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An Excerpt from al-Sayyid Asghar Akbar by Murtedha Gzar

by Yasmeeen Hanoosh

Aug 12 2013

[The following is a translation of an excerpt from the novel *Al-Sayyid Asghar Akbar* (*Dar al-Tanwir*, 2012) by Iraqi author Murtedha Gzar. This recent work by a young engineer from the southern city of Basra has received considerable attention in literary circles at home and abroad, significantly for the ways in which it departs from the mimetic norms of social realism that were found in the established narratological models of the pre-2003 U.S. occupation era, such as the varieties cultivated in the 1960s and 1970s in Iraq by seminal authors like Gha'ib Tu'mah Farman, Mahdi Isa al-Saqr, and Fu'ad al-Takarli.



[The cover of *al-Sayyid Asghar Akbar* by Murtedha Gzar]

Al-Sayyid Asghar Akbar has been hailed as “unique in its magical realist narration,” and a “harbinger of a new style of narration that departs completely from the literary output of multiple generations of Iraqi narrators.”¹ Part of this uniqueness comes from the ways in which the novel restructures iconic Iraqi places, mainly the Shrine city of Najaf, transgresses intradiegetic time, and reconstructs historical discourses. By so doing it defies our expectations and media- and government-cast collective images of twentieth-century Iraq. Instead, it negotiates a discursive space that lies on the peripheries of two hegemonic, official narratives of Iraqi culture: the national narrative of the Ba`th regime and the religious counter-narrative of the traditional Shi`i opposition. It exposes a discrepancy between two authoritative, normative processes of historicizing; the ‘Rewriting of Iraqi History Project’ and the Najafi *ijtihad* and *taqlid* traditions.

Ultimately, in this complex work Gzar accomplishes a skeptical deconstruction of Iraq’s cultural formations and a new, post-Ba`thist reading of Shi`ism, Najaf, and Iraqi identity by telling the story of three generations of family genealogists from the Shi`i shrine city of Najaf. The narrative time spans the period between 1871, the year the grandfather Asghar Akbar arrived to Najaf aboard a ship that was transporting corpses from India to be buried in the holy grounds of Najaf’s cemetery; and 2005, the year his three childless granddaughters, Nadhmah, Mu`inah, and Wahidiyyah, conclude his lineage and are found buried in the vault of their grandfather’s house.

These sisters jointly narrate the bulk of the novel’s events. Sometimes alternating and sometimes in unison, the unique narrative voice of these sisters tells the story of their grandfather by rearranging the letters on the lead sorts (pieces of type) that make up the remains of a decayed printing press that used to belong to the grandfather Asghar Akbar. Worried that they would run out of letter sorts before finishing their account, they feverishly type-narrate the story of their grandfather, an eccentric horse genealogist who arrived to Najaf on a dubious sea journey. They narrate, with countless digressions into their personal stories and the present, how the controversial Asghar Akbar was to become the city’s most acclaimed family genealogist despite the suspicion of the city’s legal and political establishment. As they synchronously type-narrate the novel’s events, the sisters commit typos that affect the development of the plot and wreak havoc on the city. As they distort and deconstruct the established accounts of key political events such as the Najaf Revolt of 1916, the 1918 British siege

of the city, the popular uprising against Saddam Hussein's regime in 1991, and the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003, the sisters rewrite the modern social history of Najaf and reveal striking parallels between the political events of the turn of the previous century and the turn of the current century.]

The Siege of Najaf

Excerpt from the novel *al-Sayyid Asghar Akbar*

by Murtedha Gzar

Three reconnaissance aircrafts were sent from the ILA-55 base. One flew east over the haystacks seven miles away from the city, and one was destroyed and fell down in the Sea of Najaf, thanks to the undertakers and coffin porters who beleaguered it with their lies. Yet the diaries of Hasanali Bakubki, in which he analyzed the wiggling of the tail of Ms. Gertrude Bell's dog in her tent during the visits of some of the city's notables, reveal that the two aircrafts returned safely to their base and were welcomed by the friendly bullets of the Indian cavalry. These diaries, which were sold in the book auction after the invasion of the city and the conclusion of the siege for three thousand Rupees, moreover state what the gossip of the elderly had already confirmed: the third reconnaissance aircraft hovered over the dome of Imam Ali's Shrine and the gold rumbled beneath it while Ayatollah al-Damad was raising his hands to pray before hundreds of worshipers. Upon hearing the roar of its propellers, he looked up and heaved a long sigh. It was actually a gasp that was later described as a "knockout", after which he fell unconscious. Two hours later his soul left this world.

