"The Burden of Representation": Absence and the Deferral of Meaning in Yasmine Ghata's *The Calligraphers' Night*

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Abstract The study explores the question of representation in the first novella of the Lebanese-French writer Yasmine Ghata, *The Calligraphers' Night* (2006). Narrating from the afterlife, the protagonist Rikkat Kunt presents the reader with two simultaneously attached-detached narratives spanning her life as wife and mother and as a calligrapher. Her search for meaning in the two narratives drags the reader into deeper analysis of the absence and deferral of meaning in the process of representation. Building on Kobena Mercer's "burden of representation" and Jacques Derrida's "deferral of meaning," the study aims to show that meaning in Rikkat's double narrative is unconquerable; it is endlessly produced but never exhausted. Neither as wife and mother nor as a calligrapher could Rikkat realize this truth; it is only after death that she is able to accept the fact that no matter how hard she tries to make up for loss through producing meaning, some state of absence is sure to result from the constant deferral of meaning. After all, and as Derrida has always taught us, the sole conductor of the process of representation is the word, which is driven "by the absence that makes it necessary." (Reynolds 4) This realization is enough to turn the process of representation into a burden, even after death.

Key words representation; absence; deferral of meaning; "burden of representation"; death

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Introduction

Nothing much happens in Yasmine Ghata's first novella, *The Calligraphers' Night*

(2006).[1] In fact, what happens does so only in retrospect. A dead woman, conscious enough of her death, is going back in time to when she is alive to narrate the bits and pieces that make up her life story. The present constitutes no more than one short chapter of this autobiographical novel; the others are an attempt to revisit a life that has ironically come to an end before it had even started.

To have a character put his life in the past years into a narrative questions the authority of the narrator, what about having a dead character put her whole life into a narrative after her death? The question of representation pops up on the first page of the novel leaving the reader with doubts as to whether a character from somewhere beyond temporal and spatial definition is able to author her story. With death being a metaphysical reality, how could the reader accept a narrative emanating from it? To narrate from the afterlife, therefore, is the challenge that Ghata and her dead narrator take up in this work. With no distinct categories to set an outline for the narrative, the act of narration becomes beyond control jumping back and forth between what has taken place before it and what will take place after it.

This fluctuation between a past which the reader is not in the least sure it has taken place and a present which is so threatening that the reader is sure to feel intimidated to take for granted leaves him with a number of questions that demand answers. Why has Ghata chosen to have a life story, to a large extent based on a true one, narrated by a *dead* woman? Why has she given authority to a narrator who is not only removed from lived reality, but is in all ways separated from it by death? Is she trying to question the conventional act of representation and, therefore, trying to redefine it on new grounds? A clear cut answer to the above questions is hard to arrive at, even after reading and rereading the novella. But, what is certain from a first reading of it is that Ghata is far from being traditional in choosing a retrospective narrative for her novella. A dead female calligrapher, based on the real figure of her late calligrapher grandmother, reminiscing about a life that has come to an end is enough to prove that Ghata writing *The Calligraphers' Night* is no Dickens writing *Great Expectations* (1861).[2]

1 *The Calligraphers' Night* (2006) is originally written in French. It is translated into English by Andrew Brown.The character Rikkat Kunt is based on the author's grandmother who has been a calligrapher.

2 Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1861) is a novel of education (*bildungsroman*). The term *bildungsroman* is originally German. It was coined by the philologist Karl Morgenstern in 1819 and was later employed in 1870 by Wilhelm Dilthey. As a novel of education or formation, it focuses on the journey of maturity that the character undertakes from childhood to adulthood. Maturity is achieved at the end of the journey though usually with difficulty.

But to get the message behind Ghata's novella is not only to realize that her narrator is a dead woman called Rikkat Kunt. It is also to realize that what distinguishes it from any other work narrating the life story of a woman struggling to prove herself to everyone around her is the non-conventional way it addresses the question of representation. In two simultaneously attached-detached narratives; one narrating the protagonist's life as a wife and a mother and the other narrating her life as a calligrapher, Ghata has managed to question whether the act of representation is a means of self-fulfilment or self-assessment; whether it is an attempt at filling gaps or an attempt at highlighting the absence caused by them.

To this end, the study aims to show that Rikkat's narrative is not only an attempt at self-discovery or self-realization, but is also an attempt at redefining the act of representation as an ongoing process of signification. Whether or not Rikkat's attempts at representing her life can be described as successful is not what a wise experienced reader would care for; what matters more for him is to figure out whether Rikkat's search for meaning in her two narratives yields answers to her questions. Is meaning a guaranteed product of the process of representation and is therefore conquerable? Or is it (meaning) endlessly deferred in an ongoing process of signification, emulating, in one sense or another, the eternal state of death with which she begins her story?[1]

The Act of Representation: An Act of Deferred Signification

In "Representation and Resistance: A Cultural, Social, and Political Perplexity in Post-Colonial Literature" (1999), John Yang defines the act of representation in writing as an act of resistance. (1) In the postcolonial context Yang has chosen for his study, the connection seems feasible, since by writing the postcolonial writer is not only reflecting his national identity and culture, but is also resisting being swept away by the mainstream identity and culture of the colonizer. But, to rethink Yang's words in the context Ghata has chosen for her novella leaves the reader wondering what form resistance takes in the narrative of the dead Rikkat. Yang's argument can be of help here. In his discussion, Yang rejects the empowerment-marginalization opposition in light of which postcolonial literature is traditionally written, read and analyzed, situating the process of writing at the junction between those two

1 To ask which narrative gives a more convincing answer to the question raised by the study is not what this study aims at. After all, and as was pointed out in the Introduction, an experienced reader/critic would not limit his understanding of the text to looking for answers to such questions, but would rather direct his attention elsewhere; to where a critical understanding of how the search of meaning is fueled by the ongoing process of signification that Derrida unearths in the text.

opposites, rather than at either side of them. "Resistance theory in postcolonial literature refutes the very notion that idea of representation also connotes further subjugation" (1), Yang explains, indicating that if postcolonial literature is restricted to a discourse "existing simply to react against or resist dominant ideology" (1), it fails to fulfill the function it is there for; resistance. To this end, a 'compromise', as Yang calls it, has to be set between the two sides of the equation placing the act of representation within a dynamic continuum that is "inevitably hybridized, involving a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create and recreate independent local identity" (qtd in Yang 2).

