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to New Aesthetics

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Das von Anwārī al-Husaynī entworfene Signet auf dem Umschlag symbolisiert eine Waage.

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Iraqi Women's Fiction and the Construction of a New National Identity

MARIA AVVINO

Female Iraqi writers feel more and more involved in the political and social reality of their home country (Iraq), and in that of the Arab world in general. This involvement can be understood in the light of the autochthonous culture that binds the individual to the community and foregrounds the "we" rather than the "I". It is further clarified by the pivotal events that have taken place in the country during the last two decades. If the Western author can write in solitude, seeking refuge in his private world, the Oriental one cannot shrink from keeping a close relationship to the historical and social reality in which he lives. The deeper the society in which the artist lives is broken up by hostile forces and the more its political and religious leaders are narrow-sighted or unable to defend and orientate the community, the deeper this bond is felt by the artist. The female work is therefore never a mere work of fiction but always strongly anchored in reality.¹ Iraqi female writers observe the reality they live in, they describe it, follow its evolution, interpret it and outline possible ways out, assigning to literature the function of a last bulwark against inhumanity. It is difficult to classify novels according to a specific subject since they usually deal with a variety of complex and many-sided topics. This rule applies, first of all, to novels written by women, who seem to avoid uniformity. Nevertheless, in novels written by women one subject prevails—that of power. This is the case of power in all of its expressions. It is the question of power exercised by religious institutions which through moral rules and psychological mechanisms have kept women's vitality under control, marginalizing women who have dared to express their wishes and of power exercised by men inside the family.² This last one is, for example, the topic Hayfā' Zanganah deals with in her *Maḡāriḥ maḡnah* (A City's Keys), published in 2000.³ The main subject of analysis is however the power of the establishment, that is, the one exercised by the elite that dominated the country until recently and held it under strong repression. The ruling dictatorship literally upset social order and the entire life of generations of people, imposing a blind and violent military ideology that made use of physical power in order to remain in power and to force every-

1 *Nūr* magazine (Cairo) dedicated a whole issue (no. 17, Rabr̄ 2001) to the Iraqi female universe: *al-Ma'rah al-širāḡiyyah fī muwāḡāḡahat al-ḡiṣār* (Iraqi Woman Facing Embargo). Articles focus on the new responsibilities Iraqi women have been obliged to assume in the last decades.

2 See, among others, 'Aliyyah Mandilī's autobiography, *Ḥabbān al-maḡāzīn* (Little Balls of Naphthalene).

3 The novel tells the painful story of a girl who is forced to bow under the brute force of men's arrogance and rape, without any of her relatives intervening. The brutal rapist—the father—exerts total control on his daughter, who, in the end, chooses death.

body under its yoke. Militarism and human rights obviously are incompatible. In this type of dictatorship there is no room for women's rights (whereas the other sex was apparently granted still more privileges than before).⁴ The dictatorship helped to maintain disparity, supporting the gender ideology that dominated in society. Particularly during the last decades, the country underwent a series of crises of a military character—first of all the war against Iran, later the aggression against Kuwait and the embargo that lasted more than a decade, causing a general impoverishment in Iraqi society and a widespread sense of frustration, especially among the male population.⁵ This contributed to a tendency to perpetuate traditional family models and tribal culture. A neo-patriarchal vision of the woman symbolizing "the mother-of-the-nation" whose main task was to give birth to men ready to be sent to war to defend the country was imposed. In such a nationalist frame, women have been portrayed as mothers or pregnant wives, offering their support to fight, but rarely as main characters themselves.

The attitudes towards dictatorial authority may vary as to the place where the female writer lives. Nevertheless, an accommodating attitude is hardly ever shown; on the contrary, dictatorial power incites rebellion. The rebellion may be expressed with a realistic tone; more often however, especially in recent years in those authors who remained at home, with a hallucinatory and apocalyptic tone. Frequently the awareness of the impossibility of a direct denouncement on the political and literary levels (the first because of repression, the second because of censorship) suggested the use of parable and apocalyptic visions.