The third aircraft was incinerated. It blew up into hot flames that were described in the pamphlets as the red shrapnel of hell.

At the time, Captain Marshall was proofreading a thank you note he had written in reply to Major Balfour, governor of Karbala, commending him for his valuable advice on the need to respect the holly city and show the finest of veneration to its esteemed religious scholars—the 'ulama. Next door, his Dutch doctor had finished his reply to the ornithologist at the University of Dublin. He was still uneasy about his descriptions of the mute larks of the Imam Shrine, and about his discussion of the curses that inflict the hungry person who contemplates hunting them.

It did not occur to the reply writers that the Bedouin postman would not come on that day to take the last of their letters. Captain Marshall had not yet received the news of the robbery of the tannery next door to the Bureau of the Ottoman government which his armies had occupied. Yet jokes in Urdu were resounding in the Bureau about the meaning of robbing goat wool and hide in circumstances like these and under this flaming sky.

In the evening, the sheep sneaked out to the open, arrived to the gate of the Bureau and knocked ferociously. The Indian security man said to his superior that it was the postman. When he returned to open the gate, he received a stab that knocked him down on the ground, after which Hajj Najm the grocer entered while removing the wool from his clothes. He looked for Captain Marshall. Marshall, his doctor, and a third person whose identity the news did not specify were all sleeping in the hallway of the Bureau. Before Hajj Najm the grocer and his band could attack them and remove their covers, Marshall, the doctor, and the third person pointed their pistols. Some of the insurgents were injured, others were killed, and others fell from the tower, which they failed to climb. But Hajj Najm was able to point the nozzle of his rifle at Marshall's head. His companions did the same with the doctor and the third person.

Beyond the city walls the hands of the clock of the bell tower were waking up to the voices of

undertakers and the calls of grocers and poison merchants. The last of the worshipers in the Shrine Mosque, Sayyid Asghar Akbar, 2 shook the darkness of the previous night off his prayer rug, folded it, and went out to the house of the Sister Wives in order to make up with his first wife for having brought her a sister-wife who did not like to read and did not know in which direction to turn the quern.

Not too far from his usual path in front of Sagha Mosque, Hajj Najm the grocer was displaying fruits and vegetables that were not fresh, and calling to sell them for the lowest of prices. He told his assistant to repeat this refrain: "buy the best produce in this market. Our goods are patient and love to huddle in the shade. Our watermelon is shy and forced us to close shop for five days. Our cucumber is grouchy so do not approach, oh reader of The Compendium of Happinesses!" His assistant was funnier than him or more spontaneous. He made himself another refrain that had nothing to do with the difficult night he spent strangling Indians, "eat this produce and add a flavor to your farts!"

The grocer's young conspirator friends peacefully sneaked into their homes and wives' laps, and then dissolved in the dust of the city and lurked within its ruins. As for the middle-aged men and the ungrateful sons of notables, they returned to help the ulama and clerks dish out hospitality to the English, or "Meriam's brothers," as they were called by the city's genealogists.

Sayyid Asghar Akbar, who had defeated these genealogists and shut down their gatherings and their silk cloaks with his new theory of future genealogies, that morning Asghar Akbar was trying, with his contracted air, to emerge safely from another labor that did not resemble the labor of the murder of Captain Marshall and the subsequent escalating crises of anger against the masked insurgents. Nor was it the attempt of Mrs. Rumiyya to light herself up with the heavy oil that was brought for her husband from the Lheys desert in Basra as an expensive gift in return for drawing a future tree for a falcon hunter who had ten daughters and one son who peed diagonally. Nor was that labor about the quick capture of some of the grocer's companions, or the excitement of many students and market vendors about a prize that was announced by the successor of the betrayed Captain, Major Balfour the governor of Karbala.

