

# Shahadat

Witnessing Iraq's Transformation  
after 2003

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# Introduction

Despite the large number of state and civil society initiatives taken toward reconciliation, and despite a government of national unity, Iraq has been deteriorating with ever increasing speed into smaller and smaller fractions. Every political endeavour or diplomatic attempt to prevent this from happening seems only to have sped up the process of disintegration. The fault lines of fragmentation run along the outer edges of Iraqi Kurdistan as well as the walls of the green zone. They follow the borders of districts and split returning exile communities up into groups of former Ba'athists or former Communists, beneficiaries of the regime or those who were persecuted by it. They separate a Shi'ite corridor throughout the south from the "center," which remains a battlefield of opposing identities. The horrendous brutality with which rivaling groups pursue one another is without parallel in our times.

In the shadow of violence, Iraqis working in the various disciplines of the cultural sphere are trying to reorganize their activities and relationships. Examples of this can be seen in the annual Festival of Poetry in Merbid, the International Iraq Short Film Festival in Baghdad, as well as a conference organized by the publication house Al-Mada in Erbil, and the founding of a diverse number of artist-societies and art magazines such as Hala and Masarat. With the aim of supporting these efforts and providing an expanded perspective on the transformations in Iraq, the book at hand has come to be, in which Iraqi artists, journalists and analysts report over work and life in their country today. The participating authors are key figures in the cultural political discourse, which seizes on themes such as: the relationship of intellectuals living in Iraq to their colleagues in the Diaspora (Ali Bader), their relationship to new and old governments (Haidar Saeed), the feasibility of critique and critical artistic output (Thawra Yousif, Sherko Bekas), new religious movements (Lutfia al-Dulaimi), violence, coming to terms with the past, and life in exile (Basim Kahar, Mohamed Mazloom)...

Shahadat is a collection of observations from the internal perspective. Though they may differ widely in form and direction, these observations are connected by the common evaluation that in the near future, radical Islamist concepts will define new borders for freedom in thought and expression in Iraq. Many of the contributions are thus connected by the latent question: will critical thinkers, artists and intellectuals be able to live and work in Iraq at all in the future, or has the time in which that might

have been possible ultimately and irrevocably passed? At least half of the authors who have contributed to this book have left Iraq over the past six months, and more than two million Iraqis have preceded them in doing this over the last two years. “The situation is totally dark. There is no hope at all,” says Oday Rasheed (Chapter 8).

Shahadat is neither a systematic analysis of the present times nor a thorough telling of the entire story. What we have rather done here is to collect commentary from contemporary witnesses, all of whom have spent the larger part of their lives under the domination of a dictatorship, lived through three wars, the UN enforced embargo, and the fall of Saddam Hussein. These are young intellectuals whose biographies carve their ways through patronization and persecution, imprisonment and seduction, courage and resignation. Accordingly, the discussions and contributions presented here revolve in many ways around the relationship between society and leadership, as well as a cultural processing of the historical episode which is now commonly referred to as “regime-past.” Others are drawing the balance and asking the question: Into what state will a people devolve that throughout its existence has been the subject of political experimentation, which have resulted in ever-new cycles of violence? Answers to this and other questions may help in understanding the situation in Iraq today, and the developments which have led up to its creation.







01

Maysoon Pachachi

## A Film Training Center in Baghdad (August 2006)

In June of 2003, I was sitting in a café in Ramallah with my friend Kasim. Like me, he is an Iraqi filmmaker who has lived in London for a long period of time. For about ten years, we had been coming and going to and from Palestine, teaching short and intensive filmmaking courses. Many of our students had then gone on to make films and set up their own production companies.

As we were stirring our coffees and

talking about Iraq, we began to wonder about what we could do there that might be useful to Iraqis. That afternoon, encouraged by our experiences in Palestine, we decided we would set up a free-of-charge film training center in Baghdad. We would offer basic short courses in camera, sound, lighting, editing, documentary, and short fiction filmmaking. We would be independent, and would seek funding from charities,

trade unions, and private parties.

In Iraq, it had long been impossible to make films without having to adhere to the constraints imposed by government control; due to the embargo, there had been no film stock, spare parts for film cameras, labs, newer video cameras, or digital technology of any kind. Even film students and their teachers at the Academy of Fine Arts had had little opportunity to make films or even handle cameras.

Thirty-five years of dictatorship, three devastating wars, thirteen years of the most comprehensive sanctions in history, a military occupation, extreme political and criminal violence, and an unpredictable, frightening future has traumatized and dazed Iraqis. The struggle against these things, however, has become part of a spirit of survival and resistance, and this has often included the making of art, and the creation of things to confront what seems to be the unmaking of the world.

Kasim and I, therefore, decided that we could at least try to offer the experience that we had accumulated in order to help young people, in particular, to unlock their talents and creative potential, and to provide them with basic and professional training, enabling them to put their thoughts and stories up onto the screen.

We found a couple of rooms to rent in Baghdad, fixed the plumbing and bought a generator. We then acquired some cheap furniture and a couple of DV cameras, and began giving our first course in March of 2004. This was a one-month training course in camera, sound, and lighting. In October of 2004, we started giving a course on documentary filmmaking, in which students would produce their own short films.

Though we had planned for the course to last for ten weeks, the situation in which we were trying to work was

unpredictable, volatile and dangerous. Everyday, students had to make their way across town, passing through roadblocks and checkpoints, skirting around tanks, and worrying about explosions. Sometimes, they simply could not make it to the classes, though they always tried hard. As one student said:

“What’s the alternative? Sit at home and give up altogether? – No. I just say a prayer every morning when I leave the house to make my peace with God, and if I’ve had a fight with my parents, I make sure we’ve made up and everything is OK between us, and then I leave. Who knows if I’ll make it back in the evening?”

As the course went on, some of our students were directly affected by violence; relatives of two of them were kidnapped, a cousin of one student was badly injured in an explosion, and an uncle of another was killed in a suicide bombing.

Perhaps, for the students, one of the ways to stay alive emotionally and spiritually in the face of all this destruction was to make their films. And so, they threw themselves into their work with determination. They researched and prepared, and finally, they were ready to shoot. We found ourselves having to juggle between wanting to push them out onto the streets with their cameras to explore the world around them, and worrying about their safety. We realized that if we were to carry on, we would have to be flexible and prepared to improvise. With that in mind, we held a meeting with the students to discuss the security implications of the shooting locations which were to be involved in filming the sensitive and political stories which many of them had selected as subjects for their films. Most students then decided to abandon their original subjects and start researching alternative stories which might be more feasible, and more

capable of being safely realized under the present circumstances.

In the end, the films they made were more intimate and personal than they had at first planned, and the subjects were much closer to home. Most of the films they made took place in their own neighborhoods and among their friends and families.

All of the shooting was finally completed in October of 2005, and we decided to do the editing in Amman, Jordan. We thought it would be beneficial for our students to leave Baghdad for a short period - to relieve them of some of the daily stress with which they were having to live. None of them had ever had the chance to leave the country before. We had very little money, but we borrowed flats from friends, and office space to set up our editing equipment, and settled down to work. We started early in the morning and went on working until the evening. Kasim lived in a flat with the boys, and I with the girls. Sometimes, we all went out in the evening together, and other times, we returned after work to our apartments in separate groups. There over dinner, we shared stories and jokes, and discussions about politics, family, love and ideas. Slowly, as time went on, we could feel the students begin to relax, and could feel a burgeoning sense of possibility opening up new horizons for them.

This had much to do with their being outside of Baghdad and away from home for the first time in their lives, but it was also the effect of working on their films. They struggled to make their ideas work, discovering how to structure their films, and they encountered many technical as well as storytelling problems. In the end, the films they made were personal and honest; they contain the contradictions and ambivalence of the actual lived

experience, which was the immediate source of these films. They are simple and sometimes technically rough films, but they reveal the problems Iraqis face everyday, and the ways in which they find the resilience to survive.

The longest of the films, "Baghdad Days", is thirty-five minutes long, and was directed by Hiba Bassem, a young woman from Kirkuk. The film is a moving video diary of her final year at university in Baghdad, as she tries to find a place to live, deals with family problems, looks for work, graduates, considers the bewildering political changes going on in her country, and struggles to come to terms with her position as a woman on her own.

