil, and Amir, choose ways of dealing with this feeling of helplessness. These include Dunya’s total

withdrawal, Bassam's slow death, and Khalil's choice to return home whatever the price. Samman exposes the contradictions in the lives of exiled Arab intellectuals to show how they may become complicit in maintaining the status quo. Each of her characters wrestles with dependence on charitable crumbs or temporary relief in exile.

Since Samman herself has been living in exile since the 1980s, at first glance, it may appear as though there are contradictions in the way she raises questions about the viability and the effectiveness of exile as a place of safety or a productive space. Yet, upon closer examination, there are important nuances that emerge in her vision. First, Samman does not fully reject exile. Instead, she questions its effectiveness in providing resolution for intellectuals' ability to contribute at home. Second, Samman's prolonged exile could be precisely what makes her see through a critical lens the wide possibilities of and limits of exile for intellectual life. In a 1973 interview with the Lebanese writer Hanan al-Shaykh, Samman describes her early years in exile: "The reality of exile shocked me so much that I was unable to write at first. The more I understood exile, the less I was able to put it into words."⁴⁶ This statement shows that exile violently shook Samman in such ways that she went as far as breaking the norms and protocols of what critics define as "writing." In the same interview with al-Shaykh, Samman continues, "I lost the ability to write in an organized format. I lost all interest in writing pieces that could be classified into genres such as essays, short stories, novels, or poems. All my writings from that period, which I still have, are unclassifiable."⁴⁷ The word unclassifiable deserves attention, if we consider that displaced people are subject to regimes of classification and discrimination. At the same time, to be unclassifiable is a form of intellectual resistance that defies any attempt to reduce an exiled writer to no more than a genre or a political affiliation.

Samman's form of creativity, refined in exile, lies in the refusal to be classifiable. To be unclassifiable is itself an act of revolt against injustice. When asked in another interview by Lebanese writer Nabih al-Burji whether her words are intended to inspire revolt, she responds, "I write so I don't die, and when I don't die, I revolt, and when I revolt, I..."⁴⁸ Here, what Samman leaves unsaid encapsulates the endless possibilities that open up as a result of fearless and courageous writing that connects with the worlds of other people. Moreover, in leaving the statement open-ended, she shows how

the act of revolting could release many human strengths buried under and disabled by the monotonous daily routine and discipline. Lastly, this open-endedness shows how writing accompanied by awareness and which leads to revolt is an effective way to turn thought into a lived reality for writers and readers alike.

The necessity of connecting theory with practice for exiled intellectuals increases as *Laylat al-Milyar* progresses. We see how sheltered Arab intellectuals in the West may be safe and sound, but lose their rebellious spirit, as is the case with Dunya and Bassam. In *Laylat al-Milyar*, when Nasim visits Amir, the latter introduces him to Bassam, another Arab intellectual, once a prominent lawyer in Beirut, who escaped when the Lebanese civil war erupted. Bassam is introduced as a brilliant lawyer preparing his PhD dissertation. Bassam, drunk, objects to the introduction. “I wasn’t preparing anything, really. I’d run away and was waiting for a better time to come along.”⁴⁹ Bassam uses his PhD studies to hide in the West waiting for a “better time” at home. Bassam’s alcoholism worsens and he is increasingly unable to work on his dissertation. When Nasim asks Amir about the matter, Amir states that Bassam’s dissertation was a fraud and a “way of avoiding having to make any decisions. . . . Then he waited, and waited, and waited. . . . He’s put his life on hold indefinitely, it seems.”⁵⁰ In this case, intellectuals’ limited options to contribute at home from afar can make them fall prey to silence and indecisiveness. Amir’s statement captures the painful waiting that starts as temporary but becomes indefinite. The repetition of the word “waited” in the statement reflects the monotony.

The state of being on hold is precisely what widens the gap between thought and action. Bassam’s narrative trajectory is tragically ironic: he ran away from Lebanon for fear of being shot to death. Ironically, he ends up being assassinated by a gang that had intended to kill Amir because of the latter’s revolutionary writings. Thus, his escape is temporary and deceptive; exiled intellectuals’ escape is a mere rerouting that always takes them back to square one. The inability to escape home (and death)—even in exile—is what makes bridging the gap between thought and action urgent. This gap keeps intellectuals painfully struggling with many big questions: What to do? And how to do it from afar? How to return? What to do upon return?