Not this and not that.

The turncoats were spending some alms on buying the roles of the defectors and quarters of future trees. When they failed to sway the new employees of the grandfather's office, they threatened to write a fatwa that would issue from the distant marshes to the 'alim, the big religious scholar, in the adjacent alleyway. In it they would write a complaint and elicit the anger of the 'alim who would write to them: "what is commonplace today, in the writing of future trees, is forbidden and void, and to God is the full knowledge." Yet Abu Sabzi just kicked them out. As soon as he mentioned the name of Asghar Akbar's apprentice, the seasoned gangster Finjan Abu Nasiha,³ they ran away and their feet gobbled the tiled floors of the vaults. Only few of them laughed or made a foul sound by way of ridiculing the defunct gangster who wrote love ruba'iyyat.⁴

Rumiyya insisted that her husband let her live alone in a big sea-wood house that he had bought two years ago in Baghlat Abbas.⁵ Our grandfather agreed and promised her to visit twice a week. She, in turn, agreed to his condition, which was to take their son, Khunsur Ali, with him to Kufa every Friday, to Basra every year, and to the Tawya area every Saturday.

The child with the diagonal pee arch was able to gain the favor of his mother with the green tattoo dots under her mouth. His lines extended straight and sturdy from the thick tree that Sayyid Asghar Akbar promised. On that tree he was to beget enough boys to pollinate the daughters of their uncles in Najd, who would bear children who would soften the pebbles of the dessert with their supple feet as they played 'miqlaa,' their exciting raid-with-pebbles game.

The new labor was in the needle of Hasanali Bakubki's balance scale.

Its needle did not stop pointing to number “zero” when the greatest merchants in the auction tried to weigh ten tomes of the book, Questions of the Shirazis.

The book vendor himself—a short and fat man with a potbelly that extended from his neck to his knees—he, too, according to the needle of the balance scale weighed zero.

“Zero, like the point of the cloackmaker’s needle,” one of the turbaned passersby said as he carried a watermelon with cuts like dagger stabs on his shoulder.

“This animal has been drinking date syrup,” the voice of the concierge of the Shrine’s golden gutters answered him.

No one saw the gutter concierge as he hurried to spread a rumor near the ablution basin of the Lion Gate. He was a lightweight man who paced up and down the circumference of the Imam’s Shrine. With a leg, a cane, and a tireless mouth he distributed news, fatwas, and messages without receiving any payment or alms in return. No one asked him about the truth of what he told, because the occupation of standing near the gutter of the golden Shrine, which was handed down from his forefathers, was not once filled by someone who was asked about the truth of his news.

Before the city shook with the news of the assassination of the Captain, scattered queues of students, servants, effendis, and carriage drivers were wiping the soles of their feet for the pan of Hasanali Bakubki’s balance scale. He did not ask his customers to clean their feet before mounting the pan, but the mud of the roads prompted them to do so, especially since the cries of the market vendors picked up on every funny-looking foot or uncouth behavior.

The pan without someone mounting it rose a little above zero. This rise was the weight of the humid air, said Hasanali, or the thick dust that last week’s rains did not manage to saddle, or the weight of the gentle creatures that are invisible to outlaws and perpetrators of great sins.

“All sins are great,” the concierge of the gutters said after returning from his rounds.

When a man climbed up, the point of the hand went down to zero, making a soft rattle that dispersed people’s eyes left and right. Not one intelligible word had been uttered to this minute by way of commenting on this phenomenon. The most eloquent among the onlookers uttered one syllable in bewilderment while Hasanali finished weighing twenty men, pronouncing a single weight for each of them, one that did not go past the “point of the cloackmaker’s needle.” He tried to repeat the same thing with books, newspapers, and magazines. He weighted a heap of issues of the Najafi religious magazine, ‘Ilm, and some of those closer up in the lines helped him stack and secure the issues on the scale.

