

Writing Through the Body

Iraqi Responses to the War
on Terror

Hanan Jasim Khammas



Writing Through the Body

Writing Through the Body

Iraqi Responses to the War on Terror

Hanan Jasim Khammas



UNIVERSITAT DE
BARCELONA

Edicions

Género(s)

In memory of Professor
Jaume Botey i Vallès
(1940–2018)

Table of contents

Acknowledgements	11
Note on transliterations and sources	13
Introduction	15
Setting positionality: a note on “testimony”	31
I. This is a man’s world. Corporeality in Iraqi society and fiction before 2003	33
The body as a problem	34
Sexual difference in the Qur’ān	35
Male supremacy in Iraqi society	43
Masculinity: circumcision, the moustache, and heteronormativity	46
Moral reformation and the body: fiction of the pre-modern period	56
Her body, his struggle: fiction of the modern period	66
Her body, our land: fiction of the Ba’th period	78
II. Operation feminise. The body in the discourse of the war on terror	89
Bodies and narrative strategies: sexual terrorism, the orientalist gaze, necropolitics and cognitive marginalisation	94
<i>Homeland</i> : the sex-freaks show	113
War relics: mainstream and veterans’ fiction	123
Video games: kill for your life	145
III. Irakaustos. Representation politics in contemporary Iraqi fiction	153
Grotesque bodies	154
Four fictional grotesqueries	168
Four approaches to re-gendering bodies	197
Conclusions: a report on the banality of violence	217
Bibliography	229

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deep and lasting gratitude to Professor Andrew Monnickendam and Professor Mònica Rius-Piniés, whose invaluable remarks and unconditional support made this work possible. Similarly, I am most grateful to Dr Lucia Boldrini and the Centre for Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London, for hosting my doctoral research visit, where part of this research work was conducted. I also want to express my gratitude to the professors Anna Gil Bardají, Ada Barbaro, Gonzalo Fernandez Parrilla, and Dr Charles Eager for their invaluable notes and comments. Publishing this book was possible due to the much appreciated collaboration between ADHUC–Research Center for Theory, Gender, Sexuality and the UNESCO Chair Women, Developments and Cultures, and the administrative support of the research project Gender(s) and Language(s) in Contemporary Arabness, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities/National Agency of Research – MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033. Finally, there are no words that could express my gratitude to all my family, especially to my mother, Eman, for the infinite support, the life lesson on sovereignty, and for giving us an Iraq we can believe in.

Note on transliterations and sources

Texts and names in Arabic, Iraqi dialect, or Kurdish, which are not translated into English, are transliterated into Latin characters according to the *Journal of Arabic Literature's* system of transliteration. Translated texts and their authors' names are used as indicated in the English translations. Citations in Arabic are translated by the author within the body of the text, and the original is provided in footnotes. Electronic books cited, particularly some Kindle editions, use location number (L.) rather than page number; this explains some large numbers in the parenthetical citations.

Introduction

In 2018, the Iraqi author and literary editor, Samuel Shimon, put together the pieces for the first Iraqi noir fiction anthology, *Baghdad Noir*, which was part of Akashic Books noir series, among *Beirut Noir* (2015), *Marrakech Noir* (2018) and *Tehran Noir* (2014), and many others. This anthology successfully aimed at a plural perspective of Iraqi and non-Iraqi, home and exiled authors, narrating the city to show how Baghdad is part of the consciousness of its residents, ex-residents, neighbours, visitors and invaders. All authors of this anthology have lived in the city for a period of time in their lives, and Baghdad is a locus of semiosis in these authors' works and in their cultural dialogue. The editor of *Tehran Noir*, Salar Abdoh, for instance, is one of the authors in *Baghdad Noir*, together with the American author and veteran, Roy Scranton, who served in Baghdad during the years 2003–2006. Among the authors, there is also the Tunisian Hayet Raies, and some of the most popular names of the contemporary literary scene in Iraq. In his introduction, Shimon observes the peculiar fact that between the US-led invasion in 2003 and the year 2018, there have been more than seven hundred published fictional works, a number that surpasses the ones published in Iraq throughout the entire twentieth century (Shimon: 16). This fact requires a moment of attention, as not only did the country produce more fiction in fifteen years that it had previously done in one hundred years, but also these works were written mostly in Arabic by Iraqi authors both inside Iraq and in exile. I had the privilege of verifying this information by consulting the not yet published *Index of the Iraqi novel 1919–2019* by the late scholar Najm 'Abd Allāh Kāzīm, who had been working on this major opus for more than twenty years.¹ According to his research, 571 novels were published between the years 2003–2014 only, and 729 novels in the entire twentieth cen-