Due to the inflexibility of power, and to all the miseries the Iraqi people had to suffer from because of it, pain and desperation become the prevalent tone in literature from the second half of the 1980s onwards. More and more characters are internally torn apart, restless and shy. Terror becomes the mark of their lives: their fear and their distress, especially symbolized in the violence of a cruel nature, becomes the most specific characteristic in female fiction. No wonder then that this literature is marked by a complete lack of confidence in what the future may bring. It reflects a distrust that leads many women writers to experiment with existential distress, the absurd, fate, cynicism, a circular vision of history, and a never ending recurrence of self-identification.⁶

No wonder also that many of the leading figures of the new generation of writers are women.⁷ They have often been criticized, sometimes even by their (male) colleagues, and

4 A new family code that ignored many women's rights was issued in 1990. It allowed men to have four wives and denied women the right to inherit and divorce. In addition, the legitimacy of acts committed to vindicate one's honour was restored.

5 See Inan al-'Izzawi, "al-Athar al-jihānīyah li'l-hiṣār alā 'l-marāḥ al-'irāqīyah" (The Social Consequences of Embargo on the Iraqi Woman), *Mir* 17 (rabī' 2001): 161-180, where the author analyses the changes related to the status of Iraqi women during the embargo and the burden of the new responsibilities they had to carry.

6 See on this subject Ferial Ghazoul, "A Forest of Symbols: Iraqi Fiction Today", *Banjāl* 14 (summer 2002): 3-4. The whole number is dedicated to Iraqi literature.

7 Women have been very active in opposing the embargo imposed on books. Bathaynah al-Nāsīrī, for example, who has been living in Egypt for many years, started a campaign in Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan to collect second-hand printed matters, books and magazines that she later sent to Iraq. In the Egyptian capital she even founded a publishing house named *Shīrā*, specializing in works by authors who, living in Iraq, were unable to publish their works in their country.

accused of writing in a sterile, destructive, provocative manner. The women, in turn, called themselves discordant voices and denied the existence of a gender-specific literature.

Furthermore, by refusing the values imposed for centuries on women by men, values that excluded women from the public sphere, novels turned out to be an instrument of self-liberation and relief, and above all a way to fight a feminist struggle (although many would refuse this term). This liberation has to be understood not only as an act of emancipation from an isolated and depressing life but also, and particularly, from the women's socially subordinate position. Writing in this way acquires a subversive relevance both against the established authority and the patriarchal system, and books, in constant danger of being censored and even destroyed, become "victims" too.⁸

For an Iraqi woman the simple act of writing, whether literary or other, is a revolution in itself. At the same time it is a defeat for all embargos, both the one imposed by the Americans and the one imposed on women by the Iraqi régime through its cultural institutions and propaganda. The Iraqi woman—the writer as well as the common woman—has suffered an embargo that expressed itself in various fields and that denied her [the right] to carry out the role she was entitled to in every aspect of political, cultural and social life [...].⁹

The women who entered the conflict with power and later gave a description of it, are many. Consider the following woman writers:

— Hayfā' Zanganah (b. 1950, Baghdad) was a political activist in the 1970s and later paid the price for this. She was arrested and put into prison where she suffered torture, an experience later described in the autobiographical novel *Through the Vast Halls of Memory* (1990).¹⁰

— The one who lived the most tragic experience is Hayfā' Shārārah, university professor and translator from Russian. In 1995 she committed suicide together with one of her daughters. She decided to take her life when she realized that she no longer was able to take the humiliation and miseries that were imposed on her. She left behind her a work which was published posthumously, in 1996, with the title *Idhā 'l-ḡayām agcaqat* (When Days become Dusk). This novel constitutes a relentless accusation against the Iraqi dictatorship which exercised such an oppressive and coercive control of her body

8 The writer Hayfā' Shārārah (see below), for instance, remembers that, due to her political commitment, her house was searched many times and many books from her personal library were destroyed during these searches.

9 Yāsīn al-Nāsīrī, *al-Makān fī adab al-mar'ah* (Space in Women's Literature), *Mir* 17 (2001): 101-108, here 101.

10 Hayfā' Zanganah, daughter of a Kurdish father and Arab mother, has been living in exile in London since 1976. She published her first novel, *Through the Vast Halls of Memory*, in English in 1990 (translated into Arabic in 1995 as *Arwiḡat al-dhākrāh*). In 1999 she published a collection of short stories titled *Thammāla al-hār* (The Presence of Others), 'Alīyah Māndīh, too, in her novel *al-Ghulāmāh* (The Maiden, 2000), tells of the rapes and the violence inflicted on female political prisoners in Iraq during Saddam's times. (State) rape was largely used towards the wives of men whom the régime considered suspicious. On *al-Ghulāmāh* see the article of Šabrī Hāfīz, "al-Ghulāmāh wa-bunyat tarjī' al-ghāh", *Mir* 17 (2001): 93-100.