“Why did we fall and how do we ascend?” Hasanali said as he gazed at the dot of the zero. When he noticed that the eyes were staring at him without caring about the scale’s zero, he pointed to the number in the headline of one of the protruding papers. The gutter concierge repeated, “Why did we fall and how do we ascend?”

Maybe the queue dispersed and Hasanali had some time alone with his machine. It was said that he escaped to Baghlat Abbas after the black banners were hung over the minarets, indicating the beginning the bitter siege. It was also said that he returned alone and was able to circumvent the Sikh cavalry from Mt. Hawish’s side, and was able to enter the city and depict with his quill some of the small battles and the exchange of hand grenades on the two sides. What was agreed upon is that his machine remained inside the city and did not cross the wall. That is because the song that the boys sang as they lugged a soldier from the English army mentions that they looked for Hasanali’s scale all day, and were unable to find out the soldier’s weight.

Perhaps Baghlat Abbas was one of the calmest spots on those days, especially since a dozen of runaway madwomen, after the attack on the mental asylum and the escape of its director, headed toward the auspices of Baghlat Abbas and made themselves nests from date tree fronds there, because the original inhabitants used up all the wood of Captain Abbas' vessel. The madwomen were calm, picking out lice from each other's heads. With the exception of six or seven who committed suicide or succumbed to fever, most of them survived and lived to a ripe old age, although our mother who told us a lot about them and about their grandchildren did not describe them or mention their ages. Most likely they became second wives of some of the undertakers who went complaining to the Englishmen about the oppression of their bosses.

During these days of siege, Baghlat Abbas grew and its narrow roads crowded with blackness. If someone looks at our father's notebooks now, he would enjoy those classifications and subsection headings that he included with his blueprint of the island's development. He wrote three pages about some of the newcomers of those days, under the title "People of the Bell."

The English had attached a small bell with an enchanting sound to the barbed wire with which they enclosed the city. Whenever someone tried to get away, he usually forgot about the bell, but he heard it as the last beautiful sound in his life. As for those who attempted to escape and thought of crossing quietly past the wires and the bell, those were the ones for whom a new life was inscribed. The newcomers to Baghlat Abbas, my father on top of the list that contains a host of sawy people, were the ones who escaped peacefully during the siege days.

Our father said that the cloak maker, the teacher of our grandfather's first trade, died on the seventh night of the siege, during the fierce attack on the young men's trenches in Mt. Hawish. Also on that day, our grandfather became the owner of a small owl that was confused during the raids on the mountain and had fallen as a result. As he was dragging its limping legs, the young men who had surrendered picked him up as they raised their white banners and prepared to seek shelter in the homes of some notables. The soldier who handed it to our grandfather fell dead seconds later. The English themselves killed him, as it was difficult for them to see their agents capitulate.

The owl was calm throughout the siege period. He stood on the galleys staring at Finjan Abu Nasiha and casting dashing looks on his master, Asghar Akbar.

"Mr. Finjan," Asghar Akbar said as he sat the owl in his lap, "how much time do you need to tie together the tree of Shinyar the washer's tribe?"

"I don't need time. I need letters. We're out of lead sorts"

"And I need sleep."

Sayyid Asghar Akbar went to his bed, lifted the covers off the torso of his Caucasian wife "Beyond," and clung to it as if climbing a tree. He realized, thanks to experience, that this trunk belonged to a western thicket, at least the yonder west. It could not possibly be eastern or northeastern! He moved the covers farther away and his eyes widened:

"How did you get past the wall, daughter of the pipesman?"

"I didn't. They destroyed the homes that surrounded it, the women escaped, the children scattered, and all the men were killed. I slipped into a marching crowd of old women from Shinyar the washer's family."

It was Rumiyya.

She did not let him search for the faces of the old women she hid in some of the rooms and cells of the

vault. She drew him to her body until he licked the last slice of fruit.

