

# War Narratives Through The Eyes/I'S of Women in Iman Humaydan Younes' *B As In Beirut*

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## **Abstract**

Lebanese author and journalist Iman Humaydan Younes published her debut novel *B as in Beirut* in Arabic in 1997 while the English translation didn't appear until 2007. The novel is divided into four narratives told by Lillian, Warda, Camilia, and Maha who live in the same apartment building in Beirut during the Lebanese civil war that extended from 1975 till 1990. Younes chooses to present personal narratives that reflect the emotional states of these women rather than describe the violent occurrences of the actual war. In this sense she tells of the repercussions of the war on her female narrators, and the coping mechanisms that each adopts away from the violence, destruction and absurdity that have been the main foci of most Lebanese war novels. My paper affects a close reading of these interlocked narratives and investigates the female voices behind them: who they are, what they are going through, and what they do in order to survive the state of inertia and loss during the civil war. My contention is that Younes's novel is one of the very few that succeeds in conveying the female experience during the civil war and paves the way for a Feminist attitude towards gender roles in a war- torn nation, and towards an understanding of the place of the woman in an overly male-oriented and maneuvered dominion.

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**Keywords:** Lebanese women writers- Lebanese Civil war- War literature- women and war

*“This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room. A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop.” (Virginia Woolf, A Room of one's Own)*

Iman Humaydan Younes's *B as in Beirut* was originally written in Arabic and published in 1997, but it wasn't until 2007 that the English translation appeared. Her consequent novels were also translated from Arabic into English and several other languages: *Wild Mulberries* was published in 2008, *Other Lives* followed in 2014, and most recently *The Weight of Paradise* in 2016. Younes's writing revolves around the Lebanese civil war and the place of female protagonists in the context of war. Younes studied Sociology at the Lebanese University of Beirut and works as a journalist and writer. Her Master's thesis entitled "Neither Here, Nor There" documented the stories of those who disappeared during the war. She conducted interviews with and was interested in the individual stories and narratives of their families and loved ones. She focused on their experiences and their approach to memory and loss. In that sense her interest in the narrative of war counters the mainstream narrative that has been imposed on the Lebanese people. She draws from her rich socio-historical knowledge to write the war, and her approach stems from her preoccupation with the individual and social aspects of war.

Younes writes both in Arabic and French. *B as in Beirut*, her debut novel is entitled *Bā'mithla bayt... mithla Bayrūt* in Arabic, which translates literally as: B as in House... as Beirut. By equating Beirut to house or home, Younes targets the connotative dimension of the word. Beirut is home. It constitutes the private sphere of war that I aim to discuss in the current study. The book is divided into four interlocked narratives told by four very different women, namely Lilian, Warda, Maha and Camilia who live in the same apartment building in Beirut during the Lebanese civil war that extended from 1975 till 1990. The last two stories intertwine and Maha tells her own story as well as that of Camilia in the last section of the book. Younes chooses to present personal narratives that reflect the emotional states of these women rather than describe the violent occurrences of the actual war. Her focus is the private, personal sphere rather than the public and collective. Yet she uses this intimate experience as catalyst for the development of female consciousness with regards to male experience and social experience in general.

### **The Beirut Decentrists**

The Lebanese civil war has been the setting and subject matter of many female authors including Ghada al- Samman, Hanan al Shaikh, and Emily Nasrallah among many others. The mid 1970s witnessed the emergence of a significant number of women writers who started to write their own literature in and about the war, a field that primarily constituted of male authors. These women who experienced the war reported their own take on it in their literature. Critic Miriam Cooke (1987) baptized them as the "Beirut Decentrists", as they are de-centered or excluded from the literary canon. These female authors have relayed the experience of consciousness of survival

and described the war and their society through their own lenses. In “Women Write War: the Centring of the Decentrists” Cooke writes:

The Beirut Decentrists... wrote of the dailiness of war... from the inside margin, compelled to participate because the war was everywhere. The men wrote from the epicenter. The men’s writings catalogued savagery, anger and despair. These women’s writings reflected the mood of the war and the emergence of a feminist consciousness. (Cooke, 1987, p.3)