In the film, Hiba confides her grief, anger, confusion, frustration and hope to the camera. At one point, looking straight into the lens, she sings a painful old Iraqi song - beautifully.

A strong narrative thread through the film is the story of her cousin, Ali, targeted because he had worked as a translator, and badly injured when he picked up a phone charger packed with TNT, which had been thrown into his garden.

In the film, Hiba is continually having to move from place to place. Eventually she finds a room to rent in a house, where the landlady suggests she befriend an older man so that she can "exploit" him.

Her family - three sisters, mother and brother - have to leave Kirkuk because, as an Arab family, life has become difficult for them there. Hiba's young sisters talk about the distress they felt on having to leave their friends and their city.

Hiba finds work as an assistant director on a television drama series, but is upset that "any young girl working in this mostly male environment seems to be considered easy prey."

Finally, despite the difficulties of finding a place to live, and though she is

unable to study due to the lack of electricity, Hiba graduates from university. In an emotional outburst in front of the camera, she reveals how her studies have been “a blessing and a curse.”

Hiba also speaks to the camera about the December 2005 parliamentary elections. She says that she will not vote, and does not even know any of the candidates. She later regrets this decision, however. By the time the referendum on the constitution takes place, she has become more hopeful and decides to participate. She ends her film by saying, “If the referendum process is allowed to take place in peace, we will have a chance; but if it is disrupted by violence, you can begin to say prayers for the dead for us.”

Seeing the film now, nine months down the line, during which the country has been fracturing and spiraling into unspeakable violence, this last scene of the film is an unbearably poignant moment.

Hiba’s first idea was not to make a directly personal film like this. Her original subject was to be the family of a child who had been killed in an explosion. She spent hours gaining the family’s confidence and gathering their story. She was interested in how people cope with that kind of pain and how they might be able to recover from that kind of trauma. This is an absolutely essential issue for Iraq at the moment - this question of how you break the sense of powerlessness and victimhood, how you take back something from a tragedy like this which enables you to live. As it turned out, she was unable to make this film, because it became much too dangerous to shoot in the area. She decided, therefore, to tell her own story.

Hiba is remarkably open and honest in her film, and, particularly as a woman, she displays real courage in revealing her emotions, doubts, and anger in public.

The editing process was beset with

technical problems, especially because, out of necessity, it had been shot on a variety of cameras and standards, and weaving the many narrative strands together was a very delicate task. In the end, however, Hiba had a film she was relatively pleased with, though she was also very critical and had learned a great deal. She left Amman with real enthusiasm about carrying on with making films.

Her film has already been shown at various festivals and has won the New Horizon Silver Award at the Al-Jazeera International Film Festival in Doha, as well as the gold award at the Rotterdam Arab Film Festival.

Once Hiba returned to Baghdad, the problems began again. The landlord of the house that she and her family had rented appeared on their doorstep one day with a group of armed thugs, and demanded that her family leave. Though they had a contract and had made all their payments on time, the landlord had found clients who were ready to pay more; as far as he was concerned, the contract was no longer worth the paper it was written on. Without a properly functioning legal system, government, or police force to help them, Hiba and her family had no one to whom they could appeal. They were forced to look for another place to live.

Eventually, they were able to rent another house in a working-class quarter of Baghdad. The area is entirely controlled by armed religious militias. Recently, they issued warnings to all the households in the area: women are now no longer allowed to leave the house without covering their heads. They cannot wear trousers or jeans, and are not permitted to drive. If they are riding in a car, even if the driver is their father or brother, they have to sit in the back seat.

Throughout Iraq, there are increasing

incidents of women being targeted by extremist groups, being violently attacked, and sometimes killed. These threats must be taken seriously. As a result, Hiba and her sisters, none of whom had ever worn *hijab* (Islamic head covering) before, now stand in front of the mirror every morning deciding what to wear so that they will be safe as they make their way to school or work.

In this atmosphere, Hiba says that it is very difficult for a woman to think of making films.

Kasim and I, however, are both anxious that Hiba and our other students find a way to continue developing their ideas and filmmaking skills. Despite the difficulties and danger involved, it can also sometimes be a question of finding a way not to lose heart, to maintain the sense that it is worth carrying on. Right now, this is, of course, an issue for all of us, and not just for our students.

**Maysoon Pachachi** is an Iraqi and British filmmaker. Educated in Iraq, the USA and Britain, she graduated from the London Film School and worked as a film editor in London before turning to directing and producing. She has directed eight documentary films, including the prize-winning *Iranian Journey*, *Bitter Water* about a Palestinian camp in Beirut, and *Return to the Land of Wonders* about her return to Iraq in 2004. She has taught film direction and editing in Jerusalem and Gaza for the Jerusalem Film Institute, the European Union, and at Birzeit University in Ramallah. In 2004, she co-founded a free-of-charge film training center in Baghdad. She is currently developing documentary and fiction film projects.



02

Ziad Turkey

# Migration Towards Destruction

*Photography*

We find ourselves inside the ruins of what once were highly esteemed official buildings, which evoked in us feelings of fear, numbness, and caution; sometimes of disgust, and other times of endearment. These were prisons, interrogation and meeting rooms, but were also rooms which were witness to jokes and laughter. These rooms never lacked the picture of a certain person: the unique, the stubborn, and the mighty one. But today, this picture is no longer there, and the name of this person has lost its

power. In the interior of these buildings I found some who were sleeping on file-cabinets, others who had set up their kitchen in a solitary-confinement cell, and a man who was sharing the former chief editor's room with his wife. I found children playing in the office of a leading party member, and a boy who was flirting with his girlfriend in the room of the general manager. These pictures are dedicated to all of those who deserve shelter, and to their children.





Photographs from the exhibition *Migration Towards Destruction*.



© 2005, Ziad Turky



Photographs from the exhibition *Migration towards destruction*.



© 2005, Ziad Turkey

Born in Falluja in 1964, **Ziad Turkey** finished his studies in theater in 1986. He has been carrying his camera since 1982 and, since that time, has developed his own techniques. Turkey also studied cinema in Baghdad, and later shot his first 35mm film during the war in Iraq. The movie is called *Underexposure* and was directed by Oday Rasheed. He held his first solo exhibition, “Migration towards Destruction,” in Singapore in 2005, which was hosted by the Goethe Institute.





03

Basim Kahar

## “I have Stepped out Beyond the Bounds of Memory in the Geographical Sense”

*Interview with the Iraqi Playwright and Director Basim Kahar, by Koumay al-Mulhem (June 2006)*

Born in Baghdad in 1963, **Basim Kahar** received his bachelor's degree in theatrical direction from the College of Fine Arts in Baghdad in 1990. After directing several plays in Baghdad, including *Macbeth*, *Waiting for Godot*, and *The Phoenix*, he moved to Syria in 1993, where, together with Muzaffar Al-Nawab, he put on the play *Al-Arbana*. Following his stay in Syria, he moved on to Beirut, where he directed several plays at Al-Madina Theater and the Beirut Theater. After immigrating to Australia, Kahar worked at the Sydney Artistic Theater as director and presented many plays in several other theaters across Australia. He has conducted a great deal of research concerning modern theater, written numerous articles and essays, and held a number of theatrical workshops. Kahar now lives between Sydney and Damascus, where he recently presented his latest play, *The Intoxicated Days*.

**Koumay** *We encounter in Iraq the phenomenon of the “artist in exile” – either self-imposed or forced. Where are these people today, now that the rule of Saddam Hussein has been toppled?*

**Basim** Many creative people from the Iraqi intelligentsia have left Iraq due to political or economic conditions, or because of sanctions. Many who are actively engaged in the literary, cultural or scientific arenas outside of Iraq are unemployed (though their minds are still working busily) because of the difficulties which arise when living in a foreign culture, under unfamiliar conditions. If an Iraqi journalist went to Canada, what kind of work would he do there? It is a very big problem, especially if he doesn't know the language, and is therefore unable to navigate a different cultural memory. Some have indeed managed to break through the language and culture barriers, and have managed to achieve many things in a new geographical setting, whether it be in Australia, Canada, France, Holland or any of the other exile destinations. The question that always confronts the Iraqi intellectuals is: what are they to do in exile?