and mind by depriving her of freedom of movement.¹¹ After many unsuccessful wars, Saddam Hussein had tried to raise support for himself among the male population and to this end he had sacrificed women's rights and favoured Islamic and tribal structures.¹² The conditions that were imposed on the women were humiliating to the degree that all words became powerless. This was a time when the only thing one could do was to keep silent and in this specific case, to keep the silence of death. "My spirit trained itself to learn the language of silence", Hayāt Sharārah writes.¹³

Idhā 'l-ayyām agsagat is a work that in terms of genre belongs to autobiography, a common example of Arab women's literature in general, not only Iraqi.¹⁴ All the women writers mentioned above used this genre or other literary forms that, in comparison with the novel, usually are considered to be more fluent and more easily practicable by critics.¹⁵ Among the genres preferred by the writers are also the diary and the epistolary novel, i.e., genres that seem to be dominated by a fragmentary logic in comparison with an accomplished project.¹⁶

Yet, autobiography remains an essential element in other forms of Iraqi female literary expression such as novels and short stories. It is there as a background even when the story told is imaginary. For example, Batul al-Khudayr's *Kam badat al-samā' qarībāh* (How Close the Sky Appeared to Be, 1999) or 'Āliyyah Mamduh's *al-Mahbūbāt* (The Beloved Ones, 2003), exhibit unique imprints of real life.

Another characteristic in the latest works of Iraqi women writers is the difficulty to classify the genre to which the texts belong since they are characterized by a repeated transgressions of generic boundaries, something which results in hybridity. The characteristic element in this writing is its extreme fragmentation, as for example in *al-Mahbūbāt*, a text that blends the genres of novel, diary and letters into each other. The epistolary framework, accumulating and combining with the other generic elements, particularly in the last part of the text, creates a structural complexity that serves to express the numerous characters' constant confrontation with time. It prompts an analysis of the mechanisms which propel such confrontations as well as of the structure and self-presentation of power.

The most salient aspect of women's literature today may well be this mixing of genres that can be interpreted as an indication of the will to assert specificity. It is one way in

11 In 1994 the government promulgated the *mahrām* law which denied Iraqi women under 45 the right to go abroad alone. A man of the family—father, husband, brother, uncle, nephew, or any other adult who juridically is not allowed to marry the woman he accompanies (scholarly the *mahrām*)—had to escort them. As Hayāt Sharārah's family was composed only of women, she and her two daughters found themselves condemned to stay in the country.

12 He played the card of misogyny "to attract those millions of Iraqis who felt their masculinity had been robbed by defeat and later by the impoverishment caused by embargo".

13 Sharārah, *Idhā 'l-ayyām agsagat*: 56.

14 The best-known autobiography is perhaps 'Āliyyah Mamduh's *Habbāt al-mafāhīm* (2000), translated into many European languages.

15 Cf. Hayāt Zangana's *Mafāhīm ma'nāh* (Keys to a City, 2000), the story of her family in a Baghdad setting.

16 Among the diaries recently published we should mention Nuḥā al-Rādī's *Baghdād Diaries / Yawmiyyatī Baghdādīyyah* (1998, translated into many languages), Balqīs Sharārah and Rafīq al-Jādīgī's *Jidār bayn al-zalāmātayn* (A Wall Between the Two Darknesses, 2003), and *Sanawī ma'a 'l-ḥanayf al-ṣirāfī* (Years of Fear in Iraq, 2004) by Hādīyā Sa'īd, a Lebanese writer who had lived many years in Iraq.

which female writers take on a decisive role in giving their country a modern cultural identity. Representing herself through writing, the woman cannot but give to her female imprint to her artistic creation. The latter is expressed, then, not only in the description of a personal vision of life but also in the search after an aesthetics of one's own.

This is also true for 'Āliyyah Mamduh who in her works follows an experimental path, especially in *al-Mahbūbāt*. In this novel her writing essentially constitutes an existential and stylistic study of female authenticity. The events of *al-Mahbūbāt* take place almost exclusively in a female world, and women are both the story's main characters and its implied recipients.