Yang's call for a middle ground from which to author a text revolutionizes the conventional approach to the question of representation in two ways. First, the act of representation is defined as an ongoing process, indicating that meaning is endlessly produced but is never exhausted. To explain, what entices the author to produce meaning is some feeling of loss that he feels he needs to make up for. This feeling (of something being lost), which translates also into the author's need to discover who he is and how he has come to be who he is, creates an absence that he tries through producing meaning to fill. As he embarks on this process of self-discovery and meaning production, he experiences a fake sense of satisfaction telling him that what he has authored so far is producing meaning and that the state of absence that has left him with feelings of loss and chaos is gradually disappearing. This contentment, however, lasts not as long as the author wishes it to, for not long after his needs are gratified, he once more experiences a state of loss, doubled by feelings of disappointment and frustration. Eventually, he comes to the realization that meaning is not fixed and therefore unconquerable and that the more he tries to conquer its changeable nature, the more it defies his control.

Second, defining the act of representation as an ongoing process makes resistance to fixed meanings and predetermined readings possible. In his article, Yang argues that representation and resistance are intertwined; they go hand in hand spanning an ebb and flow of interwoven discourses that make up the text. This point is also brought up by Serena Guarracino in her discussion on the role of the postcolonial writer in J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime* (2013). In the article titled "The Postcolonial Writer in Performance: J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime*," Guarracino argues that the act of representation is an act of resistance because it is essentially an event, "a performative act in the complex nexus of discourses" (101), which are constantly changing as meaning is produced: "To think of literature as an event means to stress its transient state against the apparently stable nature of the written text- a text that is, or may be, performed into 'literariness' by each reading,

including academic readings and writings" (103).

Guarracino's words stress the same point brought up by Yang; resistance lies at the core of any act of representation. To write is to start an event that does not to come to an end with the last word in the text, which means that resistance to the act of representation is present throughout the text. Two points are worth mentioning here. First, resistance to the act of representation is a gradual act. It does not usually happen at one moment in time; it extends over a duration of time (writing or reading). Moreover, it is accumulative; it builds on what has already taken place as well as what will take place in the future. This indicates that, like the act of representation, it is far from being a static act where a story is expected to begin with "once upon a time" and end with "happily ever after."

If to represent is to resist, then there is a point in agreeing with Kobena Mercer in "Black art and the burden of representation" (2008) where he describes the act of representation as a "burden" that weighs the writer down (1). As long as meaning is being produced, its static nature is being resisted allowing the act of representation to go with no restrictions. This leaves the author, whose needs are not gratified, exhausted and frustrated. "The burden of representation," in this sense, is what makes the act of representation go on and what resists the fluidity with which it flows. Going back to the discussion above, it becomes clear that the writer writes to express himself and to be able to assess himself, which means, he (the writer) is constantly in conflict with what he writes. Where is meaning in all he has written? Which gaps are filled and which are left empty? Is he free from the state of loss, caused by absence, when the act of representation is about to reach its end?

All these questions occupy the mind of the writer/narrator engaging in the act of representation in writing. Rikkat, and Ghata by extension, suffer hard beneath this burden, though not in the same sense Mercer uses in the postcolonial context; the new sense of the term here extends to a wider context which is more comprehensive. Their burden is the burden of every author[1] whose attempts at achieving a complete act of representation leaves him with the same sense of loss he has started with, with it only becoming a doubled one.

Referring to Jacques Derrida's view of writing as an ongoing process of signification gives more depth to the discussion. In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida defends writing against the derogatory hierarchy which privileges speech

1 The term author is employed in the study to refer to the maker of any type of work. The author can be a writer, a narrator, a composer or an artist.

as a medium of representation over writing.[1] Though this opposition is of no direct concern to the present study, his argument in defense of writing is essentially important to understanding how the process of signification is at work in the text. To start with, signification is a non-referential process, meaning that the process of meaning production is not one that has a start and an end and that meaning is not necessarily produced at the end of this process. Second, signs are not self-contained entities; they do not refer to some meaning stored in them.[2] Quite the opposite, they refer to other signs, which in their turn refer to other signs, creating, in this way, an infinite cycle of deferred referrals. In this process, what Derrida calls a 'breach' is created between what is intended to be represented and what is represented in actuality in the text. This means that the state of absence which has originally necessitated the act of representation in an attempt at filling it is not necessarily eliminated, and might become a doubled one as the act of representation comes to an end. Here, what matters is whether the author is aware of the fact that the act of representation is not as simple as 'once a process ends, meaning is produced'. No guarantees are given to the author of the text; which means that the act of representation could eventually take the author back to the starting point (the initial state of absence which necessitated the search for meaning), or could even drag him back further to where loss is intensified and meaning is further lost.[3]

Derrida's description of the act of signification as a deferral of meaning should not, however, be solely taken from its dark side. Some hope can be found

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1 In "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" (1967), Derrida criticizes the structuralists' overdependence on abstract structures. Structures are made up of the word 'events' which he defines as ruptures (redoublings of the structure): "The appearance of a new structure, of an original system, always comes about…and this is the very condition of its structural specificity- by a rupture with its past, its origin, and its cause" (120). He also criticizes the structuralists' belief that a structure should have a fixed center. According to him, the center exists inside and outside the structure simultaneously; therefore, the center is not the center. In the absence of a center, the bond between the signifier and the signified is broken initiating play in an endless cycle of meaning.

2 Saussurian linguistics, the launching pad of Srtucturalism, is based on the concept of the sign, which, according to de Sausssure, is made up of the signifier (the voice or the image) and the signified (the abstract concept associated with the voice or the image). The signifier and the signified serve as two faces of the same coin, but they exist in an arbitrary relation, in the sense that the relation between the signifier and the signified is not natural.

