



*“Iraqi Freedom”:  
Counterhegemonic Narrations  
of the Occupation of Iraq  
from Blogs to Books\**

by Francesca Maioli

Among the social and cultural consequences of the terroristic attacks on the Twin Towers and the subsequent war in Iraq, several commentators include the huge development of blogs, a new internet genre or medium born in the late Nineties.<sup>1</sup> Blogs proved particularly effective in covering the most relevant events of the early 2000s because of their accessibility to little digitalized individuals and their ability to spread and share news, opinions, images and videos in a very immediate and unfiltered way. This is the reason why they rose right after the attacks on the Twin Towers, when people looked at the web as a way to gain more direct, immediate and personal accounts of the events, and during the subsequent 2003 war on Iraq, when media coverage of the war was closely controlled by the U.S. government, and people looked for ‘uncensored’ news in the Internet (Johnson & Kaye 2007, Miller 2004, Schechter 2004). Blogs’ relevance to 9/11 and the war on Iraq is so remarkable that Geert Lovink even calls blog culture “a post 9/11 beast” (2008: 2), while others claim

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<sup>1</sup> On this see for example Keren 2006.



that the war in Iraq was “the first true Internet war” (Kurtz in Wall 2005: 153. See also Reynolds 2004).

Since then, blogs have been spreading everywhere in the world – at least in those social strata where Internet access and digital literacy are increasing –, and the predominance of English as ‘the’ language of digital communication is more and more challenged by the growth of websites and blogs in other languages, chiefly Chinese, Farsi and Arabic. As an example, Keren reports that by 2004 Farsi had become the fourth most popular language in blogosphere and,

many blogs have appeared signifying a new virtual space for free speech in a country dubbed the ‘biggest prison for journalists in the Middle East’, by Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF). Through the anonymity and freedom that weblogs can provide, those who once lacked voices are at least speaking up and discussing issues that have never been aired in any other media in the Islamic world (2006: 52).

This explains the growing success of blogs in non-Western countries, especially in all those places where newspapers and media are closely controlled by state power or even censored. And even in those countries where, such as in the Arab world, blogs are still a minority phenomenon, “volume might not be necessary for political influence. Since much of the new energy in Arab politics comes from relatively small groups of activists, a technology which empowers their efforts could have a disproportionate impact even if it does not reach a mass base” (Lynch 2007: 5). These words sound nearly prophetic now, after the role played by bloggers in the recent North African uprisings, although not everybody agrees on blogs’ political and subversive potential (See for example Keren 2006 and Lovink 2008).<sup>2</sup>

While blogs can have a subversive potential against different kinds of state power, this paper focuses on blogs writing against a (*neo*)colonial power, assuming that they are an outstanding empowering tool for post- or neocolonial subjects in terms of spreading a counterhegemonic narrative and promoting transnational activism. My starting point lies in the assumption that as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989) argue following Todorov’s insight, the key feature of colonial oppression is located in the control over the *means of communication*. In this sense, in a situation such as occupied Iraq, where both local media and Western representations of the war and occupation are controlled by the US (Kamalipour and Snow 2004), the Internet allows this new kind of ‘colonized’ subjects to resist by appropriating the means of communication both in terms of the medium (the Internet) and the language (English), circulating an antihegemonic discourse in the peripheral space where they

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<sup>2</sup> Several collections, besides, interrogate the empowering potential of blogs in terms of political influence or chances to revolutionize journalism – see for example Russell & Echchaibi 2009 and Tremayne 2007.



are located as well as in the 'centre' – the West they are generally targeting when writing in English. Therefore, blogs can be included among postcolonial narrative forms because of their ability to appropriate the means of communication of the 'centre' while preserving the integrity of the Otherness (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989). Not surprisingly, blogs are also raising some interest from the publishing industry, as numerous adaptations prove.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, they can also be considered a new literary form <sup>4</sup> with a huge empowering potential since its primary circulation does not have to undergo the same marketing implications and ideological constraints as 'published' texts. The power unbalance between the two media is especially evident when, for example, a non-Western woman's blog is compared to its book adaptation. The latter depends on a publisher's political and commercial project that is generally based on the image of the "average third world woman" (Mohanty 1991b: 56), producing a text that "discursively colonize[s] the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular 'third world woman' – an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of western humanist discourse" (*Ib.*: 53).

This paper focuses precisely on two female blogs from Iraq discussing the neocolonial project that the US is promoting behind the mask of the "war on terror": *Baghdad Burning* by Riverbend, a young woman in her twenties who blogged from 2003 to 2007, and *IraqiGirl* by a Mosul-based teenager using the nickname of NHK (or Hadiya), which is still active. Both blogs describe the girls' everyday life in an occupied country, and were turned into books by Western publishers. This paper argues that the blog form allows these women to challenge dominant narrations of the war and occupation, as well as of Muslim women as passive and victims, providing them with an unprecedented tool of resistance and opposition. In becoming books, however, the blogs are inevitably absorbed into hegemonic representations of Arab womanhood as a consequence of the marketing practices surrounding the book as a consumer good.