Laylat al-Milyar also tackles the question of the gap between theory and practice with a nuanced gender perspective. In one scene, Amir recalls

a conversation with Bassam about his former lover, Layla, who was a revolutionary intellectual in Lebanon. Layla is confronted with the contradictions of her male comrades who call for women's liberation but behave like oppressive patriarchs in a male-dominated society. She is shocked and disgusted. In an echo of this shock, Samman asked Ghassan Kanafani in a 1967 interview, "Why in the Arab world do we think like Sartre and act like our ancestors wanted us to?"⁵¹ Years later, Samman lamented how in various Arab revolutionary movements, and despite women's contributions and sacrifices, "men monopolized power and reassigned women back to the kitchen."⁵²

The novel presents a similar dilemma in the case of Layla who, as a disillusioned woman, decides to leave the contradictions of Arab revolutionary causes behind and reinvents herself to become a cutthroat private secretary for a corrupt billionaire, Raghid Zahran, when she arrives in Switzerland. Zahran builds his empire on the skeletons of Arab causes. Amir is unable to understand Layla's transformation, nor does he know how to help reconnect her with her revolutionary spirit. Bassam advises him, "Slap her in the face!" Amir rejects the advice but later reflects: "Maybe Bassam was right when he advised me to slap her. He surely didn't mean it literally. But he was drawing my attention to the importance of getting past the stage of theorizing and moving on to action. I tend to focus on the theoretical side of things, which is an unforgivable sin when the enemy is getting things done while I sit around and rot."⁵³ The disharmony of theory and practice in Amir's words is the climax of the exiled intellectual's dilemma in the novel. Indeed, for Samman, this gap can only be bridged when intellectuals come to terms with the fact that death, whether metaphorical or physical, is inevitable. The inevitability of death is precisely what gives rise to the need to translate thoughts into actions. As such, the question of death is also significant for understanding Samman's vision of intellectual life.

For Samman, living the life of the mind means striving to make one's death meaningful. She is preoccupied with how intellectuals can avoid dying twice: once physically and a second time intellectually. She has often expressed a painful awareness of her impending death as a writer combined with an increased sense of responsibility about what to write before that happens. When asked by the journalist Layla al-Hurr in a 1975 interview, "When you philosophize, what do you write?" Samman responds, "I write:

Since death is inevitable, it is truly a catastrophe for our death to be devoid of any meaning and for it not to add anything to humanity.”⁵⁴ These are the existential issues that Samman’s exiled characters in *Laylat al-Milyar*, especially Khalil, wrestle with: how to make their death meaningful and how to be worthy of it. Indeed, the characters in *Laylat al-Milyar* raise the question of whether life is worth living without turning theories into a way of life. For exiled intellectuals living between two or more worlds, the question is: at some point, does theory detached from action become akin to knowing the causes of oppression but remaining silent? There is no comforting solution to this dilemma in either Samman’s fiction or her nonfiction.

Closing the Circle

For Samman’s intellectuals who survive war and violence, war is never over, even after they arrive in exile. In *Laylat al-Milyar*, we see how Kafa attempts to convince herself and her husband, Khalil, that they must never think about Beirut, let alone return. In a memorable passage, Samman presents two discourses that exiled people embrace to survive both worlds. Upon arrival in Switzerland, Khalil obsessively follows the news in Lebanon, while Kafa buries her memories in any way she can. Enraged, she turns off the TV and reproaches Khalil for his fixation upon destruction and dead bodies in Beirut’s streets even after they have made it to Geneva. Kafa criticizes Khalil and Arab revolutionaries like him as “useless hypocrites” who contribute to this destruction. Kafa’s arguments capture the Western mainstream discourse of othering the Arab world: “they are killing each other,” “they have always been doing this to each other,” and “these people just love blood and fighting.” Insulted by Kafa’s words, Khalil responds: “This is not exactly what happened,” he shouts. “But it is what some people wanted it to look like, so that some moronic woman like you would say what you are saying.”⁵⁵ By emphasizing Khalil’s inability to forget what he left behind in Lebanon, Samman reveals the impossibility of escape, despite—or perhaps because of—the beautiful, serene Swiss scenery. At the novel’s end, Khalil insists on returning home to seek closure. Khalil’s retort to Kafa also captures the ideological and epistemological battle between East and West. Media discourse on the region, as well the Western gaze upon the Middle East, create a total state of confusion and disorientation to which

people like Kafa succumb. In shouting “this is not exactly what happened,” Khalil is not only speaking to Kafa, but to many Arabs and Westerners who take the media’s portrayal of the region’s struggles at face value. Moreover, Khalil’s statement illustrates the entangled relationship between home and exile. Khalil’s life in Switzerland is shaped and driven by his intellectual experience at home; it remains incomplete while disconnected from the struggle in Beirut.