3 For further information, see *Of Grammatology* (1976), translated into English by Gayatri Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

despite the bad news it carries. How? As signs come to form an ongoing cycle of signification, the possibility is established for creativity. This means that the more meaning is deferred, the more fixed interpretations and predetermined readings of the text are resisted. Here, springs up the hope to make up for the state of loss the act of representation can leave the author with. The more creative the author is, the abler he is to take advantage of this flippancy. The key to understanding Derrida's praise of the text as a space of endless possibilities, therefore, is to realize that there are no set expectations awaiting the maker/inscriber of the text. Whether or not meaning will be produced, whether or not absence will be made present is a matter beyond the author's control. The sole conductor of this process is the word; the sign which, as Jack Reynolds (1995) explains Derrida has always taught us, is driven "by the absence that makes it necessary" (4).

Representation and Production of Meaning in *The Calligraphers' Night*

In his review of Ghata's first novella, Maureen Freely (2006) highlights the autobiographical nature of the work, but he refuses to mark it as solely an autobiography of the author's deceased grandmother, Rikkat in the novel. His belief that "though it is faithful to the known biographical facts of her grandmother, it refuses to be contained by them" (1) shows the reader that Ghata's concern is not to only tell the life story of her grandmother. After all, what would a dead woman get from telling her story if she were dead? She is already dead; what struggles she has won, she has already done, and what struggles she has lost, she has already done. In other words, no change is expected to take place after telling her story; nor does the reader expect to find a *bildungsroman* in it. Plus, if she is being Spencerian or Shakespearean in seeking immortalization through her art, then this is again mostly unlikely, since Rikkat's life journey is not that of a person running after fame after her departure. Immediately with the first lines of the novel, she clearly states that her "departure was without fuss, like [her] life" (3), which tells us readers that a fame-oriented story is far-fetched here. A third possibility, and a more convincing one, would be that telling that story is Rikkat's, and Ghata's, attempt at understanding the act of representation which lies at the core of the writing process (writing and inscribing). Both Rikkat and Ghata are trying to come to terms with how the words on the page come to produce meaning and whether the created meaning is stable or transient.

In the novella, the search for meaning takes the form of two consecutive narratives that Rikkat narrates after her death: the first is of her as a calligrapher, the second is of her as a wife and as a mother. The two narratives, though not equal

in portion, embody the narrator's, as well as the author's, attempt at understanding how meaning is produced in the text. To start with, Ghata's protagonist is a dead woman narrating her story after her death. This means that had not she died, she would not have been able to narrate her story. Death is a condition indispensable to the materialization of this narrative. Another point to keep in mind is that what Rikkat produces is neither a chronological narrative nor a sequential one. What she produces is best described as vignettes representing scenes from her life. In one of the reviews of the work, the reviewer (2007) remarks that *The Calligraphers' Night* "…traverses the life of calligrapher Rikkat Kunt" (1), indicating that this work is not a narrative in the traditional sense of the word. First, Rikkat, as a narrator, is speaking from two different positions. This means that Rikkat's narrative is not the traditional grand narrative that is one-sided, but is a combination of small narratives that equally contribute to the form of the novella.[1] Second, Rikkat's narrative does not stick to a clear timeline; it goes back and forth in time to where her memory slips. One reason could be her being dead; her memory falters and time ceases to be the distinct category that gives meaning to events. What is more, Rikkat's rejection of a chronological narrative indicates that she has never seen her life as a continuous scene. The fragments that make up her life are what give meaning to it and what she has tried hard to copy into her narrative: a fragmented life producing a fragmented narrative so far, but what about meaning? If Rikkat could put up with a life torn between being here and there, and then put up with a narrative torn between now and then, then could she put up with meaning torn between presence and absence?[2]

Loss and the Constant Need for Compensation

After the death scene which opens the novel and which sets expectations

1 Lyotard's terms "grand narratives and small narratives" form an intrinsic part of postcolonial criticism. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed the publication and circulation of grand narratives of the colonizer, which were written and explained according to his point of view. In contrast, the second half of the twentieth century saw the rise of small narratives which were written from the point of view of the colonized, who has been silenced for a long period of time in the grand narratives.

2 The term "absence" has its roots in the poststructuralist theory of psychoanalysis. Analyzing the pshyco-sexual development of the child, Jacques Lacan explains that the child experiences feelings of loss upon the renunciation of the mother, which is the tax he pays for initiation into the social (the world of the father). The absence of the mother leaves him bereaved as he tries seeking for the lost object of desire (the mother) in substitutes to make up for his loss, but he never succeeds to fill in the absence caused by the renunciation of the mother and has no other choice but to bury the feeling of loss inside him.

for a work narrated from a place and a time that are hard to identify, the reader is introduced to Rikkat as a calligrapher. The voice he hears is that of an artist fidgeting with her tools to produce art:

> Qalams, makka, divit and the whiff of ink they exhaled were within reach, standing in order of size and how often I used them, all at a distance from each other so as to avoid any jealousy or quarrels. Once I was dead, they would have killed each other. So I departed serenely, abandoning my tools that had become the extensions of my hands… (3)

This introductory scene is set carefully for the reader, in a way that he would never expect Rikkat to be torn between two roles in life, and later between two narratives. Rikkat is an artist by instinct; engaging in an act of representation where meaning is struggling to be born out of the absence that necessitated its birth. It is a birth right that her calligraphy tools own her, she never seems to belong to another but her qalams, makkas and divit.

A moment later, however, the reader realizes that Rikkat has at least one son, the one mentioned among the six people attending her funeral and begins to steer away his thoughts from the possibility of a one-sided narrative about an artist. Rikkat being introduced as a mother shovels all possibilities upside down. The meaning she produces is not only the product of her art, being a mother and a wife offers her another leeway to make present that absence. Still, the dead Rikkat calls herself a 'calligrapher' more than she does a wife or a mother. She even identifies herself as a member of a group of calligraphers, speaking as one of them: "We calligraphers know this ritual by heart" (8). And though "[her] life flashes past in front of [her] at the speed of light, assails [her] and then withdraws without warning" (8), what she remembers more than anything are the years during which she has passed from being a student to a teacher of calligraphy "especially the beginning of [her] career as a teacher at the Academy of Fine Arts" (9). Her memories (and her voice) as a mother and a wife are still secondary at this point, leaving the reader with the conclusion that this narrative is most likely an outlet for the calligrapher in herb who has tried through her art to produce meaning.