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<sup>3</sup> My discussion of the topic is based on a few self-evident assumptions about the complex relationship between blogs and books that will not be discussed in detail, but need to be taken into consideration when tackling this subject. First, it must be noted that bloggers' authorial status is 'authorized' and validated by the community of readers clustering around a narrative that is perceived as 'authentic' and genuine rather than by a publisher's assessment. However, it is difficult to verify a blogger's identity and statements, as several hoax cases – such as the recent fake Syrian lesbian blogger – prove. Secondly, their direct and authentic quality creates peculiar reading standards: unlike books, blogs can be read as soon as the blogger posts, and communication can take place immediately. This creates feelings of attachment even among people who have never met, as well as a kind of *real* suspense that a book cannot originate. Finally, a blog does not have those 'editorial' filters (preface, introduction, cover, etc.) that inevitably lead readers towards a preferred reading of the text.

<sup>4</sup> Clearly, blogs belong to different genres and can be more journalist-like or more diary-like. As an empowering description of life and struggle in a colonized country, however, they are comparable to "out-law genres" (Kaplan 1992) or to "resistance literature" (Harlow 1987).



These ways of representing Muslim women are paradoxically promoted by Western liberals trying to disseminate a specific counterhegemonic discourse of the war. In this sense, the book form contrasts with the empowering nature of the blog, and the book itself becomes a tool of the very imperialistic project that it is allegedly born to fight. In order to highlight the difference in scope and inherent significance of the two different products, book and blog, my analysis of the blogs will be focusing primarily on the parts that were included in the books (only the first book, from August 17, 2003, to September 15, 2004, as far as Riverbend is concerned, and from July 29, 2004 to December, 1, 2007 for NHK).

#### MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

On May 2, 2003, President Bush declared the war (or “Operation Iraqi Freedom” according to Fox News and the official discourses) was over and won. Iraq had been “liberated” from oppression and dictatorship, and a new era began for the unlucky Gulf country.

Roughly three months later, on August 17, an Iraqi woman decided to start her own blog to tell the world that the situation was not what the U.S. media – which she herself could see from her own television – were describing. The blog, *Baghdad Burning*, quickly became very popular and was turned into two books before it closed in 2007, when the blogger was forced to move to Syria with her family to escape from the hopelessness of new, ‘free’, Iraq. When she started writing, another Iraqi blogger, Salam Pax, was already quite popular, but between 2003 and 2004 a lot of new Iraqi blogs were born. This paper focuses on *Baghdad Burning* and on another female blog that was started in 2004: *IraqiGirl* by NHK, a fifteen-year-old girl living in Mosul. While the former has got a strong political position, where the hardship of everyday life is always described from a specific political viewpoint, and with the conscious use of specific rhetoric strategies, the latter takes a political stand in deciding not to discuss politics, and narrates with a more ingenuous tone the everyday life of a teenager in an occupied country, alternating worries about school and exams with descriptions of life among violence, insecurity and lack of freedom.

Although very different in tone, style, and content, the two blogs are very similar in their counterhegemonic project based on challenging dominant representations of the war. The Internet allows them to disseminate a different discourse of the Iraqi situation, disrupting Americans’ control over means of communication which produces a specific ‘reality’ through the language of official discourses and traditional media. In particular, they describe a different reality challenging dominant



representations of the post-war period as “the liberation of Iraq”, and of the war as motivated by 9/11 and terrorism, as well as by American willingness to promote the emancipation of Iraqi women – an issue that had already been used with Afghanistan (See Riley, Mohanty and Pratt 2008, and Al-Ali and Pratt 2009).

Of the two, Riverbend is the oldest and the most aware of the political and economic interests underpinning the war, as well as of the opportunities that the blog form offers her, and the one who really crafts her accounts as a ‘writer’.<sup>5</sup> Sinno (2008) describes in full details all the rhetoric strategies that Riverbend deploys, from humor and sarcasm to storytelling, and from the deconstruction of colonial motives to the promotion of transnational dialogue. What I would like to focus on here, instead, are the ways in which she challenges three specific discourses: the discourse of the war as one of ‘liberation’, the faltering relationship between the war, Saddam Hussein and 9/11, and the claims that the war was somehow connected to an improvement in women’s conditions. Though from a very different vantage point, NHK also takes up these issues. Her narrative is less fluent (when she started her own blog she was just fifteen and could barely speak English),<sup>6</sup> more self-centered and essentially focused on her everyday life, but her narration is no less challenging to dominant representations of the war.

The notion of ‘liberation’ of Iraq, a discourse that was widely promoted by American media, is one of the main targets of both *Baghdad Burning* and *IraqiGirl*. Neither blogger regrets Saddam’s times, but they cannot avoid describing an extremely harsh reality: the war is not over and it is very unsafe to go out because of the risk of abductions, violence, shootings, etc.; power outages cause huge troubles to everyday life, and the economy and job market are even worse than during the pre-war economic sanctions (while Riverbend lost her job as a consequence of the occupation, NHK’s parents saw their salaries in the state sector increase remarkably less than the cost of living).

Of the two, Riverbend is the one who uses the most successful rhetoric strategies. They are generally based on a contextualized use of sarcasm and humour aimed at criticizing or ridiculing official discourses (see Sinno 2008), as when, for example she quotes Donald Rumsfeld,

I \*love\* Donald Rumsfeld’s latest comment on Iraq... “... It’s like Chicago.”  
Wow. This guy is funny.

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<sup>5</sup> Probably this, along with her excellent knowledge of English, is the reason why she was frequently deemed of being a fake, a non-Iraqi pretending to narrate a war that he or she is not experiencing. Riverbend herself addresses this criticism in an early post dated August 18, 2003 (BB 32-33).