While men describe battles and depict violence in their novels, the Beirut Decentrists create their own sphere of experience away from savagery, blood and politics. Cooke adds that they are decentered on two different levels: the physical and the intellectual. These female writers were scattered all over Beirut during the war, and “they moved in separate spheres” intellectually (Cooke 1988, p.4). For her, these female authors were able to affect an act of resistance against men and against society during the civil war, and became in control of their own bodies and fates. Their writings underwent an evolution from passivity to action, and strong female voices developed during the war.

Younes might not categorically fit in Cook’s definition of the Beirut Decentrists mainly because she wrote in the period after the war, not during the war. However, it is clear that Younes’s writing continues in the tradition of Lebanese women writers who succeeded in establishing a new position of self-assertion vis- à-vis patriarchy in a war-torn country. Her protagonists Lilian, Warda, Camilia, and Maha tell diverse stories of survival during a war that is not named and never actually shown. These four women recount the war through their positions and dis-positions while never describing violence, battles, bombing or bloodshed. In her 1997 novel *Beirut Nightmares* Ghada al- Samman adopts a similar choice when she chronicles seven days in two-hundred and six nightmares spent in a villa in Beirut in 1975. She uses the journal format in order to give the illusion of fact recording while the reader never sees or hears the war except through the mind and psyche of the narrator. By distancing their narrators from the battlefield and centering them in the private sphere, these female authors deliberately adopt an angle that veers away from historical reality and establishes a new focal perspective.

The current paper will focus on three of Younes’s narratives: the first, the third and the last, those of Lilian and Camilia mainly for due to the abundance of material that can be discussed and to the fact that each narrative deserves special attention and in-depth study. Thus, limiting this discussion to Lilian and Camilia’s narratives will give me the opportunity to closely study them in light of the claim at hand. In addition, Warda and Maha’s roles in the narratives are rather passive in the sense that both women suffer from patriarchy and male control that are imposed on them. Warda’s husband works in the Gulf area and leaves her behind. At one point he takes away her child

from her and she finds herself alone. She is deprived of her strength, hope, family and her sanity. The narrative style in her story is highly emotional and psychologically heavy, especially when compared to Lilian's straight-forward narrative style. Warda is left deserted until she decides to end her life while Maha's lover dies in the war and she finds herself sharing an apartment with Camilia who enables her to find purpose and meaning in her life. While Warda and Maha represent a good number of women who were overpowered by patriarchy and social restrictions, Lillian and Camilia propose an alternative reality where women were actually able to manoeuvre their respective roles and positions in a war-torn country. They find for themselves a voice and a role that might start from the nucleus of the private sphere but that transcends the limitations of prescribed female demarcations. The novel clearly presents these female voices that tell of a different experience, a female experience in its own right.

### **The Assertion of a Voice**

In the first narrative Lilian has lost her connection with her husband and is hoping to flee the country. She is pragmatic and practical, waiting for her visa to leave the country, "suitcases closed and waiting" by the door (Younes, 2007, p.2). She often compares herself to those suitcases: "I mused how they were just like me in that way: closed and waiting" (Younes, p.2). Lilian feels disconnected from her husband, a writer who lost his right hand as a result of an "accident". The reader guesses that the accident that is kept vague is actually a war-related injury but Younes never mentions it. Details of the war: shootings, battles, dead people, injuries and politics are practically missing in the novel. These sorts of details are kept ambiguous. The novel distances itself from details of violence, motives and reasons of the war. This vagueness is deliberate in an effort to highlight the private sphere of the female characters during the war. The author is not interested in those details but rather in the repercussions of such a war on these protagonists. At one point Lilian states: "One thought and one thought alone cycled through my mind: we are all alone. We lose those who we love, alone, and there is no shelter outside of the womb" (Younes, p.14). Her hope of deliverance is symbolized by the image of the flying woman: "I imagined a woman standing on the windowsill, flapping her arms in the wind like a bird trying to fly for the first time. She rose into the air, chased the sky without knowing where she might end up" (Younes, p.10). This image is interesting in the sense that it creates a certain space for Lillian to find her freedom from the status quo, which she eventually does at the end of her narrative.