1 The document I consulted was still a work in progress, supposed to be published in the early months of 2020, but it was interrupted by the global Covid-19 health crisis, which led to Professor Kāzīm's death in July that same year. The index includes a list of all fictional works written by Iraqi authors during one hundred years. It also contains sub-indexes categorising these works in different genres, such as feminist novel, young adult fiction, Jewish Iraqi authors, and so on.

tury since the publication of the first Iraqi novel, *Jalāl Khālīd*, in 1919. This shows that, in addition to an extraordinary tendency towards writing fiction, there is a shift in the dominant genre when it comes to self-expression, especially when we consider that up until 2003 the predominant literary genre in Iraq was poetry (Bahoora, 2017: 247).

Although writing fiction has become a general tendency in literary development in the Arabic language, contemporary Iraqi fiction also witnessed the emergence of new fictional genres, and by new, I am referring to the new literary production in Arabic and by Iraqi authors. The first anthology of science fiction written by Arab authors within, and about Arab contexts and issues is *Iraq +100*, an anthology of science fiction short stories edited by Hassan Blasim, imagining Iraq after one hundred years of the US-led invasion in 2003. This anthology was followed by *Palestine +100*, imagining Palestine after one hundred years from the Nakbah of 1948 – it is interesting to see that, at least for the editors and publishers of these anthologies, the impact of the invasion of Iraq is comparable to that of the Nakbah. And although these are not the first attempts to promote the writing and publishing of science fiction in Arabic, these are the first Arabic sci-fi anthologies to be published as such, and to receive international recognition in translation and awards.² In addition to science fiction, there is also fantasy fiction, which is – as defined by David Roas – a genre that presents an aesthetic alteration in narrative logic, a problematisation and a questioning of the notion of reality (Roas: 30-42). This genre is becoming popular in recent fiction in Arabic, as in the short stories of Mazen Marouf, Hassan Blasim, Ahmed Saadawi and Diyā' Jubāilī, among others.

Other than the question of genre, shifts in contemporary Iraqi fiction are also present in the increased interest in translating and awarding post-2003 Iraqi fiction. One example is the work of Hassan Blasim, whose stories, translated by Jonathan Wright, were longlisted and won the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in 2010 and 2014. He was also awarded the English PEN three times and has been described by *The Guardian* as “perhaps the best writer of Arabic fiction alive”.³ Sinan Antoon has also been awarded many prizes for his academic work; his second and fourth novels were nominated for the international prize of the Arabic novel in 2013 and 2017, and his third novel, which he translated into English himself, was awarded the Saif Gobash Award for Trans-

2 Both anthologies are winners of the English PEN award. Since 2008, the Syrian Public Book Board has been publishing the *Science Fiction journal*, where sci-fi literary texts and studies both in Arabic and in translation are promoted. See عمران 'Umrān.

3 See Yassin-Kassab for full article.

lation. There are also Diyā' Jubailī, who won Al Tayeb Salih Award for Short Stories in 2017; Ahmed Saadawi, who won the International Prize for Arabic fiction for his *Frankenstein in Baghdad* in 2014; and 'Āliyah Mamdūh, who won the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature in 2004, among others. These anthologies and international collaborations among Iraqi and international Arab and non-Arab authors and publishers suggest, on one hand, that Iraqis have a lot to tell us, and, on the other, that there is international concern about what Iraqis have to say after 2003, and it is all happening in creative writing. This concern, an act of solidarity with a traumatised people as well as a recognition of artistic originality, is due to, firstly, the fact that, as Roger Stahl argues, "Iraq was perhaps the most dangerous war since WWII" (Stahl, 2010: 88) in terms of communicating and informing about the war. In this sense, telling the world what happened in Iraq in 2003 is an example of what Said describes as "imperial arrogance unschooled in worldliness, unfettered either by competence or experience, undeterred by history or human complexity, unrepentant in brutal violence and cruel electronic gadgetry" that violates human rights everywhere. Iraqi fiction post-invasion matters because, as Slavoj Žižek puts it, Iraq was used "as a pretext or an exemplary case to stake out the coordinates of the New World Order" (Žižek, 2004a: 5).