<sup>6</sup> In an interview appearing in the book, she explicitly includes the wish to learn English among the reasons she started the blog. See BB 169.



You know that? I agree with him – he just didn't finish the statement properly. What he actually should have said was, "It's like Chicago ... during the 1920s, when Al Capone was running it: gangs, militias, fighting, looting, vendettas, dubious business dealings, and shady figures in dark corners" (BB 80).

Shootings, lootings, rapes, etc. are widely discussed in other posts, and Riverbend's colloquial tone and neutralizing of official statements is a very powerful device to challenge dominant views while at the same time engaging in a peer-to-peer dialogue with her Western readers, who really feel she is "one of us" rather than that mysterious object that Western media call "Muslim woman". Her very good English, along with detailed knowledge of current affairs and of American culture – here embodied by Al Capone – truly make her speak from equal grounds than her readers.

The same mocking strategy also applies to those who are allegedly holding power in Iraq – the nine rotating presidents, whom she calls the Nine Dancing Puppets – and includes ample discussion of colonial motives to explain her readers that Iraq has not been liberated as the war was propelled by colonial interests. For example, she describes Iraq as a country,

For Sale: A fertile, wealthy country with a population of around 25 million... plus around 150,000 foreign troops, and a handful of puppets. Conditions of sale: should be either an American or British corporation (forget it if you're French)... preferably affiliated with Halliburton. Please contact one of the members of the Governing Council in Baghdad, Iraq for more information (BB 106).

This colonial imagery returns when she describes the way that, in her opinion, the West perceives Arab populations:

The Myth: Iraqis, prior to occupation, lived in little beige tents set up on the sides of little dirt roads all over Baghdad. The men and boys would ride to school on their camels, donkeys and goats. These schools were larger versions of the home units and for every 100 students, there was one turban-wearing teacher who taught the boys rudimentary math (to count the flock) and reading. Girls and women sat at home, in black burkas, making bread and taking care of 10-12 children.

The Truth: Iraqis lived in houses with running water and electricity. Thousands of them own computers. Millions own VCRs and VCDs. Iraq has sophisticated bridges, recreational centers, clubs, restaurants, shops, universities, schools, etc. Iraqis love fast cars (especially German cars) and the Tigris is full of little motor boats that are used for everything from fishing to water-skiing (BB 61).

She makes a specific use of exaggeration to tackle the stereotypes that, she is aware, too many people in the West still foster about Arabs. Her point is quite evident:





nurturing the notion of Arabs as primitives, and therefore in need of being civilized, is merely a modern repetition of the old “white man’s burden” imperialistic narrative aimed at justifying an occupation that has nothing to do with the “liberation” of the country. The blog, then, allows this ‘colonized’ subject to unveil and denounce this 21<sup>st</sup> century imperialistic project in a direct and unfiltered way. Moreover, unlike other kinds of “liberation” postcolonial narratives – such as for example that wide field of “resistance literature” described by Barbara Harlow (1987) – or the North African blogs that actively promoted the recent upheavals, this blog does not target her own fellow countrymen, but rather Westerners. Because its aim is to oppose this 21st-century imperialism, and the best way to do it is not armed resistance – which some of her fellow countrymen are trying – but, rather, awakening Western public opinion through its preferred and most wide-reaching medium: the Internet.

While declaring that she would like to be a writer, NHK appears to be less conscious and less able to craft specific narratives – even though she makes a few clumsy experiments with poetry or basic rhetoric devices such as iteration. Along with her description of a war-torn country where the notion of ‘liberation’ is contested with the mere description of everyday life, the most powerful challenge to the discourse of liberation is probably to be found in her repeated assertions that she is not going to discuss politics as this could be dangerous,

My father advised me not to write about political situations. That’s because I’m still young. So I will change the kind of subject that I write about (IG 31)  
I was talking with my friend by e-mail and I decided I wouldn’t comment anymore about the war in my blog. (IG 33)

This resolution, however, is hard to follow, as the girl’s everyday life is made of shootings, abductions, fear and death, as she records in another post,

My mother told me not to write about politics. She said write about my normal life. But I don’t have a normal life so how can I follow her advice? (IG 81)

Her parents’ advice that she avoids political issues, however, functions as a major remark that Iraq is not a free country indeed, a condition that she is keenly aware of and frequently denounces,

I was thinking last night when I went to sleep: Did the American soldiers come to Iraq to give us our freedoms, which we need?  
I ask myself this question and got the answer: NO! Why? I will give you a simple example.  
I don’t put my real name on this blog because I’m not allowed to have a free opinion in this life. I can’t tell the truth until I am sure that no one knows who I am (IG 41).



The two bloggers need to use a nickname and the general denial of free speech are the best evidence that the country has not been liberated. Under Saddam, Iraqis could not express their political views and freely discuss politics. In 'free' Iraq they cannot, either. Blogs, then, offering a chance to speak to the world without revealing one's real identity, can be described as the only way for this particular kind of 'colonized' subjects to make their voices heard. In this sense, anonymity does not prevent blogs from being empowering or subversive.