Giving this point some thought, however, makes us hamper our expectations and refrain from drawing hasty conclusions. Rikkat's two positions as narrator are equally important to the question of representation. If she were trying through her narrative to make up for her loss and produce meaning, then doing so as wife and mother is as important as doing it as calligrapher. No doubt, calligraphy is an art

where meaning is created through the power of the word. It is not only a process of copying one text into another. In the novella, Rikkat describes calligraphy as an act where authority is exercised and meaning is produced through the process of inscribing/copying the text:

> My pupils observed my precise, controlled movements. I dyed the paper. I covered it with a sticky preparation, soaked in a decoction of tea, then coated it with a protective layer to prevent the ink from penetrating into the fibres. Once the page was dry, I polished it with a flint stone; my students fascinated, swayed to the rhythm of the stone on the now silky leaf of paper. (9)

Rikkat's description of the process through which she creates a text reflects a master of the art. Her steps are firm and she is experienced enough to know that with one step missed, the whole process is ruined. As a calligrapher, Rikkat is productive; her hands produce meaning as they bring together paper and ink with precise movements. In this part of the narrative, the reader sees Rikkat at her best, wielding authority and knowing exactly how the loss that her art is making up for is not only kept under control, but is also directed to produce meaning.

But what about Rikkat the wife and the mother? Not much later in the novel, the reader is told that Rikkat has married twice and begotten two kids, one from each marriage. Her first marriage to Ceri, dentist and father to Nedim, has proved to be a failure. They spend several years separated though married, each living in a different city especially after Rikkat gets a job and has to settle nearby. In fact, Rikkat has commitment to her work as a calligrapher more than she has to her marriage to Ceri. Later, when the relationship seems to come to an end, it does so peacefully. Both take the same decision of divorce and Nedim stays with his mother. Through those years, Rikkat finds in Nedim what she has missed in Ceri but found in calligraphy; an alternative to the loss caused by a failed relationship. "I left Ceri behind me, left the mud of Konya, the real earth of the freshly ploughed furrows and the ghosts of the dervishes hovering over their lost fiefdom. Jerome went back with me" (30).

The second courting in Rikkat's life proves by no means to be a more promising one. Mehmet Fahreddin, who, though "born in Tirana…had the manner of a Western diplomat, and went so far as to copy the accent" (47), is no more than a failed alternative to Ceri. Rikkat notes that after her divorce and the death of her father, her all-female family "lacked a masculine authority figure" (47), which, ironically enough, is filled by Mehmet, whose acquaintance with her father has

made him seem an appropriate replacement. Later, Rikkat will feel ashamed of telling why he left, taking with him her second son Nurullah. Apparently, Mehmet, instead of becoming the family's new masculine authority and making up for their loss, has set its members apart and left a great deal of pain after his departure with Nurullah to Lebanon. As she narrates this part of her life, Rikkat repeatedly refers to how angry Mehmet has felt every time he has seen her working in her studio. Contrary to Ceri's passive reaction to Rikkat's love for calligraphy, Mehmet's reaction has been aggressive: "Mehmet came in without knocking, overturned the inkpot on the squared sheets of paper, picked up old Selim's divit and hurled it through the studio window. He left without a word" (56).

It is only after Mehmet rapes her sister that Rikkat realizes that Mehmet is not the right match to fill in the absence created by the departure of Ceri and the death of her father. But, this time, she finds it hard to find another alternative to make up for her loss. There is no Nurullah to start a new life with like when she has had Nedim after her first divorce; Mehmet has taken Nurullah with him to Lebanon and Rikkat has no choice but to grieve for his absence, leaving it unattended.

Fake Gratification and Transient Meaning

Loss and the constant need to make up for it is also present in Rikkat's life as a calligrapher.[1] But, here Rikkat manages to deal more successfully with it and to find ways to steer it away creatively. First, Rikkat loves the art and sees it not as a replacement for anything or anyone. Moreover, her skill in producing a piece of writing springs not from a need to fill in the absence that the departure of three family members has created in her life.

> Thus it was that I became a calligrapher. This legacy, capable of transmitting to me the talent of a virtuoso calligrapher, would long preserve its master's habits, the skills of his hands and the ability of his fingers. Aware that his heritage was to turn my life upside down, I kept it secret, I hid my joy just as I had become accustomed to hide my pain, and just as easily. We calligraphers are impenetrable; ink teaches us to remain opaque. (21).

1 One reason why Rikkat resorts to immerse herself in the world of calligraphy after her two failed marriages is that she knows that this world is beyond the authority of human relationships, especially those of marriage. Explaining that most calligraphers are unmarried, she goes on to describe them as "hybrid beings, neither men nor women, which is why God keeps them close to himself" (41). Rikkat's words explain why in most cases calligraphers are isolated from other people, why they commune with the dead and why many of them end up committing suicide.

Rikkat's words on how she becomes a calligrapher bring to mind a couple of points. First, death (absence) functions as a stimulus not only in one of her narratives, but in both of them. Just as her father's death necessitates the presence of an alternative masculine figure to make up for this loss, the death, suicide in this case, of Rikkat's calligraphy mentor, old Selim, necessitates a replacement. But, here the replacement helps to relieve the pain caused by the loss of her mentor more than in the case of Ceri or Mehmet. To Rikkat, old Selim does not only leave his tools, but what is more precious and enduring; the legacy. He makes Rikkat his own replacement so as not to make his absence irretrievable. While the bereaved daughter looks for a masculine figure to fill the absence created by her father's death, old Selim has already found in her a suitable heiress to take up and preserve the art of calligraphy after him. Neither does he fear not finding the right match, nor does he hesitate to make his match a woman! Showing more bravery than Rikkat, old Selim's decisions in ending his life and beqeathing his legacy to his female pupil seem firm and well-placed.