Although Younes sets this story mostly inside the realm of the household that Lilian is running, she never underestimates the role that her protagonist plays in providing security and protection for her family. This is

seen in the novel when Lilian is crossing checkpoints with her children in order to visit her parents in East Beirut: “I heard my heavy breathing before I could hear my own footsteps. I was exhausted. I remembered that I had two children with me. I looked back. I sat down on the sidewalk among people who were terrified of slowing down even for a moment” (Younes, p. 36). During the Lebanese war crossing checkpoints was a dangerous ordeal and was not habitually done by women unaccompanied by their spouses or male figures. Lilian is a strong independent woman who chooses to take charge instead of waiting. She also does it without her husband’s help. This character as well as others we meet in the novel were not the case in earlier literature. Critic Miriam Cooke wrote about women writers. In *War’s Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* she writes: “Women were not yet sufficiently part of society to be able to use their own voice. Women could be characters in men’s fiction, but they could not create such characters” (Cooke, p. 79). Younes creates characters like Lilian who not only voice out their experience from their own point of view but who most importantly refuse to look at the war from a purely political point of view. They are not mere passive readers of events but rather active participants and oftentimes writers of their own fates. Along these lines Lilian admires Josefa’s character and states: “But Josefa actually resembled the heroines, who transformed their misfortunes into fertile wheat fields... She wasn’t afraid, though. She wasn’t afraid a day in her life” (Younes, p. 24). In *Women and War in Lebanon* (1999), edited by Rustom Shehadeh, Mona Amyuni in “Panorama of Lebanese Women Writers, 1975-1995” writes about the role of women during the war and argues that war was an oppressor of women but that this didn’t stop them from playing an important role during the war. This is quite evident in some of Younes’s protagonists who perform an act of resistance against the war, against oppression and mostly against ineptness.

The disparity between men and women’s outlook at the war, the past and martyrdom is also evident in this first narrative. Lillian’s husband is caught in the past and is unable to proceed towards the future. Her approach is different from his since she is constantly looking for a way out of the war-torn city. Her husband Talal is preparing for the commemoration of his grandfather’s martyrdom. A new tomb has been built for him and Talal is consumed with this event while Lillian is trying to make him accompany her to her appointment with the Australian consul. Talal is adamant about the commemoration and the preparations for it that he chooses to miss the appointment that is essential for his family’s future. Lillian, the pragmatic, exclaims: “To hell with Talal and Abbas, to hell with martyrdom and commemoration” (Younes, p. 48). She reads in his refusal a sense of surrender to the past that she simply would not accept. Younes further illustrates this important theme in the following excerpt: “While Talal was writing his

commemoration address, I asked him why we search for our identity among the dead, why this search always takes us back into the past. I knew that to search somewhere else, in that moment in particular, would require extraordinary courage, courage Talal no longer possessed” (Younes, p. 49). Politics to Younes seems to be pointless at this stage. Looking back at the past, dwelling on what’s passed does no good. The practical outlook of this female character challenges the passive acceptance of events and focuses on the survival of family and the small nucleus. Younes capitalizes on this standpoint at the end of this narrative when she has Lillian confront Talal before she takes the children and leaves to Australia:

I looked at him and thought, My God, how we’d changed. How we used to fight back at the outbreak of the war. I got so angry whenever he talked to me about politics just to provoke me. We were enemies but neither emerged victorious. Rather, we were both losers until the bitter end. Now, after all that bloodshed and all the years we had lost, the conflict had become bound up with our very lives. As though the violence, which had dragged on for years and lasted far too long, held our personal conflict together, refining it, making it more tolerable than it was before. That’s war, my friend: the most despicable way of disagreeing. “Did we really need all that violence?” I asked him... (Younes, p. 52)