Another of the two bloggers' major complaints is the fact that they live in a state of violence and fear. Rape, abductions, raids and shootings are everyday issues. And violence is described as blind and senseless, not dissimilar from that terrorism that Americans claim to be fighting, to the point that Riverbend explicitly compares the two issues,

We have 9/11's on a monthly basis. Each and every Iraqi person who dies with a bullet, a missile, a grenade, under torture, accidentally- they all have families and friends and people who care. The number of Iraqis dead since March 2003 is by now at least eight times the number of people who died in the World Trade Center. They had their last words, and their last thoughts as their worlds came down around them, too. I've attended more wakes and funerals this last year, than I've attended my whole life. The process of mourning and the hollow words of comfort have become much too familiar and automatic (BB 329).

The post, dated September 15, 2004 and titled "Fahrenheit 911" after Michael Moore's movie, goes on like this,

September 11... he sat there, reading the paper. As he reached out for the cup in front of him for a sip of tea, he could vaguely hear the sound of an airplane overhead. It was a bright, fresh day and there was much he had to do... but the world suddenly went black- a colossal explosion and then crushed bones under the weight of concrete and iron... screams rose up around him... men, women and children... shards of glass sought out tender, unprotected skin ... he thought of his family and tried to rise, but something inside of him was broken... there was a rising heat and the pungent smell of burning flesh mingled sickeningly with the smoke and the dust... and suddenly it was blackness.

9/11/01? New York? World Trade Center?

No.





9/11/04. Falloojeh. An Iraqi home (*Ibid.*).<sup>7</sup>

The only connection that Riverbend can find between 9/11 and Iraq is the similarity of the violence people are forced to experience, while no traces of Weapons of Mass Destruction either of connections between Saddam and Al Qaeda have been found – as she remarks several times,

This war started out a war on WMD. When those were not found, and proof was flimsy at best, it turned suddenly into a “War against Terrorism”. When links couldn’t be made to Al-Qaeda or Osama Bin Laden (besides on Fox and in Bush’s head), it turned into a “Liberation”. Call it whatever you want – to me it’s an occupation (BB 42).

On another occasion, on September 12, 2003, she responds to a reader questioning her failure to remember September 11 by telling “A modern fairy tale”, as she titles the entry, in the evident attempt to question dominant discourse by using their very rhetorical strategies – telling fairy tales to justify the unjustifiable,

By 2 pm, the electricity was back on and I was sitting in front of the tv watching one of the Arabic stations. Suddenly, they showed American troops standing solemnly in a 9/11 Memorial Service being held in... Tikrit (where Saddam was born)!! I sat watching, confused. I assume it was done in that specific place so some oblivious person can, five years down the line, hold it up as testimony to the world that this whole war was, indeed, about terror and Osama bin Laden and 9/11 and WMD. It was done in that particular place so that someone, a week from now, can write to me and say, “Of course there was a link between Osama and Saddam and that’s why we attacked you. The proof is this: the 9/11 Memorial Service was held in Tikrit.”

This famous ‘missing link’ between Iraq and the war on terror is like, how I imagine, a fairy might look – small, flighty, almost transparent and... nonexistent. Shortly after 9/11, this fairy was caught by the Pentagon and stashed in a cage for all the world to see.

Almost like the Emperor’s new clothes, anyone who could not see this enigmatic creature was accused of being an Enemy of Freedom, a Saddam sympathizer or – horror of horrors! – unpatriotic. They were promptly indicted and burned at the metaphorical stake.

So most people chose to see the fairy. Some people, in fact, really thought they \*could\* see it. Everyone certainly tried. Unfortunately, the fairy soon began growing smaller and paler under the burning scrutiny of millions of curious eyes.

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<sup>7</sup> Significantly, this is the last entry included in Riverbend’s first book, as to underline this similarity for Western readers.



So what did they decide to do? Bush, Rumsfeld and the rest made a critical decision: the fairy must be protected by a great wall. Plans were drawn up, the toughest bricks were selected and contractors from Fox News, CNN and others were assigned. And with every fresh news story, a brick was laid, until the wall was so high and strong, it became a fortress... and everyone forgot what lay behind it... which was the alleged fairy... who may, or may not have, existed. But it no longer mattered anymore, anyway – the wall itself was there...

And the fairy? The fairy dug an escape tunnel to Iran... or perhaps Syria... or maybe North Korea. Time will tell – she will be caught again (BB 92-93).

Besides, the violence of American soldiers is paralleled by the violence of local terrorists, whom Americans should do something about but are unable to, as in the case of the terrorist attack that kills UN diplomat Sergio de Mello (BB 36).

From Mosul, NHK describes a similar Iraq. One of her very first blog entries describes the death of a relative – her sister's father-in-law,

When Aya's [NHK's newborn niece] grandfather was killed, he was with one of his neighbors. They were walking back home because at that time there was a lot of fire shooting in the area and the Americans closed the roads leading to their house. The place where he got shot was an opened area and there were no shelters to protect them from fire.

There was a shop nearby and the shop owner invited them to enter his place until the shooting stopped. But Aya's grandfather refused, probably because he was worried about his family. So he continued to walk.

In front of Aya's grandfather on the way to his home about one hundred meters away, there was an American Stryker vehicle. The American soldiers who were in that Stryker shot him in the thigh. The bullet caused severe bleeding and he fell to the ground.

His neighbor and the shopkeeper tried to take Aya's grandfather to the shop but the American soldier shot them too. This happened every time they tried to bring him to a safe place to stop the bleeding.