> People came and slipped [Selim] out of the scarf that had strangled him; he was as stiff as his qalams, as hard as the wood of his paintbrushes… To my great surprise, …, I found a parcel addressed to me. Under the piece of string that tied the whole package together, there was inserted a slip of paper with my name, 'To Rikkat', carefully written. (19)

The smooth transference from male mentor to female pupil, however, invites all kinds of confused feelings on the part of the reader; appreciation, gratitude, doubt and irony. How viable is this transference? First, the art of calligraphy is traditionally identified as a male-dominated art; rarely is a woman seen to take up calligraphy as a profession. In the novella, Ghata describes Rikkat's visits to the "building that had been granted to these old men" (11) with tongue in cheek; Rikkat's role does not go beyond being a mere assistant who would "pass unnoticed, … prepare the paper and ink, clean and tidy away the tools, make sure the studio functioned properly" (11). Even after becoming a teacher of calligraphy, Rikkat could not convince her pupils of how she has managed to survive in this all-male territory; as a teacher, she never "satisfied their curiosity; they were only ever half convinced" (10). And so was she. In fact, other than practicing the art of calligraphy in the classroom for a couple of hours on working days, Rikkat's talent has been short-lived and intermittently

productive.[1] Whenever she has wanted to practice calligraphy, she has had to isolate herself in her studio which transformed into a "refuge for dreamed of virtuousities, a hospice for pretentious old men, and the antechamber of death" (11). Practicing calligraphy has meant detachment from life around her; the way she uses the tools of old Selim, which have become an "integral part of [her] body, an extension of [her] hands" (20), has turned practicing calligraphy into a form of magic.[2] Not to forget her prolonged communings with the spirit of old Selim, which got into the habit of paying Rikkat visits while she was working in her studio.

> Selim's soul was scrutinizing my fingers watching over my reactions with tenderness examining how I would welcome his tools. I was his only heir, and I needed to show myself worthy. Thus it was that I became a calligrapher. This legacy, capable of transmitting to me the talent of a virtuoso calligrapher, would long preserve its master's habits, the skill of his hands and the agility of his fingers. (20)

Rikkat's description of how Selim's soul supervise her work is ironic. The loss she has failed to make up for as a wife and to a lesser extent as a mother seems not to find relief through calligraphy as well. First, describing herself as "an only heir" makes it highly unlikely that practicing calligraphy is taking her anywhere. Calligraphy is an art; it cannot be owned or bequeathed from one person to another. Not even is the talent a property to be transferred from one to another. At one point in the novella, Rikkat discloses this secret which she describes as a "ritual" (8) known to calligraphers by heart: "Calligraphers have all tried to seize this divine presence, but mms has ever succeeded" (8). Awaiting for a "visit from the Most

1 In 1928, the Turkish ruler Ataturk replaced the Arabic alphabet with the Latin alphabet as the official language of the country. Though his decision has played an important role in initiating the country into modernity, it has had reversed effects on the art of calligraphy and its practitioner. Their position as inscribers of holy texts, especially the Qur'an, became secondary and their art lost much of its popularity and value. The events of Rikkat's life take place around this period; this explains why many of her attempts at practicing calligraphy end with frustrating results.

2 In a 2007 review of the novella, the reviewer notes that Rikkat's narrating her story from the afterlife and the meetings she has with dead calligraphers while alive add elements of magical realism to the work. To quote her words, "The story is lyrically told. It has an almost dream-like quality to it, weaving elements of magical realism into the story of Ghata's real-life grandmother who the novella is based on" (1). Her note can serve as a launching pad for further research on Ghata's work as an example on magical realism.

High" (8) makes all calligraphers equal competitors in heirship. No calligrapher is privileged over another, which is another calligraphy secret Rikkat shares with the reader. The qalams are superior to all and they are "never wrong" (45); their authority extends hers. Second, Rikkat's feeling that she needs to prove herself worthy to a dead figure shows that calligraphy is not helping her as it should be. It is no challenge to challenge a dead man. After all, Selim is no real person except for Rikkat! The visits he pays her are never shared by anyone other than both of them. Yet, Rikkat's description of those visits make them seem so real that the reader's doubts as to how reasonable Rikkat is are hardly aroused.

> The imaginary vapours of white lead, vinegar, or camphor-based fermentation rose to Selim's nostrils as he saw his years as a young apprentice and the warnings of his teacher pass before his eyes. The old madman slipped his secrets to me, and I disclosed them in a tone worthy of the Ten Commandments. (36)

It must be pointed out here that Rikkat does not only share these visits with old Selim; other spirits of calligraphers pay her visits also, one of whom is a woman. Esma Ibret is the spirit of a female calligrapher who, tired of aspiring for perfection in this art, could only find it in death. To Rikkat, old Selim's visits are more tolerable than Esma who is never satisfied with any of Rikkat's writings. She "corrected several times over a character that was on the point of making a hole in [her] page" (38). Later, the reader is informed that Esma has been the student of a tyrannical master of calligraphy who, unlike the complacent Selim, is "always finding fault" (37) in her work. Thus, to look for support and encouragement in her figure would do no good for the confused Rikkat. In fact, Esma's visits leave Rikkat forlorn every time she tells her that she "left this world without having tasted the perfection of an immaculate piece of work or an ideal composition" (38).

Like her meetings with old Selim, Rikkat's meetings with Esma raise confused feelings. First, the reader gets the impression that Ghata supports the stereotypical view of calligraphy as a masculine art; a female artist of calligraphy cannot be as successful as a male artist. This shows in the two confused females, Rikkat and Esma, who are both struggling to survive in this profession. Both have been apprenticed by male masters, who have had extensive experience in calligraphy and who have chosen them to take over this profession after their death, but neither is confident enough of whether their writings are creative enough to meet the expectations of their mentors or not. What is more is that those only-female

meetings do not seem to proceed as smoothly as mixed meetings do in the novella. Esma, who is supposed to be older, wiser and more experienced is hard to please, and Rikkat, who is supposed to be looking for guidance and advice in Esma, feels intimidated by her presence. Referring to Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's response to it in The *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) can help understand why Rikkat's attempts to make up for her loss and produce meaning through her art do not seem to be productive enough. In his book, Bloom stresses the hereditary nature of art (calligraphy in this case): the father author establishes himself as an authority during his life, then bequeathes his art to a younger male successor he chooses. On his part, the young author takes pride in this inheritance, but at some point in his artistic journey, it becomes necessary for him to free himself from what becomes a source of anxiety, rather than pride, in order to establish himself as a legitimate contributor to the canon (20-25). Gilbert and Gubar offer a more feasible reading of Bloom in a feminist context. A young female artist is all the way faithful to her female ancestors. Even after she is well-established and no longer in need of their support, she resorts not to forsaking them for her own advantage. That is why, Gilbert and Gubar describe this all-female territory as a space infused with all feelings of sisterhood such as gratitude, loyalty and belongingness. (22-32)[1]