Žižek's statement highlights another interesting aspect, because of which the Iraqi case requires examination: the 2003 war and invasion were also fought semiotically. Referential authors, such as Judith Butler in her *Frames of War* (2009) and Slavoj Žižek in his *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (2004), suggest that televised coverage of the war and the use of cameras and visual symbolism were in fact part of the military operations. Not only visual symbolism, the images depicted in the literary and journalistic narratives in favour of the invasion, as we shall see in the following chapters, participated in the creation of a semiotic sphere – "semiosphere", as coined by Juri Lotman (1922–1993) – in which human bodies, both Iraqi and American, are central to self-expression and resistance, as well as being central to manipulating history. Surprisingly, both Žižek and Butler focus their analysis on "us", the outside spectators of war: "The message was addressed not to the Iraqi people, but primarily to all of us, the witnesses to the war – we were its true ideological and political targets" (Žižek, 2004a: 5). What this book aims at showing is the implication of this military strategy for the Iraqi people themselves, who are doubly victims of this war, once by living it and twice by watching it. The long-term impact on the Iraqi people's perception of reality and conceptualisation of identity is a concern which is somehow ignored. How do Iraqis feel about being seen as a pretext or an exemplary case to stake out the coordinates of the New World

Order? And how does that relate to the way they see themselves? Spectators outside Iraq, before and after the invasion, had access to international media while millions of Iraqis had only Iraqi media to watch and follow the news of the (pre)invasion developments, and, for years, the state media had been the only source for following the political meltdown. Prior to the invasion, state media, being the only source of information, reflected only the state's views on practically everything for decades. It was only in the weeks after the invasion that Iraqi households began to have access to international media and see that the narrative of "war" inside Iraq differed significantly from the narrative outside it; for one thing, both sides considered the invasion a "war" in their discourse. Iraq's contact with other cultures, languages, media, and other sources of knowledge became suddenly and drastically wider, something which influenced the perception of reality, and hence, corporality and identity. Thus, the proposition here, to read contemporary Iraqi fiction, not only as a register of grievances and trauma caused by dictatorship and military invasion of a colonial nature, but also to read post-invasion writings as a response to semiotic, cultural, political, religious, and aesthetic discourses which ruled Iraq before the invasion, on one hand, and those which incentivised the public opinion to invade Iraq in 2003, on the other. To read it by focusing on that element which was central to the war on terror and the invasion of Iraq: the visual symbolism, the body.

But why, one may ask, does the body matter here? On a general scale, Roger Cooter writes that "[t]he last few decades of the twentieth century witnessed the body moving from no one's particular concern to virtually everyone's preoccupation – including historians" (Cooter: 393), and such universal preoccupation with the body does not certainly exclude cultural specificity. Recent literature in Arabic has also shown an increased concern with the body; Abir Hamdar describes this preoccupation as a turn, an alternative path for resisting identity crisis: "the turn to the body in recent Arabic literature is an antidote to the collapse of the collective national and political ideology of pan-Arabism", and she also notes that "the turn to the body in Arabic literature is by no means uniform and varies in degree and intensity as we move from one political locale to the next" (Hamdar: 132). This is particularly true, because as military and political conflict in the region differed in their approach to violence, contemporary Iraq has been the stage for different destabilising circumstances during a relatively short period of time: the Gulf Wars; dictatorship; political persecutions; the economic embargo – which I shall refer to henceforth as the genocidal embargo; military invasion and occupation, and last but not least, terrorism. On the other hand, amidst all the political turmoil and

the various colonial processes in the Middle East, when it comes to fictional writing, Iraqi scholars Falih al-Ricābī and Tu‘amah Muṭāyir Ḥusāin claim that the body has an “enchanting authority” (*sulṭah sāḥirah*) (al-Ricābī & Muṭāyir Ḥusāin: 69), which has been employed in contemporary Arabic fiction recently to demonstrate social and political complexities of Arab and Muslim men and women.