During the day, a group of townsfolk were resisting the insurgents on the inside, looking for them in the drains and wells that the builders of Kufa had filled in. During the other hours of the day, the insurgents themselves were making surveillance rounds, looking for those who were looking for them, or searching for weapons to bolster their ammunition, or a handful of Basra dates to sustain their hollow stomachs with.

Because Sayyid Asghar Akbar hosted more than twenty-one old women from the Shinyar family—the most famous dead washers in the land—after the English had killed their young women and he had completed their future tree and filled it with righteous offspring, he was far from the insurgents' suspicion. However, according to Hasanali's calculations and other scribes and trusted sources, he was a suspect as far as his connections with the English were concerned. What most supported their strange views was the fact that the English soldiers pointed the nozzle of a large cannon toward the neighborhood of Sabat Darwish and the rest of the quarters in the city, after positioning its behind exactly in front of the house of the Sister Wives.

When news arrived that five hundred more homes were destroyed, Sayyid Asghar Akbar went down to check on the old women of the washer's family, carrying a galley overflowing with grilled meat that was not beef or lamb but donkey meat. It was a common dish sold openly during those hard times. When he went near them they burst with tears. The owl flew away from him to land on the waist of a reclining old woman. Perhaps this owl or one of its descendants was named "Dr. Shinyar" for that reason.

When he was summoned to be among the ten notables who were to stand behind the wall to watch with their own eyes how the British missiles were bombing the trenches of the insurgents and shying away from the holly spot, he hurried with his trees, which were written by lead sorts in galleys and not yet inked. The English asked him to record the trajectory of the missiles in his notebook and to write a couple of sentences confirming that the army did not bomb mosques and schools. He did, but his mind was not really there. It was not inside the walled city either. He returned the notebook to the officer with five words, transcribed literally from the words of the translator of the officer's instructions.

His mind was looking not at the rebels, but for his rebellious letters because Najm the grocer's band stole thousands of lead sorts from his office. Some of his future trees became ammunition for the fighters. The wheels of the smelteries were turned on at night, and the banging of hammers was heard in the smiths' quarter. The day following that incident, the insurgents sniped the necks of some Indians and missed others.

"The bullets were not loaded well and often fell from the nozzles before they were fired. They killed a woman who was squeezing a date for her infant in the neighborhood," Beyond said to her sister-wife, Rumiyya, as she prepared to sneak back into Baghlat Abbas.

"I knew you would speak Arabic better than me," replied Rumiyya.

When Sayyid Asghar Akbar signed beneath the statement that the 'ulama sent to Major Balfour eliciting his sympathy and the benevolence of the Great Kingdom, his pen was shaking and wanted to add a footnote saying, please look into my calamity and see into it that my lead sorts are returned even if as bullets or cartridges."

Our mother, Shamkha, said that some of the looted lead sorts were not used for combat. They were witnessed outside the city's sixth gate and many of them arrived to Baghlat Abbas and were scattered and lost among its new dwellers. And because they had arrived as lined up words with some letters loosened or lost, they were repeated by the madwomen and the little boys during the hour of dusk. Other incomplete words became opening verses for songs that were set to strange music. Our mother tried to cite some examples but her mind drifted for a good while. It is because she was young, and we

were young too, when she told us these stories during the days of siege and high traffic on the island. What we have not managed to understand until now is her detailed explanation of some of the words in our native dialect. She tried to prove to us that some of our everyday expressions were taken from the lead sorts of the looted printing press, from the leftovers that were not good enough for bullets and rifle cartridges.

We remembered that whenever we talked to one of the townsfolk. When we grew up, went to school, and wandered around in the alleyways looking for hairdressers and wax women, we used to feel the great difference between the two dialects.

The siege lasted a whole month and ten days during which we celebrated Nowruz,⁶ or “Christmas Day,” as our mother called it, imitating her mother-in-law, Rumiyya. Our grandfather’s vault succumbed to recession. Finjan Abu Nasiha disappeared after leaving a long letter composed with what remained of unused sorts, telling his master that doubt was eating into his brain’s folds, or his internal turban, as he wrote, and that staying with him would have required one of two things: killing his master or turning him over to the insurgents.