The Bloom-Gilbert and Gubar argument, however, does not seem to apply to the master-pupil relations we see in the novella. First, the two male father calligraphers, old Selim and Esma's mentor, choose to pass their art not to male successors, but to female ones. They probably find less threat to their authority in a female heir, more than they do in a male one. Second, no feelings of revenge or even anxiety are sensed on the part of those female successors. In fact, they are both obsessed by the figures of their dead mentors and are eager to please them, more than themselves. Moreover, Rikkat and Esma share none of the feelings of sisterhood which Gilbert and Gubar associate with female artists; none is comfortable in the presence of the other and none is willing to support or encourage the other. What conclusion should be drawn here? One opposite to the Bloom-

1 In "Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship" (1979), Gilbert and Gubar note that women writers feel intimidated by the scarce number of female writers to fall back on in the literary canon, and, as a kind of defense mechanism, they develop feelings of belongingness and gratitude towards their literary foremothers. "Women writers participate in a quite different literary subculture from that inhabited by male writers, a subculture which has its own distinctive literary traditions…a distinctive history [as] the daughter of too few mothers, today's female writer feels that she is helping to create a viable tradition which is at last definitely emerging" (23).

Gilbert-Gubar one. The artists we meet here do not find in calligraphy what they have thought they would; the absence they are trying to fill remains as is and the meaning they are trying to produce is instantly lost. Old Selim is frustrated and ends half-mad after he "grew irritable when his hand refused to obey him" (19) as he has tried through his writing to picture "a universe peopled with *diw* and *djinns*" (19). Eventually, he commits suicide. Esma's mentor grows tyrannical and easily angered, the effect of which he passes onto Esma who inflicts this torture not only on herself, hastening her death, but on others around her as well.

Doubled Absence and Bitter Disillusionment

Contrary to the high expectations Rikkat hopes to achieve through calligraphy, her experience as a calligrapher seems to weigh her down the more she gets immersed in it. "The vertical strokes and ligatures if the letters that ferment [Esma] even in [her] sleep" (38) seize her turning her into a lifeless soul wandering "around on the frontiers of the inhabited word seeking to retrieve their instruments" (38). The exchanges she has with Esma make her realize that the latter's "[transgressing] the laws of the Beyond" (38) has made her pay with her life for doing so, for every calligrapher "was authorized to reveal the whys and wherefores of the place of eternal repose" (48). Esma has spent a lifetime seeking an ideal composition, so has old Selim and her despotic mentor before. Now, Rikkat is in the same place seeking after their idealism as they have done once. And though it is true that Rikkat is not the daring Esma or the mad Selim, who would aspire to "a strict horizontality, as [their] letters were not sturdy enough to be torn apart just yet" (8), she also slips into the same route of running after this supremacy. Unknowingly, she commits the same sin of which old Selim has repeatedly warned her; impatience.

> Certain qalams, it is said, crumple their tips, mutilate themselves until they bleed, so as to put an and to their careers as torturers. Impatient calligraphers cut them into a bezel shape and abandon them among the waste of the studio. A qalam that has been recut has a shorter life expectancy than a new qalam. (9)

No doubt, Rikkat is guilty of impatience; of cutting short a life that is to begin. Her aggressive behaviour hides behind it a desire to have the upper hand over her tools, her papers and her words, which seem to have come to defy her authority. Those transgressions, though she is sure were never permissible and never will be, do not deter her from causing "a knowing and methodical massacre" (10) as long as her authority is not lost. After her death, she recalls taking this to an extreme.

> At that point I began to torture the letters, placing them in quarantine in the upper corner of the page. Crowding them together until they started to suffocate. The words piled on top of one another, slew each other. A knowing and methodical massacre, a virtuoso combat. I was daring to do what my predecessors had never imagined. (10)

Like Esma, Rikkat has to pay hard for such a transgression. Exceeding limits fires back and this time instead of her forcing the letters into the places she has chosen for them, she has to struggle to "hold back their need to make up for the wasted years" (26). A voice from the dead, shying away from committing such a deadly sin, has to intervene. Old Selim shows to teach Rikkat that the "comings and goings" (26) of the "erotic figures…on the cardboard-backed paper" (26) owe nothing to her. This experience, she confesses, has left her bewildered and confused: "Had I contributed to this work? I still wonder. Perhaps the letters had left Selim's pious hands to land in mine, avid for new experiences" (26).

But why would the letters leave Selim's pious hands and land in hers? Rikkat's words are otherwise meant. If the letters have the ability to leave one hand and land in another, then the credit for this liveliness goes back to them, not to old Selim or to Rikkat. The letters are moving from here to there to show that no matter how restrictive the authority of the artist is, they will manage to set themselves free. Two points are worth pondering on here: the relation of the artist to the work and the production of meaning. As we read Rikkat's words, we come to realize that no calligrapher is alien to the truth that the art of calligraphic writing, like any art, is beyond control, once he (the calligrapher) gets "caught up in the game, [his] qalam followed their circumvolutions" (15). The game of a calligrapher, like the game of any writer, is a game of language; what produces meaning is the letter, not the one inscribing it. In a review of the novella, the reviewer (2007) touches on this point by arguing that Rikkat's talent as an artist is driven by the power of the letters she inscribes. No matter how hard she tries, she can never fight back the "irresistible pull of her art" (1). But, the game of language, as Derrida (1977) explains, is an endless game.[1] As language no longer has a stable structure, it is decentered and

1 The same point about the play of language is stressed by Roland Barthes in "The Death of the Author" (1967) in which he declares the author dead and replaces him by the alternative authority of language. Here again, the text is freed from the hegemonizing authority of the author and this paves the way for an ongoing process of signification. Both Derrida and Barthes tell us that as authority is lent to language in the text, a scriptible, not a lisible, piece of art/writing is produced. This means that the newly born text is no longer a mere reflection of a set reality, but comes to create that reality, giving more possibility for change and resistance.