Iraq is the backdrop to this work and the land is constantly called to mind by way of symbolic representations and allusions. The homeland that has been left years ago is loved and hated at the same time, as is the case with many diaspora authors. In this novel there are numerous references to the wars which Iraq has been dragged into for decades. People are living in an atmosphere of stress, waiting for the next attack which the reader expects will come at any moment, from those whom Mamduh refers to as "the new western crusaders".¹⁷ In a letter Suhaylah, the main character, writes to her friend Tessa:

my country will be struck today, maybe in a few seconds, I came to let you hear the roar of that earthquake, dead people with their chests squashed by gunpowder, humiliation and diseases, while the flags of the Empire wave and we can hear the rumble of airplanes foretelling still bigger ruins [...].¹⁸

The news this morning is as the previous one. The country will be struck again, just like this, without prior notice. They say it will happen soon, or in a short time, now, or in any moment. They became specialists and they got to like it [...].¹⁹

Among the many possible ways to read *al-Mahbūbāt* there is certainly also the reading as an allegory. In order to represent the Iraqi nation, nationalist ideology often used family terminology and domestic iconography. Reference is made to the "motherland", its "sons" and the "father" of the nation, while cooperation between different regions in the country is presented as a "marriage". Accordingly, in this work, the house can be understood as the homeland and the husband as the dictator. The wife and son, and later on in the story the exiled characters, are the oppressed.

Suhaylah, the main character, identifies herself (and is likewise identified) with her homeland, to the point that the attacks on the country become her personal problems. The work opens almost immediately with Suhaylah risking to lose her life due to a mysterious disease. In this scene, spatial representation acquires a metaphorical and symbolic meaning, especially the pairs of opposition 'high/low', 'open/closed', 'light/darkness', 'day/night'. Spatial dimensions are described with precision and rich detail. For example, at one point the reader finds him-/herself in the closed space of a medical clinic where the protagonist is suffering from an undiagnosed illness with unclear symptoms. The reader finds himself in the closed space of a clinic where the main character is suffering from an illness with un-

17 The work was written on the eve of the Allied invasion in 2003, the one that led to the fall of Saddam's regime.

18 All quotations are from 'Āliyyah Mamduh, *al-Mahbūbāt*, London: Dār al-Sāqī, 2003. Here: 216.

19 Ibid.: 205.

clear characteristics and symptoms. The illness turns out to be life itself, the life of the country of the protagonist, a victim of incredible cruelties, wars and an endless spiral of violence committed by both the dictatorial régime and those who are going to launch the next attack. Iraq, like Suhaylah, is finished, it has almost entirely lost its will to life, dragged inevitably and against its will towards the realm of death, having already gone over into a state of unconsciousness and coma. "The situation has deteriorated so much and the miseries are such," the doctor who cures Suhaylah explains, "that she is the one who refuses to recover."²⁰ Elsewhere we read:

She is most likely to recover her conscience, but it will require time. [...] What I fear, Nâdir, [...] is the fact that she might not want to recover. [...] Her pains come from the exclusion/ostracism that she has suffered. Every day I pray to the Creator to free her and our country from this distress.²¹

Suhaylah's illness becomes worse and worse as the hour of the attack on Iraq which the allies have decided to carry out comes closer:

my health condition is very bad [...], it doesn't have to do with my years (long and many) only, but also with something else [...] a tooth ache day and night. In the morning I find blood on my pillow and my gums are swollen. [...] Even my nose has changed. I swore to Blanche the situation in Baghdad was better.²²

However, Suhaylah is an impulsive and brave woman who defies wars and sorrow, excessive religiosity and prejudices, brutality and violence, always looking for inner freedom. According to her, freedom means not to give way to violence, not to bend to an ideal that one does not support, not to accept an imposed way of life. This attitude accompanies her throughout her wanderings during which she undergoes experiences that cause her excruciating pain, pain which marks her mind and body but from which she eventually emerges triumphant. That is why, in the end, Suhaylah-Iraq is bound to recover:

Suhaylah has an endurance that is above your or our imagination [...] she won't let herself become disabled.²³

All those who love life in the way she does, I do, and all of us do, when they die they come back to life again [...]. I saw her every day in the past days [...] she moved her limbs gently [...] and it seemed to me as if she was moving more than anyone of us.²⁴

The novel unfolds its imaginative richness according to a precise and definite pattern. First, there is the portrayal of the condition of oppression and submission of women (through Suhaylah) in Iraq, then we learn about the heroine's difficult search for an identity; in the end, she succeeds to find herself but as a consequence, has to leave her country.

²⁰ Ibid.: 71.