When the shooting calmed down, they were able to take him to a safe place and put a bandage over the wound. But they couldn't find a car to take Aya's grandfather to the hospital in time and he died on the way from the bleeding. (IG 32-33)

Just like Riverbend, she addresses both the fear caused by the American occupation force and the violence committed by terrorists, who are free to ravage the country as a consequence of American incapacity to guarantee safety. For example, she narrates the episode of a car bomb exploding near the college where her mother works and her sister studies. The subsequent anxious attempt to get in touch with the loved ones recalls the experience of those facing terrorist attacks in Western towns,



I didn't hear the explosion but I heard my cell phone ringing. It was my dad calling me.

*Alo, where are you?*

*Dad, this is Hadiya. Is there any place I could be except home?*

*I thought I called your mother. Hang up the phone!*

... The truth was that my father was calling my mother because he saw a car bomb and a fire where he was supposed to meet Najma [NHK's sister] so he called my mother to see if my sister had arrived at her college and survived.

Did she die or did she not? That is the question (IG 155).

Both bloggers, then, craft a specific discourse to describe Iraqis as innocent victims of a war that has nothing to do with them. They underline the similarities between terrorism in the U.S. and the U.S. complicity in violence – either in terms of violent act committed by American troops or in terms of the Americans' incapacity to control a land they are actually occupying – in order to point out that the war had no other reason than a neocolonial project. The result of this 'liberation' or 'war on terror' is Iraqis have to live nearly secluded in their homes, something that neither of the bloggers experienced before the war, in spite of Western discourses of the Muslim woman as secluded and submitted,

For those of you wondering, YES, it annoys me beyond anything that, at my age, I have to get parental permission to leave the house. It's a trend that started after the war and doesn't look like it's going to abate any time soon. I comfort myself with the thought that it's not specific to my household or even my gender- all parents seem to be doing it lately... where are you going? To do what? Who is going with you? What time will you be back? Is it absolutely necessary? (BB 266)

Females can no longer leave their homes alone. Each time I go out, E. [Riverbend's brother] and either a father, uncle or cousin has to accompany me. It feels like we've gone back 50 years ever since the beginning of the occupation. A woman, or girl, out alone, risks anything from insults to abduction. An outing has to be arranged at least an hour beforehand. I state that I need to buy something or have to visit someone. Two males have to be procured (preferably large) and 'safety arrangements' must be made in this total state of lawlessness. And always the question: "But do you have to go out and buy it? Can't I get it for you?" No you can't, because the kilo of eggplant I absolutely have to select with my own hands is just an excuse to see the light of day and walk down a street. The situation is incredibly frustrating to females who work or go to college. (BB 43)

NHK manages to go out more frequently to go to school, but the school year is often interrupted by curfews and other safety issues, as when she goes back to school after seventeen days of forced vacation (IG 34) or when she misses a history exam because a shooting is taking place in her area (IG 36).



With their accounts, then, the two bloggers lift the veil that prevents Western eyes to see the similarities between two different situations – terrorism in the West and in Iraq – and question the notion that the war on Iraq has somehow been useful to improve security either in the U.S. or in Iraq. In this sense, they manage to expose and smash the wall of alleged innocence that justifies the actions of Western powers – the wall that protects the fairy in Riverbend’s tale – contesting the colonial notion that the West stands for good and innocence, while “the rest” is evil and has to be controlled and ‘purified’ – something that the U.S. Army seem unable to do anyway. In their narratives, violence and fundamentalism are results of the occupation, not pre-existing phenomena.

The two blogs, however, are first and foremost young women’s accounts of the war and occupation of Iraq, and the situation of women in Iraq is a relevant topic in the two narratives. NHK is young and likely unaware of the most complex political issues at stake. She does not devote many pages to discussing the role of women in new Iraq: she describes herself as more religious than Riverbend, and never openly addresses the issue of the hijab, which is one of the major focuses of Western discourses about Muslim women’s oppression<sup>8</sup> and thus, in all likelihood, one of the most interesting issues to her readers. Not surprisingly, the topic is only raised by her Western interlocutors in the book’s paratext, first during a chat conversation where she says she does use it independently of laws or safety issues (IG 116), and later in an interview in the final pages of the book (IG 173). What she openly talks about in the blog, though, is her longing for the ‘normal’ life of a teenager, one that does not look dissimilar from that of Western girls: “I am sixteen years old. I should be a crazy girl doing foolish and stupid things but I am not” (IG 96). “I also spend time watching television. I watch *Gilmore Girls*, *Popular*, *Friends*, *According to Jim*, *Scrubs*, *Frasier*, and *Eight Simple Rules*” (IG 62). Later on, she mentions her passion for Harry Potter and Agatha Christie’s books. She also questions the notion of the Muslim woman as submitted and subaltern in discussing her plans for the future as any average Western student would. In an entry titled “I want to be someone...” for example, she declares,

I still don’t know what I want to be in the future. Before, I hoped to be a pharmacist just like my aunt. But now I changed my mind. I like house decoration but there are no colleges for studying decoration. I don’t know if I want to be someone famous. I want to enter an excellent college somewhere far from the Iraqi situation. I want to leave Iraq and study and come back to my country when I am ready for that. And at that time, I will do for my country and give and give all that I have just to see it rise as high as it was in the past (IG 103).

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<sup>8</sup> As Mohanty, for example, argues (1991b). Several Islamic feminists and activists point out that, beyond the symbol, Muslim women have got more urgent issues to face. For a general discussion of the debate between Western and Muslim feminists on the subject, see for example Grace 2004.



