

Article

Scripting Memory and Emotions: Female Characters in Iraqi Theatre about War

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Abstract: This article focuses on the emotional lives of, and interactions between, female characters in two plays about Iraqi wars: *The Hymn of the Rocking Chair* (1987) by Farouk Mohammed and *A Feminine Solo* (2013) by Mithal Ghazi. These plays show life in Iraq in times of war. The article argues that it is significant that Iraqi women are depicted in drama and theatre, during those times of war when extreme emotional suffering and trauma prevail, in the role of storytellers. In addition, societies at war present a methodological problem for research in that playscripts might not survive intact. This reveals another type of emotional loss through war—one that involves culture itself.

Keywords: drama; war; Iraq; emotional suffering; female experience

1. Introduction

Drama about war provides an opportunity to explore the identity of individuals in relation to nation, history, and mortality, and through glimpses of war's extreme circumstances of emotional suffering and trauma. This article focuses on the emotional lives of, and interactions between, female characters in two plays about Iraqi wars spanning 25 years, which condemn war and also show the change from a secular to a religious society. These plays demonstrate an idea of freedom by expressing thoughts and feelings, and as theatre. In addition, there is a particular aspect surrounding drama from societies at war that presents itself materially and becomes a methodology problem for research: the script might not survive intact. This issue is addressed with the first play discussed here, whereby the production is reconstructed from fragments—as might happen with postwar reconstruction. It points to another type of emotional loss through war, and one that is not clearly personified; this loss might be termed the loss of the shared experience, of the kind provided by theatre, scholarship, literature, or cinema. This article on drama and its theatre asks: how can the shared emotional effect be remembered?

The two plays discussed in this article shed light on the different images of Iraqi women presented on the stage. The plays analysed are *The Hymn of the Rocking Chair* (1987) by Farouk Mohammed and *A Feminine Solo* (2013) by Mithal Ghazi, and they show life in Iraq across decades. Both presented topics that were forbidden or unlikely to be staged. The characters in the plays might be understood as indicative of how Iraqi women encapsulated the spirit of their time as they reflected common sense during what seems like periods of social insanity. However, the depiction of female characters and themes about their problems in both plays was unusual and stood out from other contemporary theatre. Thus, Iraqi women during wartime were shown doing more than listening to accounts of the war, as might be told to them by men which was the accepted pattern of patriarchal control; they take on the role of storytellers who express the emotions about the big events in their society. In the 1980s, the first play showed war-weary characters and their hopelessness; in the 2000s, the second play showed the clash between religion and secularity.

At the same time, *Hymn of the Rocking Chair* is a clear manifestation of the interrelation of war and drama about war, in view of the fact that there is no script for this play. After 2003 in Iraq, many

acts of vandalism were reported and most of the public properties have been either destroyed, burnt or stolen, including the stores of the Iraqi Department of Cinema and Theatre. The hard copies of books, journals with film and playscripts used to be archived there. The texts in the National Library have been destroyed and stolen, and most of the libraries in the universities and faculties have been eradicated and the value of culture itself diminished. Thousands of primary and secondary references are still missing. This great loss to culture becomes a source of mourning that is emotionally painful, like other kinds of grief.

Muhsin Al-Musawi (2006)—a literary critic and scholar of classical and modern Arabic literature—asserts that Iraqi history and cultural tradition have enhanced the collective identity and established the ability to compensate for the loss of freedom under invasion or dictatorship [1]. Hence, the cultural heritage produced by national intellectuals becomes part of the common Iraqi identity. Albert Memmi argues that, “For a nation to exist it must have a common vision to enable it to develop internally and, externally, win its place among other nations, against them if need be” ([2], p. 5). During the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, under international influences, Iraqi artists succeeded in creating a designated artistic vision of Iraq as a nation. Eventually, they were able to turn the Iraqi identity into a united national heritage ([2], p. 5). These legacies have contributed to understanding the struggles of daily life, and they were manifestations of the detachment of art from political influence and censorship ([1], p. xvii). By the 1980s and 1990s, however, the public arts had become a vehicle of propaganda under strict censorship of the Ba’ist regime which had mobilised the country in wartime. Yet an emotional connection remained between the Iraqi populace and the cultural heritage. This is best described by Al-Musawi: “Both literature and art have developed in time an emotive link, along with a binding cultural one, through those public intellectuals and artists whose life stories are household words in Iraqi life” ([1], p. xvii).