²¹ Ibid.: 85-86.

²² Ibid.: 206.

²³ Ibid.: 87.

²⁴ Ibid.: 159.

From a distance Suhaylah is able to think over her life in the lost homeland but in a way that differs from the way she recalls her country of bygone days. She can also consider returning to a relationship that it heretofore had seemed impossible for her to save. Memories of the past appear and disappear in the novel almost obsessively. The narrative continuously changes tone and subject: sometimes, Suhaylah describes, without (rational) interference, her emotions connected with pain, mourning, and flight. Elsewhere, the narrative switches to the third person when Suhaylah allows other characters to speak. When observed from the outside she becomes an objective symbol of a condition of suffering and an unsettled life. Her individual experience is transformed into a collective tragedy.

In most parts of the novel the action appears filtered through the others' point of view (especially that of *al-Mahbūzī*'s many female protagonists). This makes the portrait of the protagonist, a woman who is highly distressed yet full of hope, psychologically richer. Her own voice projects her as an explorer who is ever unsatisfied with appearances and who examines her inner reactions as well as the surrounding reality. This picture is complemented by points of view and judgments from her friends and sons. Suhaylah's most private reality and nature are in particular revealed through letters and her diary. The letters convey insights into the details of her experiences as well as her emotions better than any other medium.

As long as the protagonist remains in her homeland the writer uses a hyperbolic and metaphorical language to describe life in a society ruled by men and the ways in which women are made to behave under such circumstances. The heroine is confined to play a subordinate role by the side of her husband, an officer in the army. The reader is made to witness a chain of events that show the women's submission. Reduced to mere functions they are often considered to be creatures evil by nature. Suhaylah's husband fears her because he feels she is different from him. With violence increasing in her country Suhaylah becomes more and more alienated from her society while simultaneously, at home, the brutality of her husband comes forth as a macabre accompaniment:

we did not love each other the way one reads or hears about in love stories. [...] he attached the nickname "lethal bullet" to me, while I called him "hunting rifle". All our love letters were full of military terms. [...] He put the letters we exchanged during our short time of engagement in the magazine holder of his pistol, so that they smelled of gun-powder [...].²⁵

Suhaylah's desire for freedom in her homeland pushes her to seek refuge in art (dance and theatre). "I danced", she explains, "to refuse a series of things." In an andro-centric world, where men deprive women of the word, dance becomes the language in which Suhaylah expresses herself.

She continuously said [...] that dance was her language [...] And I convinced myself that dance increased her immunity [*manā'atī*] against the slavery [*qahr*] she suffered, and made her choose to stay alive [...].²⁶

²⁵ Ibid.: 11.

²⁶ Ibid.: 78.

Language, then, is not a proper means of defense for Suhaylah, nor for all the women who like her have to give in to men's aggressiveness. Nevertheless, if men can deprive women of language, creativity of the latter can guide them to use other codes. Dance is one of them—but not the only one: "People come in touch with faces, clothes, furniture, their instincts and music, and all of these are related to the language we speak", explains Suhaylah.

[L]anguage sometimes deteriorates relationships between people. In spite of being a means of communication, it can turn into a means of incomprehension ... so that we are left with gestures, silence, touches (strokes) and impressions.²⁷

In a universe where women are erased (literally, "swallowed"), i.e., deprived of any human appearance, Suhaylah finds another way out—food. The writer uses this as a metaphor. In Suhaylah's opinion sharing food means to put people in touch. Food is used to raise a sense of complicity among them. The gift of food is a bridge she builds up between herself and others, in particular the friends for whom she cooks "delicious meals". Suhaylah knows how to skillfully mix flavours and smells, spices and aromas and in this way she spends "the only richness I still have, my imagination and my fantasy, because I am even able to return to swallow the world instead of being swallowed."²⁸

Even later, after having left the country, cooking Iraqi dishes for Suhaylah will mean to keep alive the link to her country. In addition to being a source of pleasure, feeding somebody is a symbolical act, it means to reveal one's self to oneself and to the others; in this way it helps to draw people from different cultures closer together. Mixing dishes from all over the world, "placing east near west and north in the arms of the south",²⁹ Suhaylah wishes, for example, to put cultures in touch with each other.

When everything breaks down at home and the violence of war, symbolized by her husband's cruelty, reaches unbearable levels, Suhaylah chooses to run away. She feels that even that little freedom that she had been able to preserve for herself in her homeland is threatened. In order not to surrender to violence, not to give in to ideals she does not share, nor to an imposed life style, she decides that there is no other solution but to flee.