**K** *The fall of Saddam Hussein has removed the reason for political exile, for a time. Has there been any change in the Iraqi cultural scene outside Iraq?*

**B** Whatever has been accomplished outside Iraq has not led to the emergence of a comprehensive theater scene. Jawad al-Asadi has created a great deal of output. 'Awni Karoumi achieved much, and had many more ambitious projects ahead of him, and I myself have been working across five capitals to establish my own body of work. We cannot, however, be considered to represent a comprehensive Iraqi scene together. Each one has worked separately. For me

personally, I continue to contribute to the accomplishments of Iraqi theater on foreign stages for new audiences in various countries. At the time when I left Iraq, I had been one of the founders of an aesthetic movement within the Iraqi theater; all of the projects that I have directed outside of Iraq - which have been more numerous than those produced within Iraq - have not necessarily formed a continuum with Iraqi theater. Though they are definitely a product of an Iraqi and aesthetic cultural memory, I have stepped out beyond the bounds of memory in the geographical sense.

**K** *How would Basim Kahar be today, had he stayed in Iraq? Would he have changed?*

**B** I look at Iraq today - politically, economically, artistically, and culturally - as if I am opening a window and looking in. So right now, it is basically a matter of perception, as opposed to actual engagement with what is going on daily in Iraq. I am worried, in both an artistic and aesthetic sense, about how to even begin expressing such a grand tragedy, how to depict an exploding volcano of this kind, the homeland eating its own, people destroying one another, with killing forming the basis of their existence. It is a serious question. Is Iraq sado-masochistic? Why is Iraq not able to lead a normal life in the same way that other places are? Is there some venal sin that Iraq is being punished for? These are the things that go through my mind as I look through the window.

**K** *When you returned to Iraq two years ago after fifteen years in exile, how did you find Baghdad?*

**B** I was shocked by the places there. I came back to many areas that I could not recognize: the squares, streets,

gardens, and even the air. It was mutual; these places did not recognize me either, and they rejected me. I rejected them too. For me personally, hell is not a place. Hell is a condition, and Iraq is witnessing this condition. The flames have been caused by bullets, and now the souls are aflame as well.

**K** *You are still in exile then?*

**B** Yes, I am in exile, but not only because of the occupation. Iraq will be another hell tomorrow, with its own people killing one another on the basis of sectarian identity.

**K** *Critics treat you as if you represent the Syrian theater, and not the Iraqi theater.*

**B** Maybe I have become a part of the Syrian theater because of the work that I have done there, but I represent my own special experiment, which originated in Iraq. So, in a way, it has been a sort of fusion. I have strong leanings toward a form of theater that is visually exciting and full of surprises, astonishing the audience. It is an offshoot of an Iraqi experiment; I was very influenced by my teacher Salah al-Qasab. My work in Beirut and Sydney represent this kind of theater. I construct my aesthetic ambitions on Syrian, Australian, or Lebanese stages.

**K** *If you presented your play, Arabia, in Baghdad, with all the political statements it entails, many of them dealing with Iraq, how do you expect the reaction would be?*

**B** I could get killed or chased out of the theater. There might be death threats, or the play could be stopped before or during its performance. Whatever the case, I could easily be killed at any time.

**K** *Who would the killer be? Would it be the political forces that rule Iraq today, or the Iraqi public that would refuse what Arabia has to say?*

**B** Both. There is a tendency among Iraqis today not to accept the opinions of others, a tendency which is rooted in history and, unfortunately, continues to be a reality. In addition, there is the fact that the political forces involved today are operating on the basis of eliminating one another, and not on the basis of acceptance, or allowing for equal space. Some friends of mine, who had seen the play in Damascus, warned me not to take it to Baghdad. I had been afraid of that happening, even though I thought that we had all reached a certain age of maturity, from which we would be able to accept different viewpoints. Unfortunately, the psychological and political behavior of Iraqis today is far from having reached that stage. The situation is not one that exists by choice; the political and historical variables have cornered the Iraqi personality into that position.

**K** *This means that the script of Arabia was not meant to be presented to the Iraqi public at all.*

**B** I disagree with the notion that this play is only suitable for a certain type of audience. When I wrote and presented *Arabia* at a festival, the performance was attended by Syrians, Iraqis, French people, and Germans, along with viewers of many other nationalities. The aesthetic statement transcends geography and identity. *Arabia* was a revision of the discourse in that, set between two opposing sides, placed the Iraqi political problem on the table, so to speak. It is a problem which existed both before and during the occupation. The play revolved around what has taken place,

what has to be done now, and what can be expected in the future. This was the principle idea. Some of us accept the occupation and identify its agent as a liberator, whereas others among us carry weapons against it, and identify its agent as an occupier. We have to accept both perspectives. Why should there be only one? Those that carry weapons also share in the geography and space of Iraq.

**K** *Does a director or an artist have the right to adopt a political position?*

**B** Yes. Any ambitious and conscious director must have a clear position. It may be anger, dissatisfaction, or a certain bias that leads you to take a stance; *Arabia* attempts to understand the occupation. This is the first occupation in history that has challenged various concepts in the sense that it has restructured Iraqi and Arab definitions of citizenship, independence, resistance, terrorism, and sovereignty - all these large concepts in our lives have been rattled, and have acquired various new meanings and definitions.

**K** *Though you have declared in the past that the theater does not have a role in effectuating political change...*

**B** Yes, and what I meant by that was that the theater in itself does not have an ideological role, and should not deliver fixed ideology or political messages. I personally do not subscribe to any ideology or political line. I do, however, endorse the idea of citizenship. This should be an open citizenship that allows anyone to live anywhere. Leaving Iraq has taught me to see how the political sphere actually enters every detail of our daily lives: newspapers, food, buses, clothes, and theater.

**K** *Though in past interviews you have said that the theater is incapable of effecting change, a statement that has contradicted many other writers and directors...*

**B** Yes, the theater is incapable of effecting change. Theater is not a political party. It reflects and influences the political situation, but in an indirect way. Theater is not separate from the activities of humans. I do not express myself from the point of view of a purely political being. I am an artistic being who is engaged with themes related to the many different dimensions of beauty. Despite that, beauty does not lack a political message. The difference is that, through beauty, the message is no longer so direct, inflammatory, or extreme. It is more an agent that encourages debate.

**K** *One can conclude then that it would be difficult for the Iraqi theater to play a role in political and civil reconciliation within Iraq.*

**B** Theater is hopeless as an agent of change. It can, however, contribute to a movement towards enlightenment, envisioning a more beautiful life than the one we are living now. When the intellectual is given a participatory role, theater can repay a small part of the balance. Unfortunately, however, culture in Iraq has now become regressive, and is not capable at the moment of producing much, which is not due to it having too little potential. It has accomplished a lot in the past, but there is no role for culture to play when the sounds of bullets, and the cries from killings and massacres, committed because of identity politics, are everywhere. Under these circumstances, what is left for the theater? Or poetry? When a person is unable to turn the electricity on in



his or her house, or when the most basic human services are disrupted or absent, what can culture do?

**K** *One can conclude then that the Iraqi theater is in need of a major overhaul.*

**B** Yes, Iraqi culture is in need of structure. Currently, it operates simply according to personal initiative. Unfortunately, the Iraqi intellectual had been politically emasculated for many years under the fallen regime, and this continues today. Political groups buy up intellectuals, artists, and journalists, and that is why these groups have no power or independence. They are incapable of realizing their potential, and engaging in the discourse. Despite the change in political platforms, political habits remain the same. This static situation is reflected in the field of culture, including the theater. Iraqi theater has accomplished a lot in the past, but is in need of security and the return of civilization - an abundance of civilization.

**K** *In Arabia, we are not told exactly who Tony is. Is he a child of incest, born out of wedlock, or the son of happenstance?*

**B** Tony is the offspring of many nations which, burdened by the prominence of their history, have killed off their future generations by living in the past and not thinking of the future. His generation emerged from beneath the weight of war and defeat. Tony is the son of the unbalanced Arab identity, the unbalanced Arab generation. Tony was a mistake. He had the misfortune of growing up during the Lebanese civil war, and later migrated into a foreign culture. In this case, it happened to be French culture, which was not essentially his. That is why languages confuse him, as do religion and culture. Tony has no reference points. Therefore, he

becomes mentally unbalanced, nervous, sick, and hallucinatory. He acquires a split identity divided across geographical borders. He belongs physically to one region, but historically to another, and culturally to a third... this imbalance leads to his having a split personality.