Arab-Islamic heritage concerning the body had been going in the opposite direction, as it emphasised that the distance from the body is what determines the righteous and the true self. Muḥammad al-Muṣbāḥī explains that in the development of Arab and Islamic thought, a discursive opposition towards the body created what he calls “disdain of corporeality” (*iḥtiqār al-jismīyah*), because it is subject to change and decay, as opposed to the soul, which is the true self, the moving engine of the body and therefore the superior part, and that this opposition led to the disdain of plurality, difference, the need for the Other, and dismissiveness towards time, history, desire and feeling (al-Muṣbāḥī: L.1421).⁴ Hishām al-‘Alawī also states that Arab-Islamic thought has focused its attention on the body as rival to the soul and as a unit by which to measure opposition to and abandonment of the faith (al-‘Alawī: 10). Following the classical Aristotelian tradition, al-‘Alawī adds, Islamic philosophy saw the body as an obstacle in the soul’s way in its eternal quest for happiness (al-‘Alawī: 79). Therefore, Hamdar’s coinage of the “turn to the body” represents a turn away from this opposition and disdain; and towards an “antidote” and an “enchanting authority”. This is especially true in fiction in which understanding the structures and the frameworks that accompanied or led to this turn becomes an urgent task; this is where the present book also provides a roadmap in the context of contemporary Iraq.

Hamdar rightly suggests that the preoccupation with the body reflects symptoms of socio-political changes, and that the use of the word “turn” signifies a change or a diversion in the development of the representation of the body. However, we shouldn’t oversimplify the significance of this turn as merely a celebration of freedom after the collapse of pan-Arabism and the loss of a collective identity, as she suggests: “it is almost as if the trauma accompanying the loss of a collective identity, which had been anchored in notions of liberation from colonial forces, has been compensated for by the desire to celebrate

4. "الروح محرك وفاعل، وأنه لا يمكن الاستغناء عنه طرفة عين، لأنه هو الذات التي تصدر عنها الحركات والأفعال والإدراكات (...) فانتقلت عن الجسد إلى صاحب الجسد ومحركه (...) ومن الواضح أن احتقار الجسمية في هذه الرؤية صار يعني احتقار التعدد والحركة والاختلاف والمغايرة والحاجة إلى الآخر، والنفور من الزمن والتاريخ والرغبة والإحساس، بل وحتى من القول والتفكير."

the freedom of the body from all social, cultural and sexual restrictions” (Hamdar: 33). Hamdar here ignores the categorical difference between collective identity and hegemonic identity. The pan-Arabist ideology does not represent collective identity, at least not anymore, as there is a difference between being an Arab and being pan-Arabist and, therefore, the collapse of this ideology does not necessarily mean a loss of collective identity. The most recent engagements with the body in contemporary Arabic fiction, particularly post-2003, or rather in the years leading up to and following the so-called “Arab Spring” (2010–2012), indicate more complex significations and reveal an introspective examination of the history and heritage of the area.⁵ The employment of the body in this process of examination stages one of the fundamental aspects of the contemporary Arab literary canon: violence. This is seen in both the use of imagery concerning annihilated bodies as well as in the use of transgressive language, conveying the idea that poetic and bodily aesthetics form an act of epistemic violence in themselves. In addition to revealing the grievances borne and injustice suffered by people, writing about or through the body also informs us of their detachment from established structures of knowledge. Samira Aghacy examines how literature of the Arab East, post-1967 Naksah, reassesses the representation of sexuality and gender performativity, particularly in the case of the masculine body. She claims that the post-1967 era and “the continuous rebuffs and debacles in the area caused many men a daunting sense of impotence and ineffectiveness, demystifying an essentialized masculinity generally viewed as firm and stable” (Aghacy: 72). The constant military violence and forced displacement destabilised the perception of the body and its sexuality: “war, which proved to be a catalyst for change, unsettled existing gender codes considerably and produced huge tension and incongruities in the representations of masculinity and femininity” (109). This book, nevertheless, suggests that this questioning of gender codes is a symptom of a larger process of questioning the relation between self and body. The demystification of essentialised masculinity, argued here, is not only a result of violence and a sensation of impotence; rather it is a violent act itself, since it is an indication of a shift in the perception and conceptualisation of the body from being a cultural signifier to a sign constructed in and by history.