What eventually makes Suhaylah leave her husband (as well as her homeland and its violent ideologies) is the wish to save Nādir, her only child, from a war in which he neither did nor will take part but which nevertheless has already "stabbed" him "in his chest and his shoulders."³⁰ Suhaylah explains to the reader that her son resembles herself more than her husband and that she would like to make him be even more like herself by giving him a female name: Thuryyā. "Thuryyā, this is your real name", Suhaylah tells Nādir, explaining to him that she calls him this way because she would have liked to have a daughter no one could ever have stolen away from her and taken to the barracks.³¹

Suhaylah realizes that remaining in her homeland, in a surrounding dominated by nationalist ideology, in some way means to become an accomplice of the men. In a universe

27 Ibid.: 246.

28 Ibid.: 161 and 26.

29 Ibid.: 120.

30 Ibid.: 56.

31 Ibid.: 61.

controlled by men, who used to justify female submission as well as women's exclusion from military service by pointing to women's "natural desire" to live in peace. In a world tormented by wars, women have usually played the role of merciful helpers organizing and curing injuries. Suhaylah does the same: she cures her husband's wounds. In the beginning he even inspires Suhaylah's sympathy and stirs her compassion: "Once the war is over, both winner and defeated can go back to their cosy homes, to the fertile lap, to mothers', wives', sisters' arms", "I have always been able to understand him [...], he used to hug me like a child".³² Suhaylah explains.

But although this helps to alleviate pain and to calm down anxiety, it does not modify the relation between the sexes nor does it change the division of roles. It is still as if women were on their fighting men's side because, as men say, they fight for their women:

You were beaten every day, until you started to like to be treated that way. As if the only thing necessary was your daily meal [...]. Day after day he turned increasingly brutal [lit.: every day he became more willing to act in that way] until you became a "soft" dough in his hands [...]. The war was not outside in the way you imagined and made me believe. It was in front of me. I saw it always and everywhere.³³

So, Suhaylah has to leave. She has to leave in order to create a distance between herself and the world at home. Emancipated, liberated from their roles of daughters, wives and mothers, these wandering women can regain an identity of their own. The new world Suhaylah meets becomes a zone of rest, a refuge, a protective area, a sort of borderland that offers her the chance to recall, analyze and denounce. It is a neutral space that lets her keep a clear and objective view, not only of the surrounding reality, but also of her past.³⁴

Suhaylah flees to London and Paris. In Europe she feels like moving in a no man's land, feeling her way in a new world which she lacks the parameters to "read" and understand. Far from home, all points of reference are lost. A whole world of roles and consolidated identities is suspended.

Far away from Iraq, Suhaylah feels even weaker, lost and broken. But it is exactly this situation which enables her to start asking questions about herself and the others and to think about her relationships with the others. As time goes by, the identity she had been repressing re-emerges. Suhaylah expresses the feelings she has on her arrival in Paris:

I don't understand what is happening around me. No, no—this has nothing to do with language [...]. Language is only one out of many instruments. I feel as if I had no memory, no forefathers, ancestors or history. It is as if I hadn't lived before. What I ask myself is: "Did I leave my previous self forever and will I ever find it again?"³⁵

32 Ibid.: 91.

33 Ibid.: 56.

34 It is the same feeling she has when she goes to the cinema, a place she likes so much because in the dark room "she becomes observer. [...]. In that isolated place she becomes another woman, neither

mother nor wife, neither free nor slave, neither Iraqi nor foreigner." Ibid.: 68.

35 Ibid.: 130-1.

Identity is a complex issue, especially for those who, like Suhaylah, belong to places where the search for identity takes on the brutal and chaotic form of never-ending violence and wars. In Suhaylah's homeland, her husband, symbolically speaking a nationalist and dictatorial power, tried to impose the idea on her that there is only one dominant, monolithic identity which provides no place for being different. Thanks to the meeting with other women, however, both Arab and western, the main character comes to recognize that identity can have many sides. Far from being unalterable, it is, on the contrary, fluid and changeable, in a constant process of modification, formation, and recreation. In Suhaylah's eyes, identity is not to be considered an ancestral, original, unchangeable "reality". She imagines a pluralistic, cosmopolitan world which includes various references of identity ("what attracted me with her was her cultural identity... [It included] three of the noble ethnic groups in the world. [There was the] Arab and the Persian, from her mother's side, and the Indian from her father's side, all mixed up in us"³⁵). Actually, this world is made up from a large variety of individual human beings each of whom receives his/her identity from a specific, individual blend of personal and collective history and encounters that take place throughout the trajectory of one's life. These encounters take place on the personal and family level, on the group level, and the level of the country where one resides, or of the countries with which one is put in touch. They settle in the memory and all of this collaborates to shape individual and collective personalities.