**K** *Many of the other characters in the play share that split personality. Nahr's husband, Rabah, who came from Germany to kill Americans in Iraq, for example.*

**B** That is correct. In the scene where Rabah arrives at the airport to go to Baghdad, Nahr asks him, "Why are you going? That place isn't yours anymore, you left Iraq a long time ago. Why are you going back? You will be returning as a stranger." Rabah's premise is that identity is not made of gardens, streets or places, but lies in his own personal approach to the world and to the self. He defends his own idea, and not just the occupied land. His definition of identity is malleable, relative, changing, and capable of substitution.

**K** *What about Basim Kahar's identity?*

**B** I feel like an Iraqi. I also feel that I am Syrian, Australian, and Lebanese. I lived in Saudi Arabia for a while, and I feel that I am Saudi as well. I have a complex longing for many places. I sometimes long for Sydney. When I reach Sydney, I might long for Damascus. I might long to take a walk down the old streets, and sit in the Rawdah coffeehouse. Identity for me is a moving, renewable entity, independent from formal institutions which issue things like identity cards, with a name, religion and place of birth. An identity is an aesthetic idea. I direct plays without any regard as to whether they are put on in Baghdad, Damascus, or Sydney. I put on myself, my understanding of the

human condition, my anger at violence, the military, oppression, and tyrannical regimes, and take the side of love and beauty wherever I am.

**K** *The narrative in Arabia where the script is based on the stories of various people, in different places and times, who all meet at a single moment at the end of the road. Why did you decide to write and to direct a script of that complexity?*

**B** Complexity challenges me. I also desire paradox, which is central to posing questions and sparking debate. My work requires the viewer to take on the burden of watching. Enjoyment on the part of the audience does not depend on the simplicity of the message, and the artist and the viewer do not always need to be in immediate agreement. I do not care whether you watch my work for an hour or an hour-and-a-half. What interests me is how much of myself - my anxiety, my images on the stage - you will take with you, and how much will remain after you have gone home. This is what interests me. I will never forget some of the sentences in books I have read, certain ideas I have heard, or images I have seen in movies, plays, and poems.

**K** *When you attempt to present continuous time in difficult, complex stories, don't you put more of a burden on the viewer?*

**B** The viewers themselves enter into many complex spheres of time in a single instance. Why should we place them in one time-zone only? Time is a mathematical construction which is devoid of aesthetics. I deal with psychological and relative time. For example, we think of the past and the present at the same time. Art deals with the same principle, but in a more complex manner, concentrating on deconstructing

time and restructuring it according to one's own aesthetic premises. The current times are difficult. They resemble a kind of imprisonment, in which one mathematical hour can be heavy and overbearing. Presumed time is faster. It is able to span many phases and is flexible enough to allow the aesthetic dimensions of an idea to be developed.

**K** *As an Iraqi artist with a vision, why don't you think of forming your own theatrical group, and presenting your own projects? In your last show, *Intoxicated Days*, you worked with the Syrian group, "Yesterday's Theater," where you were a guest director for the script written by Sa'dallah Wannous. Why don't you work with a permanent set of actors?*

**B** Personally, I do not like to belong to one group, party, or organization. I am against setting up predefined projects. I prefer walking through spaces which are full of possibilities, and having the freedom to follow my own artistic decisions. I always follow that little devil of my imagination, letting it take me wherever it wants to go, and like Sa'di Yussef\* says: "I walk with everyone, but take my own steps."

\* Sa'di Yussef is one of the most famous Iraqi poets. He currently lives in London





04

# Arabia

*Scene from the Play Arabia by Basim Kahar, first shown in Damascus in 2004*



Stills from the play *Arabia* - Courtesy of Basim Kahar.

### *Summary of the Play*

A young Iraqi man named Rabah, who had left Iraq in the 1980s, decides to return to Baghdad to join the resistance against American military forces there. His wife Nahr, who lives with him in Germany and whom he had met in Lebanon, follows him to Baghdad. Nahr had lived in Lebanon before meeting Rabah but had then left because of being chased by her brothers, who wanted to kill her because she had become pregnant by mistake. She gives birth to a baby, who she gives away to a Christian Lebanese family during the civil war. The baby's new family names him Tony. His adopted mother migrates to France and takes him with her. When they return to Lebanon for a visit in 1996, his adopted father is killed in the battle of "Anger Clusters" which was waged against Lebanon by Israel.

As a result, Toni suffers from severe trauma and is admitted to a psychiatric hospital in Paris. He then decides to search for his real mother, Nahr, after finding out that his adopted parents had not been his real parents. All the family members meet in Baghdad after its occupation by the American military in 2003: Nahr, Rabah, Tony, and Nahr's brothers. Nahr is later killed by her brothers, who have followed her from Beirut to Berlin, and then to Baghdad.

In Baghdad, an Iraqi police investigator arrests Toni, and he is interrogated about the death of Nahr and accused of killing her. The police investigator finds out that Nahr is Toni's mother and at the same time arrests Nahr's brothers while they are trying to escape across the border. They are accused of carrying out military operations against the Americans.

Rabah, who is resisting the American occupation, intervenes to release Toni, the son of his wife Nahr. Nahr's brothers confess that they had killed their sister, and Toni is declared innocent. These events take place between Baghdad, Berlin, Beirut, and another Arab village.



Stills from the play *Arabia* - Courtesy of Basim Kahar



SCENE "RABAH LEAVING FOR BAGHDAD"

*(Nahr standing with Rabah. A suitcase is between them. Long silences)*

**NAHR:** Stay.

**RABAH:** Nothing will keep me here.

**NAHR:** It is not as if the whole thing depends on you.

**RABAH:** It certainly is!

**NAHR:** The matter is bigger than you and bigger than all of us.

**RABAH:** It is because the matter is larger than me that I need to go.

**NAHR:** May God keep you...

**RABAH:** If I stayed here I would feel like a coward and a traitor; I would die.

**NAHR:** But the place that you are going back to is no longer yours.

**RABAH:** Nor is this my place. I no longer feel that there is a place for me. Why are you associating the idea of place with houses, streets and gardens? Nahr, place is something else.

**NAHR:** You would become responsible for something someone else has done.

**RABAH:** You are talking about a decision which has already been taken. You think that the matter for me is one of desire, an ordinary choice, a solution to a problem; it is larger than that.

**NAHR:** Why are you leaving me here alone?

**RABAH:** Why did I have to leave my family, my country, my place, coffee-house, streets, and friends?

**NAHR:** Reconsider. I beg you to. Those you think you're going back to aren't in need of you, nor did they ask you to come back.

**RABAH:** I am not going back because they need me. I am going back because I need them. I am leaving now.

**NAHR** (interrupting): On April 9th you

were crying in front of the television. There were thousands of people howling with glee, and when I saw you shouting in the demonstration, marching across the streets of Berlin, I had tears in my eyes and got shivers down my spine, and I felt that something big was going on, something larger than my pain, something that had made you cry at home, and shout in the streets. That is why I wanted to tell you that this is something larger than both of us which we don't understand, something that should make you wake up from your dreams of changing the world single-handedly, and stop you from drawing maps.

**RABAH:** I am not asleep so that I need to wake up from a dream, this is reality here, the reality that you feel every day, the reality which we were born into, grew up with, and left against our will. The reality of homes destroyed, people being herded into incarceration centers, killings, daily bloodshed- what dream do you want me to wake up from? With this life here, every day is a new defeat.

**NAHR:** Why are you feeling the defeat when you are not even a part of it?

**RABAH:** You don't consider me a part of it because I migrated, I left my own place, and here I am in a second one. Place here is a void. To be part or not to be part, the idea is associated with place. My pain is part of it, my burning, my feelings of defeat; my impotence is part of it, my feelings of loss, my being torn up on the inside. Nahr, I am a legitimate part of it. The others are the ones who have chosen, not me.