The girl's words make it very clear that being a woman does not limit her freedom of choice, while at the same time expressing pride and a sense of responsibility to her country, a responsibility that she can fulfill without being a man. In this sense, she shows that to her the veil is not synonymous with submission, as most Western observers might think, and that Muslim culture (and Iraqi in particular) is much more complex and diverse than we are made to think in the West.

The issue of the Muslim woman is instead very prominent in Riverbend, who suffers the most for losing her pre-war life, when she had a job that she loved, and lived the everyday life of a young woman in her twenties. Life before the war was, according to her, not dissimilar from the life that most Western women of her age live, as she is very keen on explaining. She discusses the condition of women in pre-war Iraq by telling her personal experience as well as by reporting figures and statistics ("Before the war, around 50% of the college students were females, and over 50% of the working force was composed of women. Not so anymore. We are seeing an increase of fundamentalism in Iraq which is terrifying" BB 43). She engages in historical explanations (BB 45), or discusses cultural issues that are brought to her attention by articles she reads – such as when she talks about the tribal use of marriage between cousins (BB 116-121) or the different kinds and uses of the headscarf (BB 122-124). She also discusses Iraqi politics from the viewpoint of women's rights and access to political life (BB 93-98), and is very passionate against being forced to veil herself (BB 43-46). In short, Riverbend's description of Iraq is one that radically challenges the discourse of the liberation of Iraqi women as another reason for the war. In her blog entries, pre-war Iraqi women are always presented as much freer and more emancipated than other Arab females,<sup>9</sup> and she frequently tries to explain her readers that she is not a mysterious 'Other' as much as a young woman living in a conservative country with its own culture, who nonetheless grew up listening to American pop music, watching Hollywood movies, and specializing in IT technology. She devotes many efforts, in short, to try and be perceived as 'one of us' by her readers. Her own digital literacy testifies that she is not the secluded and submitted individual that blog readers might be thinking of. The very use of new media is the most powerful way to challenge the view of Arab populations as primitive and of Arab women as secluded and oppressed.

In this sense, blogs can be described as the quintessential contemporary postcolonial tool as they enable people from the most remote corners of the world to get in touch with the 'centres', and bring their 'peripheral' issues to the forefront because "a blog lets you raise your voice without asking anyone's permission, and no

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<sup>9</sup> Both Riverbend and NHK, it must be observed, belong to the urban middle class and speak from a privileged position. As Riley, etc. and Al-Ali argue, life under the embargo was not as easy as Riverbend states, and women's access to education was reduced as a consequence of the economic situation.





one is in the position to tell you to shut up” (Rosenberg 336). This is especially relevant for women, whose traditional association with domestic space is challenged by a medium which allows them to be both at home and in the world at the same time. This freedom of speech, however, is only guaranteed to those who have internet access – in this case, educated middle-class women –, a form of discrimination that, in a very complex way, immediately brings Internet users out of the category of the ‘subaltern’, as “[t]he subaltern that can reach the means of blogging, on their own or with the help of others, is not subaltern anymore. He or she enters the side which can speak about the subaltern” (Toshiya Ueno, quoted in Lovink 2008: 27).<sup>10</sup> Book adaptation, on the contrary, centers precisely on the chance to enter the life of a ‘subaltern’ through the mediation of a publisher, and therefore generally results in silencing the non-western voice, as I am going to argue in the next section.

It must be added, however, that discussing blogs as a tool for postcolonial subjects raises another specific problem: a blog’s worldwide success depends on its being written in English, the language of the colonial power against which these two bloggers are writing. This, however, can be seen as an empowering element rather than a (post)colonial motive of submission. While to young NHK the political significance of choosing to write in English is not so obvious, to Riverbend English is both a language she knows very well (she spent part of her childhood in the West) and the tool she has to use for her counterhegemonic project. In this sense, she can be compared to those postcolonial writers who choose to write in the colonial language. Rather than being an element of submission, this can be identified with *heteroglossia* as proposed by Françoise Lionnet borrowing Rosaldo’s notion of a hybrid language as a site of creative resistance. According to Lionnet, writers from postcolonial countries make a political use of the colonial language to convey a different sensitivity and worldview into the colonizers’ language. Using the colonial language, then, is “a means ... of transforming the dominant conceptions circulated by the more standard idiom” (1995: 13). And the colonial language “is appropriated, made into a vehicle for expressing a hybrid, heteroglot universe” (*Ibid.*). This ‘Eastern’ hybrid language is called “Arablish” by Whitlock, who describes it in terms of “a language of resistance to English as the unquestioned lingua franca of the Internet” (2006: 36). Whitlock analyzes Salam Pax’s blog, but the ‘contaminated’ English that he uses is exactly the same language that can be found in Riverbend’s and NHK’s blogs, where English as the global language of communication is turned into their personal communicative tool, expressing and circulating a specific antihegemonic view. This language merging English and Arab cultural references and puns is their way to spread information about their culture in order to shatter stereotypes and make their own culture known to

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<sup>10</sup> As Spivak also argues (See the interview where she said: “If the subaltern can speak, then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern anymore”, “The New Historicism: Political Commitment and the postmodern Critic” in Hyasim 1990: 158).





faraway readers – and this is the reason why both of them indulge in explanations about religion and Iraqi culture in general –, but also to prove that life in occupied Iraq is not what mainstream media say. These blogs, in short, use the hegemonic language as a way to address a wide audience, and mould it up into something different in order to pursue a specific political project targeted at Western readers. Just like postcolonial writing, then, blogs function “by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989: 38). When the blog becomes a book, however, a blogger’s voice is radically modified.

