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Beyond the Trauma of War: Iraqi Literature

Yasmeen S. Hanoosh

Portland State University, yhanoosh@pdx.edu

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Beyond the Trauma of War: Iraqi Literature Today (<http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/beyond-the-trauma-of-war-iraqi-literature-today>)

A decade after the U.S.-led coalition invaded Iraq, we cannot approach Iraqi literature today without recognizing the multiple shifts and varieties in its expression. In a matter of ten years, the post-Ba'thist era has witnessed the sudden fall of a long-lasting dictatorship, an encounter with Western occupation, and an unprecedented upsurge in sectarian discourses, to name only the most prominent events. In addition to these influences, the development of contemporary Iraqi literature is the product of several fluctuations in cultural expression that span the bulk of the twentieth century. The abrupt transitions from the Hashemite monarchy (1932–58) to 'Abd al-Karim Qasim's regime (1958–63), the dictatorship of the Ba'th Party (1968–2003), the embargo years (1991–2003), and finally the post-2003 occupation era punctuate the ideological schisms and fractious state-writer relationship. The literary shifts also highlight the emergence of civic society in Iraq, the dynamics within the public sphere, and the ideological makeup of the various state-controlled cultural projects.

During this eventful decade Iraqi writers have been attempting to revive the social realism cultivated in the 1960s and 1970s by seminal authors such as Gha'ib Tu'Imah Farman, Mahdi 'Isa al-Saqr, and Fu'ad al-Takarli. This process followed the long hiatus of the 1980s and 1990s during which Iraqi writers were either silenced, exiled, or enlisted by the state in the production of war glorification literature that is generally deemed stylistically poor and duplicitous in content. We see aspects of the revival of social realism in this issue's selections of Mahmoud Saeed's *A Portal in Space* and Abd al-Khaliq al-Rikabi's *The Arab Altar*. More strikingly, however, this past decade has witnessed multiple serious departures from these mimetic norms that characterized the dominant narratological models of the twentieth century, most notably in the minimalist, impressionistic short stories of Luay Hamza Abbas, and Hassan Blasim's at once peremptory and incredulous accounts of human violence.

A notable development in Iraqi literature has been taking place within the cultural scene of the southern city of Basra, which, in addition to producing several renowned novelists who have been active in diaspora, such as Najem Wali, seems to be witnessing its own literary revival through a new generation of fiction writers. The literary output of Luay Hamzah Abbas, among others, exhibits the influence of local developments in magical realism and magical history whose pioneers, prominently Muhammad Khdhayyir, but also Mahdi Jabr, Mahmud Abd al-Wahhab, and Hussayn 'Abd al-Latif, had mostly opted for silence during the Ba'thist era.

As numerous waves of intellectuals have been politically or otherwise compelled to leave Iraq over the course of more than half a century, contemporary Iraqi literature currently assumes a binary shape as a product of "inside" and "outside" sensibilities and cultures, both of which are represented in this issue. Yet what is of higher relevance than the physical location of these authors today is the cultural point of reference that dominates their core experiences. We cannot overlook the fact that several of the contributors to this issue belong to Iraqi generations that witnessed firsthand Saddam Hussein's regime's obsession with an accelerated and blunt attempt to strategically link the past with the present in the 1970s and 1980s. The large-scale project of rewriting Iraqi history (*Mashru' l'adat Kitabat al-Tarikh*) had been at work since the mid-1970s, and was officially articulated in 1979. As scholars Eric Davis and Amatzia Baram have significantly pointed out, the project aimed to restructure collective historical memory in accordance with the dictates of the Ba'thist ideology of selective Arabization and nationalization. It encompassed several sub-projects that sought to reconstruct public understanding of national heritage, identity, and belonging. The narrative styles of several of the selections in this issue acquire their force from their authors' acute awareness of the subtext of Iraq's Ba'thist authoritative cultural discourses. They attempt to create counter-discourses to Ba'thist and

post-Ba'thist hegemony, projects of rechanneling the course of Iraqi culture.