Iraq is looked at as a place of struggle, due to the sectarian conflicts after 2003, rather than a site of cultural enlightenment. The pluralistic composition of Iraqi society prior to 2003 is also overlooked; unfortunately, these identities and sovereignty are at the risk of obliteration ([1], p. xvii). Iraqi theatre is one of the areas in culture that has experienced drastic fluctuations in activity. There are other re-enactment events such as Ta’ziyeh, but this is not grouped with theatre and it is regulated differently. Before the American and allied forces invasion of Baghdad, theatre was strictly under censorship. After 2003, theatre venues had been burnt, destroyed, and damaged. There are numerous oral stories of artists and professionals who risked their lives trying to protect historic buildings or to save their contents; for example, one internet story titled “The Librarian of Basra” is about a woman who managed to evacuate the National Library of Basra in 2003 [3]. Consequently, reviving lost scripts in theatre is a means of bringing back one part of this national identity.

2. The Hymn of the Rocking Chair

Since the playwright Mohammed and the director Aouni Karoumi are dead, the only source for *The Hymn of the Rocking Chair* proved to be two female actors who have performed roles in the play. The researcher has contacted the two female performers via Facebook messenger, emails, and viber calls [4]. The first performer contacted, Ina’am Al-Battat, introduced the author to the second one, Iqbal Na’eem. While Al-Battat fled to Germany from Iraq in the mid-1990s, Na’eem still lives in Baghdad. Unfortunately, neither of them has a copy of the script. Both have been cooperative in answering questions, and Al-Battat has been the main source and supplied the researcher with what is left of the “primary” components of the play. Thankfully, the production survives in the memories of these female actors. This enables segments of the script to be assembled from the diasporic community of artists who worked on the production, in order to reclaim its significance. Basically, there are some “remembered” lines of the script, two short voice recordings and about eight lines of a poem written by the Iraqi poet Aryan Al-Sayed Khalaf. Al-Battat also responded to a list of questions sent by the researcher via email. Fortunately, she had taken most of the articles about the production before fleeing to Germany. She had not imagined that these yellowed old extracts would be the only surviving

(secondary) resources about the play, along with some old photos for the two performances presented in Iraq and Tunisia.

It had been seven years since the Iraq–Iran War started—resulting in half a million dead soldiers—when *The Hymn of the Rocking Chair* was first presented at the Forum of Theatre in Baghdad in 1987. That year had taken a high toll, with Iraq almost exhausting its human, economic and military resources in the conflict with its larger neighbour, Iran. Yet everything seemed to indicate that this war would last forever. The play shows two female characters, Rajiha and Mariam, who are aware of the ugly reality of war. Waiting has been devouring their lives, and because they are conscious of this truth, the only way to survive it is by self-deception. Rajiha has been a famous singer who has lost her fame, and she does not explain how or why. She believes that living with the memories of the past solidifies her existence. The layering of emotions in the drama is expanded by the way in which the characters' expressiveness involves music. Rajiha is a beautiful young lady and she is still vibrant, but reserved about showing her talent. This character represents how the life and opportunities of each individual have been suspended due to military mobilisation. Mariam, on the other hand, writes herself letters and puts them under the bench of her window so she can tell Rajiha that her lover is sending her love letters and is coming back one day. Mariam is like a member of the million families who lost one or more loved members in the war and lived desperately waiting for their return.

Each day Rajiha and Mariam repeat the same dialogue; they question their existence, yearn for the past and lament the present. Nu'maan Majed, an Iraqi theatre critic, argues that *The Hymn of the Rocking Chair* carries some characteristics of Absurd Theatre. Certainly, the play does adapt key conventions from the Theatre of the Absurd. In terms of structure, the play does not have a linear plot, and it ends where it begins. Further, there is a clear absence of cause and effect between the two scenes. As for characterisation, the two characters show no development; on the contrary, both lack motivation, which reflects their hopelessness [4]. The meaning of existence for these characters lies in the process of waiting. Reality is unbearable and the past is the only recognisable truth.