'play' is introduced into it breaking the one-to-one relationship between its signifiers and its signifieds (109-111). As a result, signs float freely establishing multiple relations with multiple signifieds at the same time, producing an infinite process of signification where meaning is simultaneously produced but deferred.

The central role language plays in the production of meaning helps understand why old Selim, Esma and Rikkat equate calligraphy with torture, turning it into a burden. The three of them seem not to truly understand, at least while alive, that the letter is the authority lurking behind any piece of writing they copy; that is why they fail to interpret their struggle to get letters in the right shape and end up talking about the torture practicing calligraphy has got them into. For them, the letters are passive; they reproduce the original text as is making no contribution whatever. But, the truth that slips their minds is that the original text is no divine text to copy verbatim. Every time it is copied, it is being produced anew because of the letters that make it. Old Selim is the first to realize how intricate a process of representation is for a calligrapher, though, ironically enough, he does so too late; after his death. In one of his meetings with Rikkat, he stresses this point by explaining that "pleasure owed nothing to the model imposed; their [tools] copulation with the paper should not stiffen a divine obeisance, but rather engender an obscene tangle of letters" (26).

Selim's words after his death go in line with Derrida's arguing that meaning is constantly produced but is deferred in the text; 'there is no outside text' Derrida's well-known maxim says (158-59). By drawing the line between the original text and the copy produced by the calligrapher, Selim is in fact annuling the viability of the bond between what signifies and what is signified in the copied version. As writing begins, the signifier (the original text) detaches itself from the signified (the copied text), initiating an ongoing process of signification where meaning is constantly produced but never exhausted. On his part, old Selim comes to realize this truth about the art of calligraphy only after his death. This explains why in this scene, the reader hears Rikkat noting that "Selim himself could no longer distinguish between copy and model. The illusion was maintained even in the reflections of ink. The stiffening letters continued to exchange sighs of contentment through the Holden liquid" (26).

Rikkat seems not to understand Selim's words though she repeats them, for a whole hour after the script is written, she still wonders if she has really contributed to producing this piece of writing. Had she understood Selim's implications about the deferral of meaning in the copied script, she would have chosen, like him, to forsake her authority as author of the text and transfer it to the letters forming the text. But, for the inexperienced Rikkat, Selim's words are too hard

to apply. A calligrapher's job is to copy; copying is an attempt to make up for the state of absence resulting from the loss of meaning. As the calligrapher copies, he produces a series of alternatives (copies) to the original text, which, contrary to his expectations, holds the meaning back from him, leaving him in a doubled state of loss. Believing that by copying the original text he is creating it anew and producing the meaning that has been for long lost for him leaves him with a feeling of satisfaction. This fake sense of fulfilment, however, lasts not for as long as the calligrapher wishes. Soon enough, he wakes up to the bitter realization, that no original text and copy can blindly match; a gap is always there separating the two and reminding the calligrapher that meaning is property of no one.

Moving from one stage to another in this cycle is not a smooth process. Feelings of disappointment, bitterness and loss await the calligrapher. In the novella, the reader sees shattering examples of this. Old Selim commits suicide, Esma leaves life carrying the torture resulting from a mission declared impossible and Rikkat gives herself away to a life haunted by the dead. None of the calligraphers in the novella is able to handle this tough experience or overcome its consequences. In one of the letters Selim has written before his self-inflicted death, the reader senses the despair which is likely to have led to his suicide.

> There came a day when his breath ceased to irrigate my ink, and my hand fainted when he left me. I have often called out to him, but he has never deigned to reply. Then I decided to join him in his dwelling to him to forgive me. I am still waiting to be granted a hearing. (22)

Selim has most likely been able to find more peace of mind after his death; otherwise, he would not have been able to disclose the reality of what it means to inscribe a text to Rikkat. But, Rikkat lacks the experience as well as the foresight to take what he says seriously. Selim's "calligraphic farewell" (22) transfers to her "a glimpse of his torment" (22) only and "refusing to share it with anyone" (22), she prefers to "shut [herself] away in the secret of [her] master" (22) rather than "lending ordinary words to this narrative" (22). Rikkat has to experience those feelings in person; to learn this lesson from another will be useless.

Rikkat does not commit suicide, nor does she gasp her last breath with torture. Her death comes "as gentle as the top of the reed dipping its fibres in the inkpot, swifter than the ink being drunk by paper" (3). But though, like Selim and Esma, she dies without having produced an ideal composition, her defiance is in fact much stronger; the reader sees an extremist rejecting a secondary author position. Later in

the novella, Rikkat gets a job at the university as an instructor of calligraphy. There, she earns the reputation of being one of "several of [them] who wanted to modernize calligraphy" (112), despite knowing that such digressions are sure to "[draw] the lightning bolts of the Most High down on their heads" (112). Here, Selim's and Esma's realization is experienced by Rikkat and though her reaction is not as self-destructive as theirs, it is not less dramatic. The first step in this realization, as she sees it, is trying to change the nature of this art by modernizing it, and this, as she notes towards the end of the novella, nearly makes her "lose (her] faith" (112) that she seemed to "fear neither God nor death" (112) anymore.

What is more, the death of Rikkat's second son leaving his six-year-old daughter orphaned and his wife widowed pushes her defiance beyond limits. Her loss is too deep to be consoled; not even her passion for calligraphy can relieve or lessen it like when she has lost a first and a second husband. Her letters seem not to serve as an alternative to her feelings as a bereaved mother. Nurullah's death intensifies her desire to refuse ending up with the same state of absence every time she produces a piece of writing. No piece of writing could undo his loss.