Kafa’s reaction can be interpreted as “realistic” and “practical.” Although her reaction to exile is ostensibly the opposite of Khalil’s, it is equally dialectical. Her attempts to distract herself and forget Lebanon are also the result of her traumatic experience at home. The difference between Kafa and Khalil’s reactions to exile is in the vision and the degree of self-consciousness between the two. Khalil and other characters’ painful level of awareness in exile leads them to resist any attempts to neutralize them or force them to forget everything at home under the pretext of being “realistic” and “practical.” In a 1990 article, Samman asks her readers: since exile has become unavoidable in this phase of the Arab experience, how do we draw the line between being “realistic” and “betraying” or “giving up” on what is happening at home? She states that, as a writer, she takes solace in knowing that millions of exiled Arabs will refuse becoming realistic if that means “erasing their memory and fully assimilating with a reality in exile that belittles them humanly and historically, a reality that assigns them a role that doesn’t go beyond earning their daily ‘fodder’ and consuming it in front of the TV.”⁵⁶

Perhaps there is a certain level of awareness that makes intellectuals see these spaces with greater sensitivity to nuances, discrepancies, and contradictions. Critics and scholars observe that with her long journey in exile, Samman herself displays an acute sensibility characterized by despair and melancholy. This despair increases in each of Samman’s later books, regardless of genre or format. In his latest study of Samman’s fiction, the Syrian critic ‘Abd al-Latif Arna’ut calls this “the exhaustion of the journey,” which he observes in her post-1990s works. In an insightful reading of her poetry collection *‘Ashiqa fi Mihbara* (A Lover Inside an Inkwell),⁵⁷ Arna’ut sees that Samman, who has “gazed into the fire of knowledge for so long,” has arrived at a station that leads to no other. As she painfully writes in the poetry collection, “the lie of all lies. Everything is a lie.”⁵⁸ Arna’ut wonders

whether Samman has concluded that writing cannot influence the internal logics of the universe, because no human, not even a writer, can fully understand them.

In a poem titled “A Lover Who Declared: There is No Sea in Beirut,” Samman succinctly articulates the relationship between writers and exile in a stanza that is worth translating in full:

Paris is tired of me
And I got tired of elevators and metallic vagrancy
And aggressive fancy sensor hotel gates
Which open up spontaneously
When you stand before them
like a ghost coming from the kingdom of madness
I got tired of the smell of poisoned cockroaches
In old wooden elevators
I am tired of the smell of rotten fancy carpets
In old yellow houses like the teeth of agonizing people
And the smell of mothballs exuding from sunless windows
And the stones of lifeless buildings surrounding me
Like multiform tombstones standing on my tomb.⁵⁹

Like Khalil’s exhaustion with Switzerland despite its peace and beauty, “Paris is tired of me” captures the gaze of the exiled intellectual who is at first impressed and later disillusioned by Europe’s beauty. Intellectuals become disenchanting with the ugliness below modernity’s surface; even the beautiful things in exile are only reminders of the destruction at home. Even more painful is that, for many, exile begins as a temporary escape and relief but ends up being a permanent state of being (or not being).

In *Laylat al-Milyar*, this is clear in Bassam’s pain and refusal to accept what many would consider the “realistic” decision of settling in exile and forgetting the pain at home. Bassam’s refusal of this option manifests itself in indecisiveness. He sees exile as a waiting room, not a space of “doing” or taking action. He waits there for better times. When he finally attempts to take action after an argument with Amir, his first step is to leave Amir’s house. As Bassam packs his “meager possessions into a suitcase,” we learn that he had kept all his belongings in two suitcases: a sealed black suitcase, which contained his more elegant clothes for special occasions, and a gray

suitcase with “everything else.” In Switzerland, he opened the gray suitcase and kept the black one sealed, thinking to himself:

I’ll be going home soon, so why open this one, too, and be up to my ears in chaos? Then the years passed without his opening the black suitcase even once. Instead, he just took it with him wherever he went. The strange thing was that customs officials had never once asked him to open it. It was as if it were invisible to everyone but him. So he went on not opening it, as if the reality of his exile would come popping out of it . . . and he would have no choice but to acknowledge it as his permanent destiny.⁶⁰

This scene provides clues about the potential causes of Bassam’s indecisiveness. The fact that he keeps one suitcase sealed hoping to return home one day explains that his intellectual passion dwells in Beirut. It is an instance of how tormenting it is for intellectuals to remain in a permanent state of waiting. This zone of waiting in exile is like intellectual death for Bassam and Khalil. The suitcase that Bassam keeps sealed, and which remains invisible to everyone else but him, is a metaphor for the pain of exiled intellectuals that is visible to no one but themselves. Until the end, Bassam remained torn between two worlds, yet he miserably fails to maintain either. He escaped a stray bullet in his homeland only to commit slow suicide through alcoholism.

Samman, however, rejects the idea of a slow death in exile as totally as she rejects intellectual suicide. When asked in 1977 by the journalist Anwar Khatar whether she, as a writer, had ever thought about committing suicide, Samman responds: “And why should I consider suicide? Suicide is a luxury I haven’t had the chance to practice.” She then speaks about the different types of suicide that writers and other people are forced to commit daily to paradoxically preserve their lives: “I once committed suicide for the sake of life, to protest our daily death, to protest the conventional tactics that turn our lives into death from the inside.”⁶¹ Unlike Bassam in the novel, Samman sees that even when intellectuals choose to commit suicide, it should be understood as an act of resistance against injustice. The opposite of “death” is not simply “life” but rather “the life of writing.” In the same interview with Khatar, Samman states that she resisted death through writing. “I had to choose between dying silently like thousands of

my countrywomen or resisting. . . . I decided that exposing the game was better than a free meaningless death.”⁶²

In this sense, Khalil in *Laylat al-Milyar* is in harmony with Samman’s vision of the importance of returning to Beirut to fight the causes of displacement from within. After all, Khalil fails in his attempts to come to terms with his new life in Geneva. He looks at the beautiful scenes, reflects, and thinks to himself:

I am absent. I’ve left the present and fallen into a trap of pain and fear, the fear of becoming a refugee without a home. For so long, I took pride in the fact that every cozy house on earth was “home” to me. For so long I declared that I was calling for Arab unity as a small step toward cosmic unity. And now here I am, trembling like homesick little boy, yearning for the front doorstep of our house. I remember how my grandma was buried under them for “good luck,” after which my dad tripped over it and broke his hand.⁶³

Khalil’s dilemma is not his inability to adapt to a different place, but his inability to adapt while his homeland is being destroyed. To be a person who can adapt to different places does not mean erasing one’s memories and embracing a new place and identity as if nothing happened before. Samman’s intervention is that a time comes when intellectuals realize that the solution—if one exists—is to avoid being forced into permanent exile by addressing the causes at home. Significantly, each time Samman discusses issues of writing, resistance, and revolution, she refers to the “forces of social alienation” seeking to erase Arab memory and destroy Arab dreams for a better future. In one interview, Samman discussed her dream for a healthier Arab world with reference to post-1967 attempts to further erase Palestine: “So many forces of social alienation have been dedicated to brainwashing the Arab people, forcing them to erase all their beautiful and noble values, to cut their roots, and destroy their seeds. . . . A long time ago, they used to refer to the Occupied Territories as ‘so-called Israel.’ Today, there are those who are trying to force us into the dark tunnel of betrayal to come out at the other end and say, ‘so-called Arabs,’ instead.”⁶⁴ The fact that *Laylat al-Milyar* ends with Khalil’s return to Beirut, despite the Israeli occupation, embodies Samman’s vision of the intellectual’s role. That role lies in resisting the erasure of memories and in the revision and rewriting of history.