**NAHR:** I love you. You're my husband and I love you. Please think

cautiously. Is it possible that there is nothing that would make you think carefully before leaving? Maybe there is something that we cannot understand, I beg you, you're here now, you are in Germany, you are a German citizen, nothing can make you be otherwise.

**RABAH:** Nothing, keine, keine democracy, no freedom, no human rights, and I have become a German. My mother gave birth to me in a mud hut on the edges of Baghdad. I saw myself as an Iraqi. I grew up poor and fatherless; the army took me and the wars estranged me. I closed my eyes and crossed the border, and found myself lost in Amman, in Hashemiyyah Square, with fifty Jordanian Dinars. They pasted my picture into a passport and someone had to confirm that I was an Iraqi. There was no family, no homeland, no hope.

Keine Freiheit  
Keine Demokratie  
Keine Menschenrechte  
Deshalb bin ich Deutscher geworden

From Baghdad to Amman to Beirut to Tripoli to Cyprus to Athens to Berlin, in order to become a German, keine Freiheit, a whole week of suffering, lost in the Mediterranean, me and one hundred and twenty others, half of them children, battling waves, fate, fear and coastal guards in order to become a German, keine Freiheit. Iraqi by birth, Iraqi through falsification, German through intervention, German because I am an unneeded Arab, keine Freiheit.

A dark German speaking Arabic, who knows the Qur'an, al-Mutan-

nabi and Umm Kulthum. A German who discusses politics in Berlin coffeehouses with Turks, Afghans, Chechnyans, Bosnians, Pakistanis, Indonesians, Arabs and Kurds, keine Freiheit. A German who is tortured by the sight of tanks rolling over people; people who are not German. A German whose name is Rabah Nuri, deshalb bin ich Deutscher geworden. Nahr, place is just an idea, place is an identity. There is something in my head, something that has no relation to pork, wine, nudity, or even the daily looks of condescension and disgust that assault me. There is something in my head which I have no control over, something that is somehow behind why I am here. That is why nothing is going to stop me from going to Baghdad. I am going to Baghdad unlike other Germans. Never follow me.

*(He carries his bag and leaves, and then comes back to give her a hug).*





05  
Ali Bader

# Iraq: A Long Phantasmagorical Dream

For Those who are not Part of the New Capitalism or  
Retired Communism (May 2006)



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### *The Image*

At first, the image was still hard to make out, a little bit blurry and somewhat difficult to discern: a conference for Iraqi intellectuals, both those returning from overseas and those still residing in Iraq, was scheduled for that coming spring in Iraqi Kurdistan, and was to be held over the course of one week. This was the press release circulated in the newspapers and literary magazines,

and on television screens and Arabic websites: *Six hundred Iraqi intellectuals are to meet in Erbil under the sponsorship of the Al-Mada Cultural Institution*<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> An Iraqi cultural institution that was founded in the 1980s in Damascus by a group of Iraqi communists that had fled from the tyranny of the previous regime. After the fall of Saddam Hussein, the institution was moved to Baghdad, upholding its independence. It encompasses a publishing house, a daily newspaper, and a cultural magazine, and the establishment of a satellite channel is also planned for this year.

Poets, journalists, novelists, critics, painters, actors, cinema directors, philosophers, politicians, and thinkers were all to attend their first conference that coming spring in Erbil.

The picture became somewhat clearer as we moved closer toward the warmth of spring: *Four hundred Iraqi intellectuals will depart from the capital city of Baghdad to meet with two hundred of their overseas counterparts for the first time ever in Erbil, attending the “Al-Mada Cultural Week.”* The image began to come into focus: *Three generations of exiled Iraqi intellectuals will be meeting for the first time in one place with intellectuals from within Iraq.* Three generations separated by exile, politics, migration, and ideology were to present themselves, not through books and articles, but through personal contact. The itinerary was finally more vivid: *Two hundred Iraqi intellectuals from the United States and Europe are meeting at the Sand Rock Hotel in Amman, Jordan. At dawn, a special Iraqi plane will be taking them to Erbil, in Iraqi Kurdistan, where they will attend the Al-Mada Cultural Week.* There, they will be meeting four hundred other intellectuals coming from Baghdad and other Iraqi provinces.

### *The Return of the Citizen*

A refreshing gust of cool air wafted through an April spring evening. Carrying a small leather bag on my shoulder, I made my way toward the Sand Rock Hotel. A yellow taxi drove me to an elegant hotel, which had been built by the Hashemites in the 1920s, in the western part of the Jordanian capital. I had now become one of the overseas intellectuals: I, who had been recognized just two years before as being one of the “inside intellectuals.” It all seemed to be part of an absurd game of place - nothing more

than that - a game which marginalized people by using the idea of place, temporarily dislodging them from their positions, and labeling them as insiders or outsiders. Thus, this game being a result of war, it is to war that I owe my endless skepticism, which has cured me of blind faith, and endowed me with an obsession for clarity in a world created through illogical violence, characterized by chaos and ambiguity.

I got out of the taxi, and headed towards the glass door to the hotel. The porter jumped up from his seat to lift my belongings up onto a cart, but then realized that I was holding nothing more than a small book and a digital camera in my hand. He pushed his cart ahead of him with a resigned air, and I followed him to the center of the lobby. It was opulent and empty, with the exception of the staff: bartenders in uniform, the smiling faces of Egyptian waiters, and the elegant receptionists at the front desk. Aside from them, I was the only person there. I therefore assumed that the conference would not be taking place as scheduled, due to the absence of any other participants. I went up to my room and threw myself onto the bed, falling asleep in my clothes. Several times throughout the night, the shouts of men and women in the corridors, Iraqi accents mixed with well-spoken English, the sounds of carts moving luggage, and of keys opening doors all woke me up. I thought to myself that the attendees must have been arriving at night from all over the world. When I woke up, I realized that this is exactly what had happened.

That morning, the breakfast room was packed. I could not find an empty table or chair, so I stood in the corner watching the scene. There were many people standing and talking amongst themselves; some of them were exchange-

ing greetings, laughing, guffawing, or smiling. I recognized some of them from photos I had seen in newspapers and on television. The generation of Iraqi intellectuals to which I belong is probably the first which had no longer been able to meet any of those from that wave of intellectuals who had left Iraq after the massacres committed against the communists in 1979 by Saddam Hussein. They called themselves the “sixties generation.” This was now my first opportunity to see and meet them, after having known them for almost twenty years as simply ink on paper, and after having become a well-known writer myself. I used to read their work as a teenager, but later criticized their writing and made fun of them in my work. Defending themselves, they attacked me as well. We had been on two different tracks. They were believers, and I was not. I focused on the paradox of life, and the anxiety that gnaws me from within towards everything. My hatred toward all regimes that lead to violence, despotic chaos, and the worship of power was clearly defined.

### *The Wrong Connotation*

In the restaurant, while watching with amazement that mass of vogue hairstyles, beards, perfumes, decorum, and exaggerated rhetoric, I realized that the word exile had been given the wrong connotation. The faces looked healthy, the bodies were fit: these were the bodies of the exiled. As a term, exile had somehow lost its true meaning and taken on another: that of homeland. The fact of the matter is that an exiled person lives exceedingly well in these countries of exile, in spite of the negative connotations implied by the term. This type of exile appears to offer money, beautiful clothes, peace, and health. The homeland does not

offer any of that. There at breakfast, I recognized the great influence held by that falsely coined term, which only served to drag this long phantasmagorical dream out even further. Exile can no longer be encompassed by one definition, nor can homeland be condensed into one term. Both of these terms carry various shades and subtleties of meaning. Exile can be homeland, and homeland can be exile.

### *Retired Communism and the New Capitalism*

Watching these faces from my corner in the restaurant, I could detect that most of those coming from Europe had been the supporters of the deposed communist party, and that some had fought in the guerilla wars in the mountains of the North, or in the wetlands of the South. These had been the followers of Guevara, Ho Chi Min, and Trotsky, and are now the adherents of Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington. The image has not yet been entirely reversed, however. If you concentrate a little, you can still detect the original.