Mark and Juliette Taylor-Batty assert that time is a major concept in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as it is "being negotiated, filled, and passed" ([5], p. 29). The characters Rajiha and Mariam are trying to pass the time of waiting like the characters in Beckett's play. Similarly, the two female characters deploy various strategies: they fight, sing, pray, and remember. They wait in vain. However, the strategies for passing time do not alleviate the pain of waiting, and offer only habitual daily routines as a resolution ([5], p. 42). Mariam and Rajiha think that they are filling their time, but their lives are consumed or literally deadened by the process of waiting in war.

Having two women enact the themes of hopelessness and the meaninglessness of life extends the idea of absurdity in theatre in Iraq. Conventionally, Iraqi women are framed by their roles as wives and mothers, and during war their importance for reproduction increases, but war means that they also spend their time waiting for news of their male family members. They wait for life itself to continue rather than obey edicts to have more children. Women are the emotional centre of family life—often a source of life and hope, and potentially they offer emotional inspiration to soldiers in war and away from home. One of the reasons for specifying male characters in *Waiting for Godot* is that the play can therefore be interpreted as showing the futility of life, the sense of hopelessness, even nothingness and despair. Female characters might instead suggest a sense of continuity, their presence evoking amiability and gentleness. Mary O'Brien argues that "the male lacks the connection that relates the past and the future that women possess through reproduction and fertility" ([6], p. 118). O'Brien writes that men are symbolically removed from "species continuity" [6]. If Mariam and Rajiha are to be categorised, they represent youth, profound emotions, and reproduction. They reveal how women left behind their traditional roles in the Iraqi society.

Framed by the sense of perpetual instability and insecurity, the characters reflect Iraqi people waiting for the end of this war, yearning for days of peace and stability once again. Iraqis shared emotional feelings of nostalgia through art and drama. The researcher remembers that the dominant

sense of time changed during the war: instead of looking forward to the future, Iraqis looked back to the past. A sense of how life is meaningless and hopeless in wartime prevails in the play.

In a Viber call with the author, Na'eem asserted that, during wartime, men wanted no more to tell heroic stories of war. Thus, it is Rajiha and Mariam instead who offer an account. The soldiers who came and attended the performance of women speaking about their dilemmas often left in tears [7]. What they saw on the stage was what they did not experience at the frontlines where they lived half-buried inside their trenches. The play presents a shift in Iraqi theatre itself, from male characters taking the role of the orators to that of males listening as members of the audience.

Historian Joy Damousi explores the idea of loss in bereaved families, and she explains how the feeling of loss changes over time and goes through several phases until it reaches a self-identification stage. Damousi argues that, with the passage of time, this bereavement can lead to a self-transformation process or a change in identity. Individuals who were unable to forget the past—or, to be more specific, were unable to consider their loss as part of the past—might find their lives frozen within the time period of that traumatic loss. This led to a complicated interrelationship between aspects of the present and the past. This might explain the relationship between the loss incurred during wartime and the grief and bereavement that would extend to the aftermath of war. Damousi calls this “the trauma of peacetime”, in which families continue to suffer from the war. They go through a continuous process of remembering that can shape their present according to their past [8].

In *The Hymn of the Rocking Chair*, as Na'eem signals, women do not express hope for the future, and the mood has changed into one of sterility. Iraqi women are no longer the source of aspiration nor are they able to nurture hope for new generations. The image of women becomes that of those who are desperate, who have lost interest in the present and the future. They cannot be sought out to offer resolution, and they are not the provenance of support. They encapsulate the Iraqi people's anxiety: women are no longer the emotional support-givers and have deserted their role as listeners. As Al-Battat recalls, Rajiha sings:

Sedges grow on the edge of death
Craving for your water and mud
Flirting with each passing cloud
Eager to meet the sun of your eyes [4].