A great number of Lebanese war novels written by male authors focus on the events of war, on conflict, political and sectarian religious dichotomies while women writers speak of experience and transport the war from the private sphere to the public sphere. In this respect Younes succeeds in maintaining distance from historical reality. Male writings about the civil war focus on the violence, killing, and horrid details of the war while Younes takes a different direction by moving the battlefield to the inside, to the private sphere. Lillian chooses to leave her husband behind and emigrate because he’s unable to take this decision himself. In this final act of departure, one can read the ultimate expression of her feminist attitude. During the Lebanese war it was customary for men to leave the country to work while women were left behind. Lillian is the one who takes the active role to walk towards the future, while Talal decides to stay back, buried in the past, in useless politics and in a war he himself cannot fathom. In this excerpt one can also read the author’s rejection of the war as a pointless endeavor that costs people a lot for no obvious purpose. Lillian’s rejection of war and her final decision to leave her husband behind clearly delineate a feminist attitude towards patriarchy and war that tallies with Cooke’s reading of women writers during the second half of the twentieth century.

### **Retribution against War and Patriarchy**

We move on to Camilia who is a single woman who lives in the mountains and does not have a father figure. She has the complete freedom to behave the way she wants and to have her independent thought and vision of the world around her. Telling about her upbringing in the mountains Camilia explains: “We began to own the place. We used to be only visitors. It was easy for me to adapt to this new life, easier than adapting to the orderly life most girls in town were used to. Maybe that was because I grew up in a house with no men. No one exercised absolute control over my decisions” (Younes, p. 95). Talking about her father’s absence she says: “His absence didn’t bother me; I felt an extreme, boundless freedom, a freedom that was apparent in my eyes and behavior” (Younes, p. 116). She is at first detached from war mainly raging in Beirut and is free from male authority. This establishes the bases for her character and clearly prepares for the major events that will occur further along in the novel. Camilia is the epitome of the self-sufficient woman who never knew limitations and was never bound up by patriarchy. Her education is liberal and her thoughts progressive for her age and status. She later on immigrates to the England and comes back to Beirut to work on a documentary film about militia men in the Lebanese war.

Maha’s story starts upon Camilia’s return to Lebanon. Maha takes over the narration at this point and her story becomes intertwined with that of Camilia who comes to live with her in Beirut. Maha lost her lover during the war. Here again, there is an ambiguous reference to the war with no specific details or explanations given. Maha maintains her distance from everyone and never leaves the house. She is detached from reality around her. It is only when Camilia comes to live with her that her life starts to change. Maha’s standpoint from men and the war can be clearly deciphered in the following line: “Men’s finger stay on the trigger while women look for safe places for their children” (Younes, p. 148). This position of course resonates with that of Lilian and reinforces the binary opposition that is evident in novels written by female authors during the war, namely that of: self vs. other, private vs. public, peace vs. war, activity vs. passivity. According to Cooke, the war provided the context for such a dichotomy (Cooke 1988, p. 87). Younes agrees and asserts that the war has destroyed the Lebanese social norms and allowed new voices to emerge. In an interview with Qantara.de in 2010 she affirms: “Writers and artists speak up, and they are listened to. There’s a wide variety of voices which claim attention. The war has opened up these strong, official, mainstream voices and pushed them to one side” (Sectarianism as a Dead End for Lebanon). She believes that the rise of the Modern Lebanese novel is a product to the civil war. It is exactly the afore-mentioned dichotomy that is represented in *B as in Beirut* and that Younes capitalizes on, in an attempt to re-position the narrative of war and give it a feminist layer.