Although Suhaylah keeps a strong link with her homeland, she is not inclined to tie her identity to a specific place. And very much in line with that, she also refuses to follow the trend of tracing an individual's identity exclusively to "tradition" and to the culture of one's "origins". According to Suhaylah, identity is to be conceived of as *cultural* identity. This means that she, herself, as well as the many friends who share the same destiny, bear the imprint of being witnesses to the defeat of a "civilization", the Iraqi culture that has been wiped out by the violence and brutality of those who have been in power. "Civilization", in Suhaylah's opinion, is the memory preserved in the old Iraqi buildings and in the many different dialects of her country as well as in the Iraqi popular Iraq heritage. The latter includes ancient legends and myths, the various national ways of dressing, and traditional dances.

We rush upon Arabic as if it was the food of paradise, a forbidden fruit, we joke and quarrel in that language ... we remember our country, our world and the old house...³⁷

Civilization is also produced by those popular Iraqi dances which Suhaylah performs on stage in France. Thanks to these dances, the world can realize that Iraq does not only mean war and violence but is the cradle of a civilization that advanced the progress of mankind.

It was women who succeeded in preserving Iraqi civilization—a cosmopolitan civilization—through their love, inside their homes, taking it with them, "packing everything with care", when they were obliged to run away from the tragedy of endemic war. Suhaylah's

36 Ibid.: 28.

37 Ibid.: 162.

home in Paris therefore turns into a kind of museum and no longer remains only 'a house'.³⁸

Remembering her past, the heroine becomes aware of yet another element: the role of war, internal and external, in a dictatorship economy. Conflicts, she realizes, are necessary to keep domestic discipline and to try to put an end to internal disagreement.

Nationalism gave birth to a definitely male orientated régime that marginalized women. Yet, this same exclusion granted them a larger space for rebellion³⁹—unlike men who, in a climate of nationalist propaganda, are unaware and weak victims. Suhaylah realizes that patriarchy has an epic dimension and a heroic auto-representation. It addresses men who cannot rebel against the nationalist project developed on the basis of heroic myths and legends of the native soil, of the veneration of dead ancestors, altars of homeland, and tombsstones.

Since the very expulsion from Heaven, women have always performed the role of the rebel, and it is in this way that Suhaylah interprets the story of Adam and Eve:

Eve was the first to wish to break up the patriarchal structure... Unlike Adam, who obeyed the inscrutable prohibition given to him, Eve played the role of a rebel. She satisfied her desire, better, her humanity [...] and decided to take the risk of rebelling and eat from the forbidden tree, while Adam obeyed the authorities and bowed under laws and habits created by men themselves [...]. Adam preferred to continue the system [or: régime—*nizām*] instead of taking the risk to rebel.⁴⁰

In *al-Mahbūbāt* too one can find an idea already expressed by other women writers in the past: despite all the atrocities it brings along, war may also bring forth a positive factor. It may propel women into a process of gaining self-consciousness enabling them to rediscover a sense of collectivity/community. War has offered extraordinary opportunities for women to be protagonists because it has demanded of them to take on tasks that they have never shouldered before. During the absence of the men, who were obliged to fight at the front, the women took *hold of and demystified* the nationalist notion of the "mysticism of femininity" something that the centers of power and authority had tried to impose on them. This is the idea that women should only be mothers and wives of soldiers. Along the lines of this reasoning, war turned into an occasion to state their desire for freedom and emancipation. In this novel, female characters assert their wish, and capability, to overcome a moral crisis. They are called upon to reveal the private affairs, the failures and the trivial and senseless

38 Ibid.: 185.

39 In militarist and nationalist regimes like Iraq, a woman's body, like other things, is often 'nationalized'. The endless wars and the high number of dead people make women to be respected above all for their reproductive function. At certain times there had been campaigns propagating a growth of the population, considered vital for the nation's survival. In this context contraception and abortion became crimes against the state. In *Kam badat al-samā' qarībah*, for example, Barī al-Khūdūrī described the country as enormous barracks where, because of wars and the high number of soldiers killed in battle, authorities were persuaded to forbid chemists to sell contraceptives, and at the same time to begin a campaign to induce very young couples to get married and give birth to sons to be sent to war. About this novel see Māimūd Arnīn al-'Ālim, "Qirā'ah fī riwāyat Kam badat al-samā' qarībah" (A Reading of the Novel "How Far Looked the Sky?"), *Mar'at* 17 (2001): 86-92.