#### VICTIM, ESCAPEE, PAWN: CAN THE SUBALTERN BLOG?

“As Edward Said has argued in his essay ‘Traveling Theory’, a theory or idea that travels to different contexts gets partly or fully accommodated or incorporated and is ‘to some extent transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place’ (227). Said’s argument can be extended to all cultural products ..., which, in the process of moving across national/cultural boundaries, are transformed by the reception context, their meanings reproduced and reshaped to fit local agendas” (Amireh and Majaj 2000: 3). This is all the more true in the case of a text travelling into a different textual form, such as a blog that is turned into a book. The need to target a different readership – and thus to meet specific reading expectations –, as well as the cultural and economic implications of the publishing process turn the text into something different, something that is more likely to fit the publisher’s local agenda rather than the author’s. Besides, these blogs can be included in the category of “third world women’s texts” that, as Amireh and Majaj (2000) explain drawing on Mohanty’s work, cannot be presented to the West unless they are homogenized into a recognizable frame based on readers’ stereotypes about the ‘Other’. The books, then, cannot work without promoting a set of stereotypes that the blogs implicitly or explicitly deny.

Both *Baghdad Burning* and *IraqiGirl* were turned into books by progressive publishers (The Feminist Press and Haymarket Press) with the aim of promoting the anti-war narratives underpinning them. This process both reabsorbs the blogs within a specific Western antihegemonic discourse of the war whereby they are used as evidences to reinforce Western discourses opposing the war, and targets them at a new readership with different reading habits, expectations, and motivations. In order to attract a specific audience, these blogs need to be fit into a specific genre: “Muslim women’s narratives”. This is a highly marketable genre centering on three categories through which the West conceives the Muslim woman and receives her cultural



productions: as a victim of gender oppression, as an escapee of her intrinsically patriarchal culture, and as a pawn of Arab male power (Kahf 2000).<sup>11</sup> The two blogs, in different ways, challenge this received notion of Muslim womanhood, whereas the books originating from the blogs seem to reinforce and exploit it for commercial reasons.

As previously discussed, NHK, the youngest and less aware of a whole set of cultural expectations, questions this notion mainly by describing herself as a Muslim girl as well an individual who is free to decide about her future. The two terms are intertwined and cannot be separated: as a Muslim and a woman, she is entitled to receive an education and decide about her life just like her Western peers. Riverbend, on the other hand, is more aware of Western stereotypes and actively seeks to oppose them, devoting numerous pages to explaining her life before the war, and the issues that are more closely connected to women's rights (women's participation in the political life of the new Iraq, the headscarf, marriage between cousins, etc.). Her engagement in long, stereotype-shattering explanations often risks becoming a way to reinforce precisely those stereotypes of Otherness they are trying to challenge, as Jarmakani (2007) explains. However, this does not imply that her voice is immediately silenced under westerners' expectation, as Jarmakani puts it, because, as Mohanty (1991a) argues, what matters is *how* these texts are read. And, generally, blog readership is diverse and not 'guided' by paratextual elements as it happens with books. Blogs are a much freer means of communication because, unlike books and the editorial process they have to undergo, they "allow individuals from all strata of society to pronounce their private thoughts, feelings, desires, and deeds. This is ... a sign of emancipation, that is, liberation from the authority of parents, peers, governments, institutions, or publishers, who, in the past, decided which life-story was worth print and which was not" (Keren 2006: 8).

The adaptation into book stems, instead, precisely from a publisher's decision that something is worth print, and has got commercial implications that profoundly change its nature and its relationship with readers. Readers of the two media are very different, and most likely have different expectations and motivations. While the blog is most likely read because it provides a fresh and updated narration of the war, and allows readers to share their opinions with the bloggers, the book exists at a later stage, far from the unraveling of events.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, blog readers are likely to be more actively searching for news and sources, while books are specifically marketed to

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<sup>11</sup> The "Muslim woman" as a western cultural category has been discussed by several feminists. See for example Amireh and Majaj 2000, which contains several chapters on the issue, while Zayzafoon (2005) explains the production of this cultural category both inside and outside Islam itself, and Kahf (1999) traces a history of Western representations of Muslim women.

<sup>12</sup> For a general discussion on blog use motivations, see for example Barbara K. Kaye, 2007. "Blog Use Motivations: An Exploratory Study", in Tremayne, 2007, pp 127-148.



capture wider readerships that include people who are less actively interested in a topic. In this sense, the use of specific cover images tries to attract a specific readership by hinting at a precise 'genre' – in this case, Muslim women's narratives, generally presented as autobiographic texts denouncing oppression.<sup>13</sup> The cover, then, elicits a specific "horizon of expectations" (Kahf 2000) raising specific issues about Muslim women. These include Western cultural stereotypes but also issues of interpellation. As Whitlock explains, the image of a woman covered by a veil or burka functions as a way to address "liberal western consumers who desire to liberate and recognize her by lifting the burka and bringing her alongside us, barefaced in the West ... The image of the veiled woman ... is a powerful trope of the passive 'third world' subject, and it sustains the discursive self-presentation of Western women as secular, liberal, and individual agents" (2006: 47 and 49).