Conclusion

Ghada al-Samman's writing presents a bold and unique vision of exiled intellectuals. She argues that exile and marginality are not ideal spaces for intellectuals to inhabit. Just like the homeland, exile has limits that can make intellectuals feel paralyzed and unable to make serious contributions. In this context, however, the ability to return home does not necessarily negate the ability to adapt to other places around the world. Nor is there a binary opposition between homeland and exile, with one assumed to be superior to the other. Indeed, Samman herself, a writer of multiple exiles, has frequently noted that "vision is more transparent at airport transits covered with gray dawns, drowsiness, exhaustion, and the smoke of departing planes."⁶⁵ Yet she also contends that being a writer or an intellectual in exile, regardless of how safe or beautiful, is akin to being a "beggar standing helplessly outside the heavily fortified walls of joy."⁶⁶ Intellectuals' helplessness in exile stems from their inability to leave behind the sadness of what happened or is happening at home: "So long as sadness occupies my home, it occupies me. So long the enemy occupies my land, it occupies me. It occupies my memory. Joy outside the homeland is temporary and touristic. It's a short-lived bubble."⁶⁷ In this sense, the pain of Samman's fictional intellectuals equally springs out of an ethical and intellectual responsibility toward home.

At the end of her novel *Laylat al-Milyar*, when the exiled intellectual, Khalil, leaves his wife, Kafa, behind and finally returns to Beirut with his sons, he is shocked by the destruction he sees upon his arrival. As he starts having second thoughts, "he almost drowns in a dark abyss of regret," and starts thinking to himself, "What should I do when it seems that every step I take is a misstep? And if it was a sin to run away, then isn't coming back now a fatal error?"⁶⁸ Before drowning in the abyss of regret, he sees a multicolored kite flying in the sky, as though challenging death and destruction and promising new possibilities at home. Khalil's taxi reaches an Israeli checkpoint fortified with cement barriers and a string. The string is removed only after the Israeli soldiers check passengers' documents. Khalil presents his documents to the soldiers and thinks: "I will stay no matter what happens. If we all leave, who will cut the string?"⁶⁹

If the purpose of exiled intellectuals' thinking is to contribute to cutting the strings of oppression and destroying the matrix of colonialism,

it follows that in returning home and tearing down the wall there is a way to turn thought into action. Toward the end of *Laylat al-Milyar*, Khalil realizes that cutting the string of the oppressive powers is more important than becoming paralyzed by theory. He thinks to himself: "The theories are many, but the string is one."⁷⁰ Samman's fiction and nonfiction since the 1960s show that any genuine intellectual effort should be an act of revolt that contributes to cutting the string. Revolt, for Samman, is the highest form of love and resistance. She was once asked in an interview, "You're always rebellious, revolutionary, and resistant in your writings. Isn't there anything that you love, or that satisfies you, in this Arab world?" She responded: "I am revolutionary and rebellious precisely because there are things that I love about the Arab world. You don't revolt except for a home that you love, believe in, and hold sacred. . . . I revolt because I love. Because I believe. . . . There is no rage with indifference. There is no desire to change things with despair."⁷¹ In this way, writing on the writer's terms is itself an act of revolution. Samman has maintained for decades that a great revolutionary must also be a great lover.⁷² That every creative piece of writing, be it a short story, a novel or a poem, is a "living tissue" which contains within its cells the dynamite of the revolution.⁷³