The worshiped revolutionary Guevara still towers behind the new but still transparent capitalism, the sprouting beard and the long hair adjusted to fit the latest fashions. This is what retired communism looks like today, still visible behind the new features of capitalism. Some have retained the Ho Chi Min beard with its pointed tip and shining baldness, somewhat softened by the assaulting scent of perfume. They wear elegant clothes, and expensive capitalist shoes. Trotsky has also been recreated; the round specs, the soft brushed back hair, the recognizable frown, and strong sharp hands. Today, it is a different Trotsky. This Neo-Trotsky has exchanged the international revolution for the scientific, commercial and industrial revolution; he no longer fears currency

exchange, the import-export business, or drinking French wine.

Everything was shining like porcelain plates which have been washed with shampoo: expensive leather shoes, elegant suits, many different scents, watches, rings, silk ties, and ironed shirts. Because these aging fighters had not entirely forgotten their days of leftist and communist struggle against the former regime, however, accents of their former sartorial past were still visible: khaki pants with side pockets, khaki collarless shirts, the uncombed gray hair - all conscious and elegant fashion statements. Beards covered faces that had long been hidden from the sun in Europe. They have exchanged their weapons and tactics. The old firearms used in trench warfare, the guerrilla tactics in the mountains, the continuous uprisings in the southern wetlands that began with Aziz al-Hajj<sup>2</sup>, or the hiding in various attics of Baghdad - these have all been exchanged today for digital cameras and advanced camcorders. In the corridors, their elegant leather luggage had now replaced the brown duffel bags they had lugged around during the guerrilla wars of the past.

### *Women Too*

Women's faces had also changed. The faces of actresses, radio presenters, and poetesses, who thirty years ago, had been all over the newspapers and television screens, were now also in attendance at the conference. These were the bodies that we remembered watching as children. We used to idolize those striking youthful celebrities with their sexy bodies, all arms, legs and shaved armpits - hallmarks of the seventies. Now, these beautiful faces, set in trusted old hairstyles, had somehow managed to remain familiar. Though their skin had

aged, and the dye seemed to be snuffing out the very breath of their hair, I was still able to see in them the heroines of my youth. Their attitudes still seemed to be as bold as they had always been.

### *Old Airplanes and a New Situation*

The plane on the runway added an extra touch of realism to the phantasmagorical dream. Back in the eighties, when Baghdad was focused on possessing the most advanced airplanes in the world, that very model had still been the most modern to exist throughout the Middle East. The authoritarian regime regarded the symbolic spectacle as an expression of its power and modernity. Iraqi airlines had always had the most beautiful stewardesses and the best service. Things changed in the nineties, however. The robust and wealthy state suffered repeated blows, administered by the Allied Forces, and this plane was put out of commission for the duration of the UN embargo because of the no-fly zone regulations imposed on Baghdad. It sat on the runway of the Amman airport for more than fifteen years, subject to dust, wind, and rain, with pigeons making their nests in its propellers. After the fall of the authoritarian regime, it received a quick repair, a few parts being exchanged. The old frame, however, remained, its discarded look becoming another symbolic image of a poor, old, and exhausted nation state.

The stewardesses reflected the same kind of enfeeblement. The beautiful stewardesses with their long black hair and seductive killer eyes... well, that was twenty years ago. They still have the same spark today, but have now become mothers and great aunts, struggling to push their carts up the aisle. Makeup is unable to conceal the wrinkles on their tired faces. Somewhat more conserva-



tive uniforms now cover their sagging bodies but fail to conceal the hands, their nakedness revealing twenty years of war, fire, and smoke. Still here as they were twenty years ago, these women have become a detail in the picture of fear and terror, their seductiveness having been transformed into a kind of sad wisdom.

The pilot had once been a jet fighter, a hero from the old wars who had now become a commercial pilot. Unaccustomed to quiet civil aviation, he was unable to forget his military training. In order to heighten the suspense, for the sake of the passengers, the pilot took a sharp turn and the plane began to take a dive. Visible signs of fear could be seen on all of our faces until, all at once, everything seemed to be running smoothly again. In response to a question put by one of the passengers, the somewhat overweight stewardess laughed, "A military pilot... he's brilliant, but just not used to navigating commercial crafts."

Landing was a different matter. With military dexterity, the plane touched down onto the runway in a brilliant virtuoso display, to which everyone clapped. "Erbil! Yes, it is Erbil!" shouted one of the old guerrilla fighters while smoothing out his white beard.

### *A Crowded and Strange Place*

The reception at the airport was overwhelming. The organizers were ecstatic and were waiting for us with buses. All two hundred people were then chartered to the most luxurious hotel in the city, the Sheraton. It was the only five-star hotel to be built after Kurdistan's separation from the central government, following the first U.S. invasion of Iraq. Its modern architecture is completely foreign to the old city, alienating the hotel entirely from its environment: a tall European-style building in an ori-

ental city of small one-story houses. The facade was built using American reflective glass and aluminum, and the interior was divided into four large halls across two levels, complete with circular banisters and a fountain in the center. A world of wealth, with unlimited food and drink, the inner world of the hotel was completely different than anything surrounding it. European as well as local dishes, and alcoholic drinks were offered at a small bar towards the front of the hall. A developed world flourishes amidst a tribal region governed in medieval fashion, with its mixture of tribal heritage, religion, all that is sacred, and primitive relations. It is a quiet and predictable life which sets the tempo for the rhythm of life in Kurdistan, reminiscent of the unceasing drone of bagpipe music, the maddening repetition of its melody persisting, as the various militias begin to transform themselves into a police force and regular army.

### *Peace and Intellectuals*

Kurdistan is the only region that enjoys peace in Iraq today. It is a peace, however, that is resting on a barrel of gunpowder. The struggles and paradoxes are many; external threats are serious and real. Everything is imposed, and has been forced into an oddly fused contradiction: peace found in an exploding region, a large hotel found in a traditional and backward area, classical music being played to illiterate people, striking and seductive Western clothes amid a tribal world. One simple mistake can unravel the entire artificial and paradoxical image.

<sup>2</sup> A separatist revolutionary who led the guerrilla wars in the southern swamps against the centralized Iraqi government during the 1960s. He currently lives in London.

No doubt, it is a great democracy, but it still exhibits all the drawbacks of a Middle Eastern government: the one-party rule that, until the end of time, will be repeatedly voted into office, and the brutal and unremitting oppression hiding behind the veil of law (an article written by the Kurdish thinker Ahmad Said Qadir<sup>3</sup> placed him in prison for twenty years after a judicial session that lasted two hours).

Rebellion can be an effective means of protest against injustice, despair and despotism, but the revolutionary has repeatedly applied the same blunt instruments as those used by tyrants. Protest becomes revolution, and revolution turns to violence, the shedding of blood, and even to war - rebellion might not always cause complete annihilation, but revolutions will always find excuses for killings. Effective rebellion then turns into horrific dictatorship. The principles of freedom and justice become incorporated as part of a police state, and the revolutionary soon becomes a traitor.

### *Coffeeshouses, Bedouins and Jackals*

On walking into a Kurdish coffeehouse for intellectuals, I was reminded of the title of one of Kafka's stories, "Bedouins and Jackals." Yes, zealous nationalism is still widespread among Kurdish intellectuals. This was apparent in their boycotting the conference, and objecting to the commencement of an Arab conference being held on Kurdish territory. The Kurdish intellectual has absolute faith. He has an absolute aversion to doubt, and is free from any chronic anxiety. Because of this, however, Kurdish culture lacks the heroic rebels, internal renegades, and grand destroyers. Their idea of strong nationalism lacks any solid foundation. They endorsed ethnic nationalism long after the world had abandoned the age of

nationalism, and searched for the state in an age of falling states.

The Kurdish people have paid their dues at last, achieving independence. They have sacrificed a lot, offering up the martyrs and the dead to violence, to which they themselves have become victims. Maybe in the future, like all other fighting nations in the world, they will realize that the victories are never proportionate to the sacrifices; all such sacrifices render pitiful yields. Everyone emerges as a loser from the ubiquitous game of nationalism. After the wars had subsided, standing in numb indifference to the execution camps that were left behind, an atmosphere of bewilderment and naive relief pervaded our senses. We had reached an inexcusable level of realism. As for our hopes concerning the inevitability of justice - those never materialized in our society, except in very tiny measures.