It is difficult to chart out all of the new literary currents and circles that are developing or scarcely forming inside and outside Iraq in the post-2003 period. Despite the relative easing of state censorship inside, a great deal of cultural isolation and self-censorship persist, precluding access to the literary and cultural scene from outside of Iraq. Yet in recent literary negotiations of sovereignty, in works of broader colonial and post-colonial readings of culture, one finds the promise of an emerging reciprocity between the different literary generations inside and outside of Iraq. This reciprocity could acknowledge the shared collective history and trauma of successive wars in the literary phase ahead.

As one might expect, the prolonged experience of war still dominates Iraqi articulations of self and place, either explicitly as in al-Rikabi and Saeed's realist depictions of everyday life during the Iraq-Iran war, Ali Bader's probing into the psychological state of a soldier fighting this war, and Hassan Blasim's stark confrontation with the moral quandaries that accompany human choices during times of violence; or indirectly as in Luay Hamza Abbas's laconic meditations on the subjective and collective traumatic aftermath of the war experience, Sinan Antoon's reflection on the lingering effects of the terror of violence and war, and Sargon Boulus's symbolic recourse into pre-modern signifiers and imagery.

Yet hope and humor also permeate the new Iraqi text in unexpected, subtle ways. The tragic intermingles with the laughable in Muhsin al-Ramli's "One-Eyed TV," where he walks us through the transformation of a rural Iraqi village via the advent of television at the hand of Saddam Hussein in the 1980s. In a similarly lighthearted vein, the young protagonists in Salima Saleh's retrospective narrative "Mulberry Tree" come to remind us that not all Iraqi childhood recollections are colored by suffering or haunted by war nightmares. Nature, nostalgia for familiar places, storytelling, and the innocent pursuits of childhood are also durable threads in the war-stained textile of Iraq's recent history. The sense of nonchalance, doubt, or naiveté that marks the perspectives and actions of several of these texts' protagonists transform the narratives into parodies of the Iraqi events, concepts, individuals, and histories they depict. By so doing they prompt us to rethink our own understanding of modern Iraq as well.

The strangeness with which the work of many contemporary Iraqi writers at once rivets and disorients the reader is perhaps the best metaphor for the incongruity of modern Iraq's cultural and political history, and a shrewd reminder of the cyclical nature of the country's collective calamities. One shared aspect the selected excerpts articulate about contemporary Iraqi literature is its defiance. They reflect the Iraqi state's failure to achieve full cultural hegemony over its intellectuals.

Through the conceptual restructuring of iconic Iraqi places and discourses, together the Iraqi works in this issue, among other recent works, defy our standard knowledge of the procession of historical events in modern Iraq. They negotiate an entry into the liminal, marginalized discourses that lie on the peripheries of the national narrative of Saddam Hussein's era as well as the counter-narratives of the traditional bodies of opposition (Communist, Shi'i, tribal, etc.). By exposing the propaganda behind the official narratives of Iraqi history—such as the Ba'th-sponsored production of war novels and short stories—these works interrogate and deconstruct Iraq's cultural formations and initiate a new, multifaceted reading of Iraqi identity.

Yasmeen Hanoosh

Yasmeen Hanoosh is an Iraqi-born writer, literary translator, and assistant professor of Arabic language and modern literature at Portland State University. She holds a BA (2001) in Philosophy and World Religions, an MA (2003) in Arabic Language and Literature, and a PhD (2008) in Arabic Studies, all from the University of Michigan. Yasmeen Hanoosh's translations have appeared in various literary journals and publications, including *Banipal*, *World Literature Today*, and the *Iowa Review*. Her translation of *Closing His Eyes* received the National Endowment for the Arts' Translation Award in 2010. Her translation of the Iraqi novel *Scattered Crumbs* by Muhsin al-Ramli won the Arkansas Arabic Translation Prize in 2002, and has been since excerpted in a number of publications and anthologized in *Literature from the Axis of Evil: Writing from Iran, Iraq, North Korea and Other Enemy Nations* (2006).

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