These lines carry the idea of waiting for a glimmer of hope. The sedge plant, found in the marshes of Iraq, is a symbol of patience and forbearance. It has the ability to endure a lack of water and bears drought for a long time. Once there is water, sedge grows and rapidly flourishes, no matter how small the amount of water might be. Al-Battat remembers that, within the audience, there were soldiers on leave who afterwards would be required to go back to the frontlines. As she started singing, they wept. Some of them told her that they recorded her songs and would listen to them later when back on the frontlines. *The Hymn of the Rocking Chair* presented an inverted image of Iraqi women during the Iraq–Iran War—one that reversed the emotional values surrounding women. It stood out as an authentic representation of the emotional experience of living at that time, while merely paying lip-service to the regime, as it was obliged to do.

3. A Feminine Solo

The situation did not change after 2003 when US Marines invaded Iraq. Hopes for a new era dominated the Iraqi scene, especially among intellectuals. At last, it was time to express themselves freely without the yoke of dictatorship. Although Iraqi theatre embarked on a new era in terms of freedom of expression, a new type of censorship appeared unexpectedly as well. In 2003, political Islamic parties ascended to political rule in Iraq and gender equity was no longer held to be important, as women's roles in society shrank and Islamic radicalism imposed itself as the norm ([9], p. 4). It needs to be pointed out that there are two main sectors in Islam, Sunni and Shi'ite, and the followers of each started to engage with the other in a power struggle. From 2006 to 2009, Iraq witnessed sectarian

tensions that ranged from random kidnapping to raping, killing, and the disfigurement of dead bodies. Calls to stop the sectarian vendetta failed to decrease the number of casualties. According to news reports, the Iraqi government said that the death toll during the height of Sunni–Shi’ite sectarian killings in 2007 had reached 17,956 persons [10]. Civil war was expected as the next development after the execution of Saddam Hussein in late 2006.

In Iraq, it is hard to designate a period of postwar trauma because Iraq is a country that keeps undergoing wars. According to Rebecca Schneider, war is an unfinished phenomenon. It imposes itself in the collective memory, and it highlights the presence of the past in the present ([11], p. 32). Hence, re-enacting the theme of war on the stage extends beyond remembering the past, as it instead makes the past a central part of the present. The question is: what is the significance of reliving the past in the present moment? It becomes acceptable to look back rather than forward, and therefore to continue to experience pain and other emotions. Schneider quotes Adrienne Rich, who identifies the objective of re-enactment as “re-vision”. Rich explains: “Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival” ([11], p. 6).

Hence, war as depicted in the Iraqi theatre, with female characters, is a form of survival through “re-vision”. It balances the survival of female identity with a type of memory for the culture. Despite the physical risks of gathering to make theatre in Iraq during war in 2003, artists resolved that this reinforced the imperatives of being alive. Theatre continued, and—as playwrights are aware—art can capture the social mood. A work written in 2006 but only produced in 2013 offers the second example of war and Iraqi drama. Ghazi’s *A Feminine Solo* was directed by Sinan Al-Azawi. Again, two women characters meet in one place, disclose their secrets and reflect the spirit of their era. This time the characters embody the main religious sects: Noor is Shi’ite and Hayat is Sunni. The play focuses on marginalised women who have suffered from social injustice: a religious recluse and a prostitute. The character Noor, which literally means “Light”, has been tortured, beaten, and raped because her brother has been accused of being a member of a banned Islamic party during the Iraq–Iran War. The whole family has been afflicted by this catastrophe, with her father being killed during war and her mother passing away. The loss of her parents and brother means that Noor lives with these deaths and does not leave her house. Metaphorically speaking, she punishes herself for being alive without her family.

Judith Butler (2006) argues that, when individuals undergo experiences of loss of their loved ones, places, or communities, they are exposed to the possibility of personal change. During the period of grief, there is mental adjustment to a temporary experience that would be followed by a recovery. This process can facilitate recognition of the self and the bonds that tie us to those around us and define who we are. In an extreme situation, the loss would exceed the loss of the loved one who had died, because it would raise a troubling question: who am I without that person, place, or community? The sense of bereavement can reveal a lack of individuality and instead highlight a fragmented identity. The idea of constituting the self according to what we possess also signals what we do not have ([12], p. 22).