### *The Arrival of the Four Hundred*

The halls were beautiful, the rooms modern, the beds as roomy as the swimming pool and sauna. For those coming from overseas, the Sheraton offered an image of life that was not much different from the one they had left behind, though that same image was completely alien to those coming from inside. The television aired local programs: sad music, the cold voice of the announcer, innumerable scenes of death, voices of fear, anarchy, screaming men and women, terrifying sounds of explosions, trench warfare, kidnappings, slayings, body parts and organs splattering through the air. After watching reports on the local news about the tens of thousands who have been slaughtered (more than one hundred and seventy of which were intellectuals and journalists), an eerie and oppressive silence

began to loom among the viewers. They were stunned, and could do nothing but stare numbly and with a cold gaze at the scenes of violence on the screen, and the rushing ambulances transporting bloodied bodies. Body parts wrapped in blankets and dirty torn towels, all thrown into pickup trucks. Good. Four hundred intellectuals were coming out of this hell. "They are late," said one of the organizers. "The Sheraton can only house those coming from overseas. As for the others coming from the South, they are to be distributed among the other hotels in Erbil."

### *Threepenny Justice*

I do not know why I began humming the "Threepenny Opera," replacing the word justice for opera any time I would hear the phrase, "Erbil isn't capable of accommodating six hundred Iraqi intellectuals." The Sheraton Erbil, a five-star hotel, had opened its doors to the beautifully clean heroes of guerrilla warfare and former political prisoners, whereas those coming from within Iraq, from within the hell of Iraq, well, they were placed in "other" hotels. Of course the word other here has great significance. It refers to those extremely modest, run-down Erbil living quarters, once built in Ottoman style and later left to decay into ruins by an authoritarian regime. This is the case with all authoritarian countries in the Middle East. They hoard up the best infrastructure for the nation's capital, leaving the fringes of society to slowly rot. The intellectuals who had temporarily escaped from the inner hell of Iraq were then stuffed into these filthy hotels, which used to house soldiers from wars past. I had also resided in one of them - as a soldier - at the end of the eighties. I have never forgotten their putrid odor, and dirty blankets,

which had covered thousands of others before me. Here were all those who had escaped for a while from hell, only to find themselves wrapped in the blankets of "green soldiers," living the comedy of the Erbil hotels along with all of their other lovely features: flooding toilets and stinking filth oozing from cracked and crooked tiles, the smell of decay, the lack of good service, the bad treatment, and the searing heat, often without water, and usually without electricity. This is justice... threepenny justice.

### *A Screaming Paradox*

Whereas those coming from Europe had arrived in bold and colorful clothes, those who had come from within Iraq showed up in muted tones. A clear and expressive contrast, sad faces wore beards like the others, but not in the same style as the retired communists. Their clothes were unkempt, and their dialogs rushed. Their conversations were short, and they were not able to stop taking notes on everything that was said. Noticed by all, their poor articulation of ideas led to an endless repetition of thoughts and an embarrassing insistence on truisms. The tendency towards generalization on the part of the "inside" intellectuals is perceived by their overseas counterparts as being an inability to say anything at all. There is a desire to arrive at definitive and decisive conclusions, whereas the overseas intellectuals are free to engage in more intriguing conversations, provocative

<sup>3</sup> After several protests, especially by Arab intellectuals, he was released. In Suleymania, the chief editor of Holati magazine was sentenced to six months in prison because of criticizing the government. A new method applied by the Kurdish government in filing complaints against journalists who are viewed as troublemakers has proven highly effective for the government and, in most cases, has resulted in the imprisonment of those journalists.

and refreshing in their subtlety. While the current events in Iraq appeared distant to the group of overseas intellectuals, the others, in constantly facing danger, experienced a feeling of increasing anxiety about life, and carried with them a sense of responsibility.

Is culture able to prevent disaster? This question conceals a deep sorrow and clear anxiety. Culture is no longer about speaking in a more articulate manner, and ascending the ladder of excellence through the subtlety and cunning of the well expressed thought. Culture no longer retains its old function of elevating speech, or stripping humans of their cruder instincts. All of them - Iraqi intellectuals from overseas and from within - reacted awkwardly to the scenes of free and indiscriminate killing, and realized the impotence of culture in putting a stop to it.

### *A Portrait of the Intellectual as a Young Man*

There are three distinctive types among those Iraqi intellectuals still living in Iraq:

The first is the Islamic intellectual. This prototype hails from Tehran, as representing the metropolis of modern Shi'ite culture. His hair is parted on the side, complemented by a neat black beard and black specs. He is dressed in a wide jacket, comfortable trousers, and a tie-less shirt, buttoned all the way to the top. It is the return of the recycled image of the fighting communist from the seventies that had completely disappeared from cultural life in Iraq. Lenin and Marx have been substituted for images of Ali Shariati and Abdolkarim Sorous<sup>4</sup>.

The second type is the former nationalist intellectual - the combed thick mustache almost concealing the lips, his

black dyed hair is combed back, and fat cheeks support harsh glasses. This is the classic Arab version of the overbearing nationalist male, the only difference being that today, he wears an exhausted look. Unable to maintain the prowess he once enjoyed under the nationalist regime, his appearance now displays the traces of defeat: a wide chest supported by a potbelly, the mustache is somewhat less pronounced, and the hawkish eyes have lost their gleam and cruelty.

The third type is the eternal Iraqi bohemian. This is the ostracized and marginal writer, an Arthur Rimbaud transposed into Arab culture, complete with three head-lice, an abundance of filth, eternal drunkenness, dirty clothes, and bad teeth. He is hostile to any kind of authority, and lives outside of the law, even the laws of culture.

Somewhere between the confines of these three distinct images, there are many contrasting others: young intellectuals brimming with enthusiasm and extremism, new intellectuals in jeans and tight shirts, or colorful T-shirts, worried about their long hair and sideburns being cut off by the religious militias and the conservative youth, whose old fashioned clothes resemble those of the old teachers, in striking contrast to their youthful faces. The common denominator between all of those coming to the conference from within Iraq, however, was that aged look on their faces; the sun had furrowed its marks deep into their skin.

### *Neo-Conservatives and Utopians*

The war is not over yet. The killing, the barbarity and the destruction continue. Dracula is still roaming loose on the streets, devouring the blood of the people. Culture takes on the form of the impossible. The local neo-con-

servatives still stand strong in their faith in glorious illusions. These are the students of Bernard Lewis, Kan'an Makiya<sup>5</sup>, and Fou'ad Ajami<sup>6</sup>.

Then there are the religious utopians, promising people the future blessings of God, as well as the executioners from the bygone regime who are now the heroes of gangs. They are the killers and the exterminators.

Everyone in Iraq has wanted the world to save them, and nobody has wanted to give up faith in the idealism of the West, from Erasmus to Habermas. But the fact of the matter, to be truthful, is that the Western dialog has always been a kind of farce. Reality is nothing great, contrary to what Trotsky used to shout, and the non-reality has not yet been created, according to the myths propagated by the Islamists. Everything points toward a terrible defeat. Everyone has given up their dreams; Iraqi culture has either caved in under the weight of unsolvable paradox, or the many ideological blows which have been delivered. As for the religionists, they alone have a monopoly on power and influence.

The destruction of war is apparent: Baghdad lies in ruins, and the North and South, having suffered from ethnic cleansing are breaking away from the influence of the center. Those coming with the Americans are proselytizing secularism and a widely sweeping form of capitalism. The Islamists, on the other hand, are proselytizing a frightening Khomeini or Bin Laden style despotism. As destruction looms, it never ceases to astonish me how the intellectual sphere persists in trying to hang on to the remnants of ideology.

### *The Conference of the Internal and External Intellectual*

The television and print media covered the conference: forums, meetings, planning, discussions, the formation of a High Council for Intellectuals, planning for a new cultural city, ambitions, hopes, and the sudden disappearance of all violent images, replaced by hope in another life. Conflicts and doubts, however, were to become exposed, and the session on internal and external intellectuals unveiled the tension. The forum began with neutral questions:

“Local literature, overseas literature ... how do we understand these two conflicting trends? Does one cancel the other out?”

The accusations began shortly after: “We wrote a true literature uninfluenced by any authoritarian ideology.” That comment was made by one rosy faced and long haired man before adding, “You caved in to authority that curtailed the role of the intellectual by dragging him into its sphere of influence.”