Furthermore, Camilia's dichotomous character is exhibited in the way she falls in love with Muhammad, a doctor her father's age and is at the same time in a relationship with Ranger (his nickname comes from the type of car he drives), the militia man who dictates her life and controls her. Camilia is back in Lebanon to shoot a documentary about militia men like Ranger and war is the reason why she left the country in the first place. The reader might question at this point her motives behind having a relationship with a man like Ranger. She is on one hand spending her time with an educated, mature man who sees her as an equal but might represent a father figure that she never had, while on the other hand she willingly lets herself be overpowered by a violent man who represents all that war connotes. It all begins to take shape at the end of Maha's narrative in the final scene when violent battles are occurring outside the apartment building while Maha and Camilia are sitting in the shelter waiting for the shooting to cease. Ranger comes into the shelter and very calmly tells Camilia that he shot Muhammad (mainly because of sectarian conflicts that fueled the war). He also declares the end of the war in a very matter-of-fact manner, without any introductions or fuss. The news comes as a simple, unimportant piece of information, very collateral in magnitude. Camilia and Maha take in the news about the end of the war in an underrated way, the same way the readers never get to see the war or even its end. Younes gives us information about the proceedings and end of the war only indirectly, very similar to the way Virginia Woolf did it in *To the Lighthouse* or *Mrs. Dalloway*. Younes in this sense continues to maintain distance from historical reality and shows little interest in the war in the level that pertains to violence, politics and the actual battlefield.

In the final scene of the novel the two women tie Ranger up and Camilia starts bombarding him with a string of long questions, mostly about the war, violence and bloodshed. She also questions him about kidnapping and killing Muhammad. In the meantime Maha is listening but she feels numb: "All things come to an end, I thought. Even violence reaches a point from which it cannot advance further. It will go on piling up on the violence that came before it, stacking up time and emptiness. It becomes like a bare, unembellished lust" (Younes, p.223). In these lines one can easily read the author's take on violence and the reason behind her choice to veil bloodshed, killing and violence in her novel. In the meantime Ranger laughs and takes the whole scene lightly, thinking it was a game, until the game becomes real and the events take a serious turn after his confession about the doctor's kidnapping, torture and eventual death. Camilia shoots him twice, taking her revenge for Muhammad's death but mostly on war, on violence, as well as on patriarchal figures, all the things that Ranger represents and stands for as a militia man. The reader can interpret this final act as retaliation on the destructive forces or powers that were facing Camilia during the war. More



importantly, the violence that the reader never has a glimpse of throughout the novel is condensed in this one scene, and the lines between combat zones and safe zones, between the public and private have now been blurred. Ranger's description of his acts of violence and murder as well as Camilia's final act represent the only denotations of violence and war. The Lebanese war the way Younes conceives it had no clear causes, no obvious shape, and no stable enemy. It only took shape in the final act in the novel.

The ultimate twist in this scene is when Camilia announces that she is pregnant. And since both possible fathers are now dead, Camilia declares that: "It'll be a beautiful child. It will have no father" (226). In this statement can be read the ultimate expression of independence and a new position for Camilia, one that is feminist *par excellence*. According to Cooke, decision making is a form of self-assertion on the part of women in Lebanon (Cooke 1988, p.134) and by giving Camilia the power to cancel out Ranger and design her own fate alone, in her own way, the author traces the development of a woman from a passive, silent subject to an empowered actor of her own fate. The absence of the father in her child's life can also be seen as the epitome of female empowerment. Camilia decides to go back to England since her "child will become my homeland" (226) and leaves Maha behind, alone with an unfinished story. The last line of the novel reads as follows: "They may say the war has ended but I haven't finished my story yet" (227).

Iman Humaydan Younes gave dimensions to her characters and presented an alternative insight into the war. Her novel reshapes the experience and meaning of war, and moves female characters from characters that serve as symbols, or characters that are reduced to flat figures, to protagonists who introduce their own voices and "contest the acceptance of a structured world and break down the simplistic oppositions between home vs. front, civilian vs. combatant and war vs peace that have long served and promoted war" (Cooke 1988, p. 79). Her novel is concerned with the lives of women: their struggles, losses and victories. It empowers these two women and gives them not only a voice to speak out their suffering, their insecurities and conflicts, but most importantly an opportunity to decide for themselves and act out their own desired roles in a time when only bloodshed and violence reigned.

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