The other character in *A Feminine Solo* is Hayat, which literally means “Life”. She has lost her husband and young child in a sectarian sedition, and she is left to face her destiny alone. With the lack of financial support and social assistance, she finds herself following the only path that provides her with the basics of life. She has joined about fifty thousand Iraqi women who have been forced into prostitution inside Iraq or in neighbouring countries [9]. This means that socially, she is considered to have a malady that leads to condemnation under religious values. This dialogue reveals the prevailing view in Iraq:

NOOR [*holding a rag and cleaning under Hayat’s foot*]: You and those who are like you are the reasons behind God’s curse. All of what happens to us is because of your bad deeds and sins.

HAYAT [*treading on the rag and preventing Noor from continuing to clean*]: Stop, stop it. Who are you to decide who is deemed to Heaven and who is deemed to Hell?...I am a human just like you, and it is only God who can punish or reward, it is not YOU!! [*She reads from the Qur'an*] "It is He who forgives and who torments; He is The Ultimate Forgiving and Merciful" [13].

One of the struggles that Hayat faces is her inability to change how society views her, and she doubts that her bad reputation can ever be changed. Hayat and Noor lack a common language with which they can communicate, and each has a different perspective on life, religion, and honour. However, they realise that they can live together if they choose to recognise each other. At the same time, what demarcates Hayat's honour is her perception that we all need another chance to be understood. She asserts that the only way to live together is to tolerate difference and nonconformity and accept each other. She urges Noor to open the door whenever someone knocks. She tells her that it could be someone who needs help, or it could be Noor's brother whom she awaits to return from exile.

This dialogue shows the difference between Hayat's and Noor's views about life, religion, and love.

NOOR [*brutally takes the prayer cloth from Hayat as if mad*]: But I am not like YOU...Do you understand? Not like YOU...Take off my PRAYER CLOTH...take it off [*madly takes it off*]. Do you believe, yourself, that you are a believer? Rubbish...rubbish, all of you are rubbish. The prayer cloth is a sign of religious authority, it is swapped between the characters and the one with the prayer cloth listens and she has the authority to judge. The key point is that they swap.

HAYAT: Poor creature, you are still in the prison, you don't want to leave it. The prison was dark, dreary, and your house is just like the prison. Get out of it, look at people outside. There may be thousands of men and women who need your help and you can offer your help, and I may be one of them. Believe me, the path to Heaven is full of people, sun and warmth [13].

After Noor's initial refusal to consider Hayat's worth, and the wearing of her prayer cloth, she finally accepts the idea only when she realises that both of them share the same affliction. Tragically, Hayat is killed by a sniper when she opens the door. But she leaves Noor with a message of hope that the future will be more bearable as she learns how to open the door. Hence, the characters defy fear, destruction, and death by going through the door to the outside.

In a short interview with the actor Hana Mohammed, she mentioned that the script was first offered to her in 2010. She recalled that many reasons prevented production of this play, including the rewriting of the script according to directorial notes. As well, many times they were unable to reach the place of rehearsals because of blocked roads. Then, as they started rehearsals, they suddenly had to stop due to safety reasons, or because there was a cut in electrical power [14]. It took three years for the script to be finalised and presented in one of the largest theatres in Baghdad, the National Theatre.

In *A Feminine Solo*, the solution for the ongoing Iraqi predicament comes through the ordeal of Iraqi women who are left by themselves to experience the neglect and oppression that reign in the aftermath of extreme violence. The characters clearly condemn war and refuse to be part of it. The play openly tries to raise awareness that it is Iraqi families who are paying the cost of the chaos and disorder that Iraq has been witnessing.

4. Conclusions

While *The Hymn of the Rocking Chair* and *A Feminine Solo* reflected the events of their respective times, at the same time they exposed aspects that were often hidden and went unacknowledged. These two plays implicitly assert that Iraqi women need not conform to stereotypical roles. They can be a source of hope, continuity and wisdom, but they can resist these expectations at the same time when they talk about the waiting and anxiety of war and its emotional suffering.

Each play offers a glimpse of resolution for the present and the future. Iraqi female characters have shared in the emotional trauma of all Iraqi people during war time, but they have defied the shadowy image of a female who supports the soldier in war. Instead the fully rounded characters in these plays have equally shared the soldiers' anxiety and tell stories from a female perspective and encourage women to contribute their stories.

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