> What am I supposed to do with these piece of writing that will not give me back my son? What am I supposed to do with a God who use my hand to write his breath? In any case, my my fingers burn on contact with my instruments. They suddenly grew stiff and died at the same time as my son; all that remains is to bury them. (113)

Rikkat's words do not only reflect her sorrow at her son's death, they reflect disappointment as well. The feelings of defiance the reader has seen in her as a university instructor initiating the art of calligraphy into a modern phase take a different form. In place of her ideal expectations, feelings of despair and compliance are sensed. Her loss is intensified leaving the absence she has thought she can make present doubled and the letters she has thought she can subdue through her authority as an author free to conduct their game. After her son's death, Rikkat becomes even more passive than old Selim and Esma; she blames calligraphy for not being able to get her son back.

Though Rikkat goes back to her lessons after Nurullah's death, nothing is the same. Her hands start trembling, her papers slipping, her qalam vibrating. Once as she is teaching her students how to sharpen a qalam, she is wounded and has to have her hand bandaged by Muna, the student who has been present in the funeral scene early in the novella. The reader learns later that Muna has been Rikkat's special

student, the way she herself has been to Selim. To her, Rikkat bequeathes the legacy of her art, just as Selim has done so in the past.

> The following day, my colleagues gave their pupils a swift overview of my oeuvre: in their view, I had reformed the traditional art of calligraphy by opening it up to contemporary variations, and had made the rules of the discipline less strict. Unusual remarks. Only Muna had grasped the meaning of my work and knew the secret behind my departure. (4)

What secret has Muna known? The reader might wonder. The same secret the old Selim has disclosed to Rikkat who chose not to "[lend] ordinary words to" (22) out of fear of "[depriving] it of all its magic" (22). Rikkat has tried, just as Selim has done, to explain to Muna the torture she has to undergo to arrive at the same realization, and like him, she seems not to have Muna fully understand how shattering the experience has been. Just like herself, Muna chooses to keep the secret for herself. The experience is new to her, and inexperienced as she is, she is sure to lack the needed courage to deal with it in the right way.

The point worth stressing here is that this time a female calligrapher is bequeathing her art to a female one, which is different from the two previous cases. Here, feelings of sisterhood, loyalty and support are sensed between the two, reminding the reader of Gilbert and Gubar's rereading of Bloom's story of murder. Muna understands Rikkat and is the only one who shares her secret. She supports her in her weakness and hides no feelings of revenge towards her. Rikkat also seems not to be like the tyrannical male mentor of Esma who has sought to keep her under his control. Her relationship with Muna is based on mutual understanding and, unlike other teacher-student relationships the reader gets introduced to in the novella, is more egalitarian. Muna keeps close to her teacher in her life and in her death making sure to close "the door behind her after switching off the lights" (115). Together with Rikkat, Muna has a better chance to arrive at the same realization with less suffering.

Representation in Death: Meaning Doubly Deferred

Rikkat keeps not from the reader the feeling that her end is near. Her dreams disentangle part of what she has foreseen. In the last pages of the novella, she describes what she has seen in the dream as "forms of writing that were difficult to discern dragged [her] into a labyrinth in which words and voices mingled" (116) as she "dived into a naked space" (116). Rikkat sees herself reading some writing which fades away as she reads it. It turns out that the words in that piece of writing

disclose the same secret that old Selim has passed to Rikkat but which she chooses not to understand while alive.

> He is deferring them
> To a stated term.
> But when their term is come- surely God
> Sees His servants. (116)

Rikkat's death comes as a necessity more than as a relief to her from the fits of shaking, for a calligrapher not serving God is good for nothing but death; a truth Rikkat eventually comes to realize. But this necessity is not long deferred. A truth lies beneath it; a truth long sought after but never achieved. Rikkat tells the reader that as her death has drawn near, "God and Selim had finally joined together" (116) hinting at the truth God and Selim (the god of a calligrapher) might have all that time been the same without her having taken the slightest attention of it.

A life-saving realization, but a too-late one. Rikkat has eventually managed to make up for the absence which in her life as a calligrapher, wife and mother, she could not. No piece of writing of the living Rikkat could have matched those lines which illuminate her way to where she could join Selim and Esma singing praises of the Most High. Here, her writings are no longer in a state of deferral; she and the written word become one and the same, constituting a state of everlasting presence that succumbs to no pain, loss or frustration. Still, the dead Rikkat gives her reader no peace in reading her narrative; her "pen falls from [her] hand" (117) in an endless state of deferral and she is again wondering "What will become of [her] work after [her]?" (117)

A gap is created by Rikkat's death; it takes the reader all the way back to the beginning, to her attempt to find an alternative to eliminate this absence through marriage, motherhood and the art of calligraphy. But though death has ushered her into this phase where absence is made present and meaning is no more deferred, Rikkat is still not able to capture the 'presence' she has all the time been seeking. Disappointment, bitterness and loss are likewise sensed in this sheltered space and, to the dead Rikkat narrating this story, the question that stems from this endlessness is "What is the point of continuing to describe the void, the emptiness and silence?" (117)

No doubt, the dead Rikkat knows the answer to this question. All calligraphers come to know it as they are transferred to the after-life which makes them share a glimpse of God's omniscience. But a price, one paid for dearly, awaits them. Here, away from any human contact, they can only disclose this truth as constantly absent-

present; heard but never understood, read but never deciphered. Muna will have to become the dead Rikkat to "establish a dialogue" (108) between the here and there, the now and then to capture it. They will have to "recognize the path [they] have trodden," (108) to know where their lines are taking them. "Calligraphers are not free" (108), Rikkat realizes. Here or there, now or then, it is the letter leading their way, treading their steps, becoming them, and "no longer [having] any secrets from each other" (109).[1]

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1　Though the reader is from the beginning informed that Rikkat has died, the novella has an open ending. This, most likely, is done on purpose by Ghata who the reader realizes, as the novella draws to an end, cares more about raising questions rather than answering them. Part of the secret lurking behind writing this novella is for the reader to realize that he plays an important role in decoding its message and that the process of writing does not end with the last word of the text.