According to Finjan’s future tree, his lineage was supposed to conclude that year. No family would be known to him and no offspring. When we looked for his Ruba’iyyat, we found that some of them were written with nibbled words, from which we understood nothing. Now we only remember the bits and pieces of verse that our family transmitted orally.

Mother Shamkha said that the real reason behind Finjan’s indignation was finding the ancestors of his beloved wife on the plagued trees. Those were drafts that our grandfather had sketched for bygone, omitted generations. It was not possible to delve deeper into their history and therefore it was not possible to move forward into predicting their future with clarity. When epidemics and fierce battles ate up a particular tree, it became difficult, according to the great genealogist, to bridge the wide gap that appeared in the history of these plighted tribes.

Finjan did not argue with his master. He did not ask him about the hundreds of obsolete roots for which he had found solutions or about the customers whose grandfathers were sterile and how he managed to treat them with the antidotes of his tried theory.

When the siege half passed, and after the business of the genealogist began picking up again, Finjan broached the topic once more. He approached him while he was busy deleting the pedigree of the insurgents and chopping off their branches. So he was asked to be silent at that moment.

“I’m silent. I learned from you that connecting fathers with sons is God’s will that He bestows on some of those He loves, and that he who does so walks in God’s steps, and thus must connect the trees while he’s silent.”

“Good job, my boy. Then come here and help me find the wife of this grandfather. But remember as you sift through these paper heaps that the second pillar of our theory is that mothers are...”

“...the keynote for the smart genealogist.”

“You too will be smart but watch out for my son Khneisir.”⁷

Sayyid Asghar Akbar laughed and the heap of trees ruffled under his feet. Finjan repeated in a forlorn voice whose letters were looted from his mouth, “I only wanted to draw one tree.”

Before the war with Iran started, or soon after according to Mu’ina, the government decided to remove the hand whose palm carried the inscription, “God’s hand over their hands.” That hand was the only hand that vied with Finjan’s in dealing heavy slaps. We might be able to see now, from the small

window, if we went up to the kitchen, the golden pomegranate that came to replace it forty years after the disappearance of Finjan Abu Nasiha in the vault of “Ishqiyan,” which not only leads to the grave of his beloved, but also to the graves of Adam, Hud, Salih—our forefathers who, news had it, were also buried in Imam Ali’s Shrine.

[*Translated from the Arabic by Yasmeen Hanoosh*]

1. Lutfiyya al-Dulaymi, *Al-Sayyid Asghar Akbar*, back cover.
2. Literally, Mr. Junior Senior, or Younger Older, or Smaller Larger—a playful allusion to the two sons of Shi’i authority figure Hussein bin Ali, Ali Junior and Ali Senior. In real life these words are not typically used as personal names in Arabic. (Tr.)
3. ‘Finjan Abu Nasiha’ is literally ‘Coffee Cup of Advice’—a playful insinuation to fortunetelling through coffee grounds (tasseography or tasseomancy). It is worth noting that coffee is the same ingredient used in Asghar Akbar’s movable-type printing press. (Tr.)
4. Poetic quatrains, two-line stanzas with two hemistichs per line—an allusion to Edward Fitzgerald’s translation of Ruba’iyyat, loosely attributed to the Persian poet Omar al-Khayyam (1048-1131). (Tr.)
5. The name of this fictitious place is literally “Abbas’s Mule,” which is also the colloquial name used locally to refer to a certain kind of ship that commonly sailed the Arab Gulf during the previous century. In this novel, it was the vessel on which Sayyid Asghar Akbar originally arrived to Najaf. It also serves as the imaginary hometown of the sister-narrators but which none of Najaf’s dwellers recognize, despite its supposed proximity to the city. (Tr.)
6. Although this celebration takes place during the spring, it is also known as the Persian New Year, hence the conflation with Christmas.
7. He is referring to his son with the diminutive form of his name, Khunsur, literally the pinky finger. His son’s name, Khunsur Ali, literally Ali’s Pinky, is an expression of reverence and deep loyalty and submission in Shi’i traditions.