40 'Āliyāh Mamūdī, *al-Mahbūbāt*: 219.

life to which the Iraqi people had been condemned. The main character, as well as the other women in the novel, refuse to accept the rules of the past and their meaningless constraints and reject traditions and their bonds. In particular, they reject a world where to be born means to be born without the hope of a future, especially for women.

What Suhaylah aims at is the creation of a new social, artistic and spiritual order. Accordingly, Suhaylah's flight must be interpreted as a metaphor for her long and difficult search. What moves the refugee is the desire to give birth to an alternative world in which the relationship between the sexes can be redefined by refusing to accept male myths that simply reduce women to the negative of men. Simultaneously, this definition includes the concept of a world which is not to be built at the expense of a perpetual struggle against men.

The fact that Suhaylah leaves the Iraqi male universe and is introduced into a circle of women does not extinguish her previous experiences. Her son's presence is an evidence of a past that cannot die. Suhaylah imagines a future in which there will be a meeting between male and female. Nâdir, so different from the father who procreated him, is a hope for the future.⁴¹

L'écriture intime et les nouvelles formes d'expression dans le roman arabe moderne

Le cas de Maryam al-ḥakāyā de 'Alawīyah Ṣubḥī

SOBHI BOUSTANI

Dans son ouvrage *Littératures intimes*, Sébastien Hubier évoque la fortune actuelle de la littérature personnelle auprès du public, il écrit:

L'importance de ces textes qui, centrés sur la figure de leur auteur, facilite une lecture autobiographique, s'explique par la curiosité grandissante du public pour les intellectuels et artistes célèbres et par la dominance d'une démarche critique biographique établissant une manière d'équation entre la vie de l'écrivain et son œuvre. Cette littérature connaît un succès toujours croissant jusqu'à devenir dominante au XX^e siècle.¹

Il constate que le "Je" renvoyant implicitement à l'auteur envahit la scène littéraire. L'autobiographie qui a conquis son autonomie a pris place parmi les genres reconnus, et s'est étendue progressivement à l'ensemble des autres types narratifs.

Cette rhétorique de la première personne, susceptible de servir des enjeux forts différents, induit des habitudes autobiographiques de lecture qui peu à peu valent aussi pour les romans.²

Le "Je", signe distinctif de l'écriture intimiste, envahit également la littérature romanesque arabe dans ses différentes formes: autobiographie, autobiographie romancée, autofiction et métafiction. Ces genres dont les frontières sont vaguement tracées marquent profondément l'écriture romanesque arabe de ces dernières décennies. Renvoyant à des référents multiples, le "Je" du narrateur remplit des fonctions diverses allant de l'autodétermination à narcissisme plus ou moins voilé.

Je me contenterai dans cet article d'évoquer deux valeurs esthétiques propres à la littérature intime: la première est la recherche d'une technique narrative fondée sur le jeu de la "personne" grammaticale et du "personnage / auteur"; la deuxième est la transgression, à travers l'intime, des tabous sexuels. Je m'appuierai dans cette démarche sur le roman *Maryam al-ḥakāyā* (2002) d'"Alawīyah Ṣubḥī".³

1 Sébastien Hubier, *Littératures intimes: les expressions du moi, de l'autobiographie à l'autofiction*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2003: 41.

2 Ibid.

3 2^{ème} éd. Beyrouth: Dār al-Ādāb, 2004. 'Alawīyah Ṣubḥī, romancière libanaise née en 1955, a publié en 1986 *Nawm al-ḡayām* (Sommeil des jours), un ouvrage de textes ouverts, éd. Mu'assasat al-Abḥāth al-'Arabīyah, Beyrouth; *Dumyā*, un roman, Beyrouth: Dār al-Ādāb, 2006; et *Ismiḥu al-gharām* (On l'appelle Passion), Beyrouth: Dār al-Ādāb, 2009.