ENDNOTES

- 1 Ghada al-Samman, *al-Qabila Tastajwibu al-Qatila* [The Tribe Interrogates the Murdered Woman] (Beirut: Manshurat Ghada al-Samman, 1981), 335.
- 2 Suzanne Elizabeth Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 2.
- 3 Scholarly works on Samman include 'Abd al-Latif Arna'ut, *Ghada al-Samman wa-Masiratuha al-Thaqafiyya wa-l-Ibda'iyya: Dirasat* [Ghada al-Samman and Her Intellectual and Literary Journey: Studies] (Beirut: al-Dar al-'Arabiyya li-l-'Ulum Nashirun, 2013); and Hanan Ahmad 'Awwad, *Qadaya 'Arabiya fi Adab Ghada al-Samman: Fi Fatra Ma Bayn 1962 wa 1975* [Arab Causes in the Literature of Ghada al-Samman: The Period Between 1962-1975] (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a, 1989).
- 4 Although Samman has been prolific and influential, and her fiction translated into more than fifteen languages, only a fraction of her works is available in English. Samman's trilogy of novels about the Lebanese civil war, *Beirut 75*, *Beirut Nightmares*, and *The Night of the First Billion: A Novel*, have been translated into English by Nancy N. Roberts. In an interview with the Syrian newspaper *al-Ba'th* in 1996, Samman expressed her appreciation for scholars who have made serious efforts to introduce her work to English readers, including miriam cooke, Nancy N. Roberts, and Issa Boullata, the editor of her collection of short stories, *The Square Moon*. See Ghada al-Samman, *Istijwab Mutamarrida* [Interrogating a Rebel] (Beirut: Manshurat Ghada al-Samman, 2011), 191.
- 5 Samman, *al-Qabila*, 54.
- 6 Ghada al-Samman, "Man Yabi'u Dhakira Jadida li-Muwatina min al-'Alam al-Thalith," [Who Can Sell a New Memory for a Citizen from the Third World?] *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, 13 January 2018, <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=860217>.
- 7 Ghada Samman, *'Aynaka Qadari: Qisas* [Your Eyes Are My Destiny: Stories] (Beirut: Manshurat Dar al-Adab, 1962).
- 8 Ghali Shukri, *Ghada al-Samman bila Ajniha* [Ghada al-Samman Without Wings], (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a, 1977), 41.
- 9 All translations from Arabic are my own.
- 10 This book is part of a series of such collected interviews with Samman, which include *al-Bahr Yuhakimu Samaka* [The Sea Prosecutes a Fish] (Beirut: Manshurat Ghada al-Samman, 1986); *Tasakku' Dakhil Jurh* [Wandering Inside a Wound] (Beirut: Manshurat Ghada al-Samman, 1988); *Muhakamat Hubb* [Love on Trial] (Beirut: Manshurat Ghada al-Samman, 2004); *Sa-Ta'ti al-Sabiya li-Tu'atibuk: Bidayat Zaman al-Tamarrud* [The Young Girl Shall Come to Admonish You: The Beginnings of the Age of Rebellion] (Beirut: Manshurat Ghada al-Samman, 2009); and *Istijwab Mutamarrida*.
- 11 Samman, *al-Qabila*, 5.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 13 Ghada Samman, *Laylat al-Milyar: Riwaya* [The Night of the Billion: Novel] (Beirut: Manshurat Ghada al-Samman, 1986), 6.
- 14 'Awwad, *Qadaya 'Arabiyya fi Adab Ghadah al-Samman*.
- 15 For such examples see Najla Nasib al-Ikhtiyar, *Taharrur al-Mar'a 'abra a'mal Simun du Bufwar wa-Ghada al-Samman, 1965-1986* [Women's Liberation in the Works of Simone de Beauvoir and Ghada al-Samman, 1965-1986] (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a, 1991); Paula De Capua, *al-Tamarrud wa-l-Iltizam fi Adab Ghada al-Samman* [Rebellion and Commitment in the Literature of Ghada al-Samman] (trans. Nura al-Samman) (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a, 1992); Samar Yazbik, *Ghada al-Samman: al-Mihna, Katiba Mutamarrida* [Ghada al-Samman: Career, Rebellious Writer] (Damascus: al-Amana al-'Amma li-Ihtifaliyyat