For many critics of Arabic literature, the body and its sexuality are employed as a reflection of the tumultuous development of contemporary politi-

⁵ The academic and non-academic work done by feminist and queer communities in the region is a testament to this revision of history and heritage.

cal history and national identity.⁶ However, in the following chapters the body is approached as John B. Thomson defines it in his introduction to Pierre Bourdieu's *Language and Symbolic Power* (1982), as "the site of incorporated history. The practical schemes through which the body is organised are the product of history and, at the same time, the source of practices and perceptions which reproduce that history" (Bourdieu, 1992: 13). This definition is one which I find apt for contemporary Arab thought for a significant reason: history occupies a particularly crucial constituent in the basic formation of the contemporary Arab mind, as it is the instrument with which national and religious identity – hence corporality – have been inscribed.⁷ The narrative of colonial and nationalist struggle is now being questioned in fiction, and the validity of this inquiry consists in showing how the body, as the site of this particular incorporated history, reveals a rewriting of history. The capacity of corporality to incorporate history is stipulated in Jean-Luc Nancy's definition of the body in *Corpus* (2008):

Bodies [...] are *open* space, implying, in some sense, a space more properly *spacious* than spatial, what could also be called a *place*. Bodies are places of existence, and nothing exists without a place, a *there*, a "here", a "here is", [...] More precisely, it makes room for the fact that the essence of existence is to be without any essence. That's why the *ontology of the body* is ontology itself: being's in no way prior or subjacent to the phenomenon here. The body *is* the being of existence. [...] [Bodies] take place at the limit, *qua limit*: limit – external border, the fracture and intersection of anything foreign in a continuum of sense, a continuum of matter (Nancy: 15-17).

Nancy's definition of body adds a spatial and geographical dimension to the eminence of history, which complements Bourdieu's definition. The body is a place by which existence is conditioned: we *are* as long as we are bodies, and only if the body is there, then we are. *We* and *there* are determined by a perception that is conditioned by time – history – and space – geography. Corporality in this sense is the nexus of experiences which are informed by, and which are located within histories. The body which I examine here – that is, the specific case of Iraq – develops to a new manifestation of corporality

6 For full discussion see, for instance, Ouedghiri Ben Ottmane, p. 17; Shaaban, p. 179; Klemm, p. 493, and Al-Hassan, p. 204.

7 For further discussion on the question of history and the formation of the Arab mind, see Chejne, p. 383, and Abed al-Jabri, p. vii-x.

which appears in the literary fiction written by local and diaspora Iraqi authors after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. My argument is that this manifestation of corporality is not just a reflection of the collapse of national identity, nor is it a mere registration of the trauma of war and occupation, but also a manifestation of a reconceptualisation of corporeality, that is, a rewriting of incorporated histories, a redefinition of the meaning of the body and the way it is written about. It is a process which, thus, is directly linked to the neo-colonial hegemony and to the history of the conceptualisation of corporality in the *status quo*. The body I examine is created via language – a socially, culturally, politically, and historically moulded language – which makes of the body a space of existence constructed in the in-betweens of the discourses surrounding the colonial and postcolonial realities.

In broad terms, my claim relies on Homi Bhabha's view that in postcolonial contexts and aftermaths of wars, the perception of the body corresponds to the confrontation or amalgamation between the different socio-cultural discourses before and after the epistemic violence, resulting from the colonial process, takes place. Bhabha uses Fanon's work to exemplify the psychic and semiotic displacement in conceptualising the body, which emerges at the encounter between narratives that represent the colonial subject. The colonial subject – the Iraqi in this case – finds their image mirrored in two different mirrors or frames, to use Bhabha's terminology. These mirrors are the different discursive and disciplinary narratives that construct the traits of the subject's subjectivity. Thus, to understand how the representation of the body in contemporary Iraqi fiction responds to the aftermath of the war on terror, it must be understood that there is, on the one hand, the traditional and nationalist discourse that ruled Iraq since the formation of the republic in 1958, and, on the other hand, there is the Western discourse of the war on terror and war propaganda, existent since the second Gulf War until after the invasion in 2003. Both created an imaginary in which generalised, oversimplified, and primitive stereotypes of corporality are presented in order to assert a knowledge of what being an Iraqi means. These discourses are legacies of Orientalism as defined by Said, and of "Orientalism in reverse", as described by Sadik Jalal al-'Azmi. Orientalism, Said explains, is a Western belief that there is an ontological difference between East and West, and that this difference is imperative for their political, economic and cultural interaction; he claims, moreover, that it has become a performative, constant praxis, which was institutionally supported for centuries in order to create and nourish an image of the Oriental Other that perpetuates this difference. The claim that the discourse which led to the invasion of Iraq is a legacy of Orientalism is hardly a new thought. Said him-