Not surprisingly, the covers of both texts play exactly with this stereotype and with its appeal to Western women. In the case of *Baghdad Burning* there are two different covers: the U.S. edition, showing the profile of a young woman's face with a yellowish city skyline on the background, and the British one presenting a picture of a few Arab schoolgirls, some wearing a hijab, some not, an image that has nothing to do with Riverbend herself – when the war started, she had already completed her education and used to have a job, so the cover bears no relationship to the actual text.<sup>14</sup> Both covers, however, include the same endorsement by Susan Sarandon ("Anyone who cares about the war in Iraq must read this book"), which clearly functions as an interpellation strategy for a specific liberal readership, and the same reference to Ahdaf Soueif's *Foreword* and James Ridgeway's *Introduction* – a Muslim woman and a Western man endorsing the text. Moreover, both editions contain a series of blurbs from both Western and non-Western sources inviting readers to buy this testimony of the war and of a woman's life in a Muslim country. The paratextual elements, in short, attach 'ethic' or 'political' value to the book, constructing it as a must-read for liberal, anti-war Western readers. It is clear, then, that, as Jarmakani argues, "[t]he Feminist Press has framed Riverbend as a counter-narrative to mainstream discourse about the Iraq war, thereby limiting her narrative to the refutation of pre-existing categories of knowledge about the Arab world. While Riverbend's analysis certainly opposes such reductive categories, structuring the book in terms of this oppositional stance ultimately disallows the articulation of other narrative possibilities" (2007: 44).

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<sup>13</sup> See for example Amireh and Majaj 2000, and Whitlock 2006.

<sup>14</sup> This way of fashioning covers to attract Western readers independently of the actual content is quite common a practice. As an example, Amireh and Majaj quote the American edition of the novel *Nisanit* by Jordanian author Fadia Faquir. While this is a political book dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict rather than with Islamic patriarchal oppression, the cover shows a woman fully veiled, suggesting that gender oppression is the main theme (See Amireh and Majaj 2000: 5).



The same can be said about *IraqiGirl*. The book, published by a progressive publisher for a teenage readership, is the outcome of a huge editorial intervention. First, the cover is again a hint to the dozens of stories by Muslim women piling up in Western bookstores. It shows the back of a young woman wearing a long and colorful headscarf. Again, we see only her profile, not her full face, and this is clearly a way to add mystery and the promise to show (or 'unveil') the real face of this mysterious figure we call "Muslim woman". This image suggests the notion of "the exotic veiled Third World woman" to create an eye-catching image, one designed not to reflect the actual content of the book but rather to attract readers and generate sales" (Amireh and Majaj 2000: 6). The girl is standing on a roof overlooking a city, with blue sky occupying the higher part of the cover along with the title. The latter is surrounded by a Moorish pattern which adds a further touch of exoticism to the already exoticist image of the girl.

The book contains a very rich paratext including a foreword explaining the recent history of Mosul and making an explicit comparison with Anne Frank's diary. The volume is interspersed with maps, notes explaining the facts NHK refers to, and chat conversations with a human right activist. It also includes a final interview, questions by American students, discussion hints, and a timeline to help readers make sense of the events Hadiya reports. Finally, the girl's very poor English (especially in the early entries) is cleaned up and standardized. This latter process breaks up the peculiarity of Hadiya's individual voice as well as the sense of authenticity of a narrative coming from 'elsewhere', two elements that contribute to the success of a blog. The book is explicitly structured as a study tool to help students understand the complexity of life in a different culture and of the war, as well as a way to promote peace and understanding among youths. Readers, then, are guided toward a specific interpretation of the text – a political anti-war reading endorsed by the words of an 'insider'.

While both blogs clearly promote and circulate an antihegemonic view of the war, and are explicitly aimed at contesting, among other things, stereotypes about the Muslim woman, one cannot avoid feeling that with the books the communicative power is returned to the West, and the voices of these two women are used to uphold a Western worldview. The two books seem to stem from the old paradigm of Western feminists going to the rescue of Third World Women as, in promising entry to the 'mysterious' world of Muslim women and granting them access to speech, they reinforce "the notions that Arab women are silent and submissive and that they need help from their First World sisters in order to be heard, notions which are precisely the sorts of misconceptions Riverbend wants to dismantle" (Jarmakani 2007: 44). Besides, all the editorial interventions surrounding the texts operate a decisive detachment between author/text and readers, suggesting a 'preferred' way of reading, and stealing the freshness and authenticity that they are allegedly promoting as the blog's major



quality. And even if they do invite book readers to go on reading the blogs online, this process is anyway mediated by a Western subject. The final result is the reinforcement of Western authority – the authority of publishers to grant access to the West, notwithstanding the fact that, through blogs, they already had access to Western audiences –, operated through specific strategies including the highlighting of the ‘exotic’ side of the texts, since exoticism allows “the dominant culture to attribute value to the margins while continuing to define them in its own self-privileging terms. What is more, the value it ascribes is predominantly aesthetic: marginality is deprived of its subversive implications by being rerouted into safe assertions of a fetishised cultural difference” (Huggan 2001: 24). In the end, then, the book operation disrupts the blogs’ empowering potential, reinforcing Western stereotypes about Muslim women as well as the cultural and ‘democratic’ supremacy of a West engaged in rescuing Eastern women – those very hegemonic values that the war promotes and the two publishers are purportedly challenging.

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