- Dimashq 'Asimat al-Thaqafa al-'Arabiyya, 2008).
- 16 Samman, *Qabila*, 303-4.
- 17 Ghada al-Samman, "Qabla an Tuhajir, Fakkar" [Before You Immigrate, Think!] *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, 28 March 2015: <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=317542> .
- 18 Ghada al-Samman, *Hikayat Hubb 'Abira* [Fleeting Love Stories] (Beirut: Manshurat Ghada al-Samman, 1980), 210.
- 19 Samman, *Qabila*, 329.
- 20 Edward Said, *The Representation of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Pantheon, 1994), 23.
- 21 Samman, *Qabila*, 310.
- 22 Ibid., 228-9.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid., 34-5.
- 25 Ghada al-Samman, *Kitabat Ghayr Multazima* [Uncommitted Writings] (Beirut: Manshurat Ghadah al-Samman, 1980).
- 26 Ibid., 7.
- 27 Ibid., 9.
- 28 Ibid., 12.
- 29 For example, see Verena Klemm, "Different Notions of Commitment (*Iltizam*) and Committed Literature (*al-Adab al-Multazim*) in the Literary Circles of the Mashriq." *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures* 3, no. 1 (2000), 51–62.
- 30 Edward Said finds that "the interplay between nationalism and exile is like Hegel's dialectic of servant and master, opposites informing and constituting each other," which creates a sense of "estrangement." Said's use of the word "estrangement" is significant for understanding Samman in this context, because exiled intellectuals experience multiple estrangements that start at home and continue—or worsen—in exile. Intellectuals' estrangement may reach a climax with the feeling that the far distance in exile prevents them from making tangible contributions at home. Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 176.
- 31 Elias Khoury proposes a reconsideration of the history of literary commitment in the Arab Mashriq. Instead of abolishing the term "commitment" altogether, Khoury suggests that the writings that emerged after the 1967 defeat must be seen as a literature that is "beyond *iltizam*." Doing so, Khoury suggests, "enables these post-1967 attempts to be read as not totally detached and disconnected from an existing and powerful discourse in modern Arabic literature, allowing *iltizam* to be conceived as an ongoing, historically contingent project, a project wherein literary commitment embraces a critical attitude toward the self, society, and history." Friederike Pannewick and Georges Khalil, eds., *Commitment and Beyond: Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature Since the 1940s* (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert, 2015), 79-89.
- 32 Samman, *Laylat al-Milyar*, 14.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid., 124.
- 35 Samman, *Qabila*, 63-4.
- 36 See an interview with Na'im Shaqir on 15 June 1979. Ibid., 88-9.
- 37 Samman, *Laylat al-Milyar*, 281-2.
- 38 Ibid., 282.
- 39 Samman, *Qabila*, 31.
- 40 Ibid., 170.

- 41 Ibid., 58.
- 42 Ghada al-Samman, *Ya Dimashq Wada'an* [Goodbye, Damascus] (Manshurat Ghada al-Samman, 2015). This novel can be read as a continuation of her previous novel titled *al-Riwaya al-Mustahila: Fusayfasa' Dimashqiyya* [The Impossible Novel: A Damascene Mosaic] (Manshurat Ghada al-Samman, 1999), 143-6. In it, Samman presents us with a character in the Syrian intelligence services named Nahi, a man with a “nice handwriting,” code for agents who write reports about suspects. Nahi is a corrupt officer who would only give the protagonist, Zayn, permission to leave Syria to study in Lebanon in return for sexual favors. Zayn decides to expose him, a move that only worsens matters. In retaliation, Nahi accuses Zayn of working as a spy for West Germany.
- 43 Samman, *Qabila*, 58.
- 44 Ibid., 59.
- 45 Ibid., 83.
- 46 Ibid., 34.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid., 237.
- 49 Samman, *Laylat al-Milyar*, 219.
- 50 Ibid., 286.
- 51 Samman, *Qabila*, 15.
- 52 See interview with the Lebanese writer and critic, Jihad Fadil, 5 May 1978. Ibid., 253-4.
- 53 Samman, *Laylat al-Milyar*, 171.
- 54 Samman, *al-Qabila*, 136.
- 55 Samman, *Laylat al-Milyar*, 128.
- 56 Ghada al-Samman, *al-Qalbu Nawrasun Wahid* [The Heart Is a Lonely Seagull] (Beirut: Manshurat Ghadah al-Samman, 1998), 194-5.
- 57 Ghada al-Samman, *Ashiqqa fi Mihbara* [A Lover Inside an Inkwell] (Beirut: Manshurat Ghadah al-Samman, 1995).
- 58 Arna'ut, *Ghada al-Samman wa-Masiratuha al-Thaqafiyya wa-al-Ibda'iyya*, 260.
- 59 Samman, *Ashiqqa fi Mihbara*, 54.
- 60 Samman, *Laylat al-Milyar*, 298-9.
- 61 Samman, *Qabila*, 75.
- 62 Ibid., 73.
- 63 Samman, *Laylat al-Milyar*, 258.
- 64 Samman, *Qabila*, 110.
- 65 Ibid., 136.
- 66 Ghada al-Samman, *Ra'shat al-Hurriyya* [Tremble of Freedom] (Beirut: Manshurat Ghadah al-Samman, 2003), 110.
- 67 Ibid.
- 68 Samman, *Laylat al-Milyar*, 492.
- 69 Ibid.
- 70 Ibid., 491.
- 71 Samman, *Qabila*, 163-4.
- 72 Ibid., 222.
- 73 Ibid., 218-9.