“We wrote honestly and carefully, facing those in power with courage.” He then mentioned the stories and novels that had escaped the pen of the censor. Another got up from beside him and said,

4 Two Iranian Shi'ite intellectuals who support the modernization of the Shari'a. The first sought to subject Shi'ite thought to rational epistemology and the second encouraged a new reading of the law (fiqh). Both have been rejected by the official authorities in Iran.

5 A well-known Iraqi writer who has written a book in English titled, *The Republic of Fear*. His other book, *Cruelty and Silence*, won him the Lionel Gilbert price. He writes for the Al-Hayat newspaper, the New York Times and the New Yorker. He started his political life as a Marxist, later shifting to more liberal ideas. Makiya was one of the major proponents of regime change through the use of force in Iraq, and is a main defender of neo-conservative politics

6 A Lebanese writer and one of the most important political theorists in the USA concerning the democratization of Arab regimes through the use of military force.

“Can’t we all call for a bridging of the gap between intellectuals in the name of the national spirit so that we can move beyond this biased view? Any binary approach has, no doubt, a negative effect on true literature.” He then went on to describe the perilous escape of intellectuals from death, across the desert, during the past regime.

“You’re elitist and disgustingly arrogant. You cannot see yourself as being above the literature that has made you who you are today.” One person stood up and continued as if he were talking about the cultures of two warring countries: “We demand that the literature within Iraq not be confused with the literature outside Iraq. We should work toward a cultural exchange between both, and overlook the way some writers are attacking others on the basis of writing for or against or outside the regime. I suggest that we take practical steps and set up intense forums between the two groups.”

“You obliterate the mind, and that is an escape strategy for the defeated. The internal literature is the only true one; as for those living overseas, these are the cowards, we have lived through hell for many years.”

“You lived under a dictatorship, the authority destroyed your perspective, making you incapable of producing a true and humanistic literature, because there was no escape from censorship.”

### *The Long Phantasmagorical Dream*

The sense of loss and defeat was communal. Staying alive appeared more urgent in its immediacy. Everything became chaotic, full of strangling abstractions, and rotten and passive utterances. It was reflective of the pure chaos which has provided the fertile ground for insurgency, and a breeding ground for

civil war. The Islamists want to make beauty an antithesis to thought. The local neo-conservatives are awaiting the companies and a ferocious secularism to organize our world and ameliorate its deformed image. Independent intellectuals are looking for rational solutions that would offer happiness. They do this without despairing, but also without having any evidence that these solutions will ever materialize. “Where is the evidence?” I ask myself. Culture is no longer an enemy to utopian daydreams, and maybe this is where the danger resides. This is because there is no place for criticism. Criticism has never been accepted in Iraqi society. Revolutionaries in Iraq have always depended on the eradication of the intellect and the deformation of the mind. In their vision today, the Islamists lack the farsightedness to allow for any critique of thought. This is how culture can come to an end, moving away from its function of exposing injustice and towards participation in the very creation of it. This is the post-war reality, the reality of despair that makes many, including the populace, aware that the only reality is that of the human looking at his or her end, the force of circumstance, and time. This is the painful bitterness of paradox. I, however, could not find the slightest sympathy for the rhetoric of the intellectuals who, amid an obscene cultural dialog, did not flinch to excuse the mistakes and the cruelties of the past regime or the errors and cunning of the occupation.

Everything has come grinding abruptly to an end. This is Iraq - that long phantasmagorical dream which awoke its intellectuals on the tenth day of their journey, some to return to their homeland as if it were exile, and others to return to their exile as if it were, indeed, their homeland.

**Ali Bader** was born in Baghdad in 1964, where he studied French literature. In 2001, he published his first novel, *Papa Sartre*, in which he critically portrayed the 1960s generation that dominated the cultural sphere in the Arab region then. The novel, which has been translated into French, won him the state award for literature in Baghdad in 2001 and the Tunisian Abu al-Qasim al-Shabi Award in 2003. His novel *The Family's Winter* appeared in 2002. It deals with the decay of the Iraqi aristocracy in the 1950s. Three years later, he published *The Naked Feast*, on the emergence of the Iraqi intelligentsia at the beginning of the 20th century. Bader's novel *Fury, Women and an Unknown Writer* is his most popular piece, and depicts the marginalized generation of poets and novelists living in Iraq in the 1990s, and their lives under dictatorship and international sanctions. In addition to writing novels, he has worked as an editor for "Al-Tali'ah (Avantgarde)" literature magazine and published several articles and poems in Iraqi and Arab newspapers and magazines. Ali Bader currently lives in Amman, Jordan.











o6

Lutfia al-Dulaimi

# Culture under Occupation

(June 2006)

Many factors lie behind the problems facing the cultural sphere in Iraq today: the occupation, and the chaos caused by it; the hegemony of religious forces; the absence of a legitimate authority, and the lack of any effective civil institutions. Iraqi culture has suffered tremendously from the resulting disintegration. Cultural institutions have been turned into instruments of power-sharing politics by the new ministerial executives who run them, and who have never had any connection to culture, nor exhibited a full understanding of its horizons, its relationship to society, or its political and human dimensions. These problems have created a kind of vacuum

and prevented us from reestablishing any kind of comprehensive national cultural product or vision, from correcting past errors, and from establishing a basis for the future of Iraqi culture in the wake of war.

Iraqi thought today is subject to intellectual violence, marked by the religious fanaticism and sectarian and national conservatism now prevalent in political and social circles. This violence is the natural consequence of the current problematic political process, and the disorganization of the politicians, who have substituted the dictatorship of one-man rule for that of an oligarchy.

### *Lost Identity*

The once well-established Iraqi cultural institutions, or what is left of them, have undergone the most violent forms of destruction in their entire history. This began immediately after the fall of the dictatorial regime, along with the arrival of the occupation forces in Iraq. Libraries were burned and looted, archaeological treasures destroyed, and museums were ransacked. The Iraqi National Museum was among the first to be targeted. The libraries of national universities were also robbed and, in some cases, burned down completely. The occupation forces also destroyed several Iraqi archaeological sites. Their soldiers, along with a number of organized gangs, looted ancient treasures and other priceless items from the local museums in various Iraqi cities. In response to the wanton destruction of the country's museums and burning of its national archives and libraries, the British journalist Robert Fisk has coined the term *year zero* when referring to the start of the occupation in Iraq. These acts were aimed at the obliteration of the Iraqi cultural identity. We have thus been left with a blank page, which is waiting to be filled with an alien history and by a foreign culture. These events should tell us that we are now witnessing the consequences of the deliberate destruction of any kind of Iraqi cultural identity. This has led to an atmosphere of sectarian and ethnic prejudice, far removed from the sense of national pride and culture we once shared.

### *Party Affiliations of the Past and Future*

Whereas members of the Ba'th Party decided on cultural issues based on a precise hegemonic political vision with all its narrow chauvinism, current governmental positions - since the fall

of the regime and the beginning of the occupation - have fallen into the hands of people with no connection to culture whatsoever. The former Minister of Culture, for example, had been a member of the police force in the last cabinet under Ibrahim al-Ja'fary, before later becoming a merchant dealing in animal fodder. After his party had nominated him to fill the cultural position in the cabinet, he admitted to having not read a single book over the course of the last two decades. He has defined the intellectual as, "a person who has been raised on national and Islamic values, and rejects the hegemony of foreign cultures." The minister has the freedom to define his own agenda. Meeting with the tribal leaders, he has sought the release of prisoners as part of an "ethical cultural" mission. The problem has become even worse with the formation of the new government, under which - in stark contrast to the times of authoritarian rule under Saddam Hussein - culture is no longer a political priority. Seats are distributed along party lines without any kind of qualification assessment being conducted or even considered. The criteria, as already demonstrated, are not based on whether the person has any kind of cultural qualifications whatsoever or whether they are familiar with cultural activities, intellectuals and artists, or cultural trends in Iraq or the rest of the world.

### *The Religious Authority and its Interpretations*

One of the gravest problems facing us at the moment is the monopoly held by religious institutions on culture. Their interpretations are severe, and the justification which they feel in punishing those who have transgressed their understanding of the boundaries of the sacred is dangerous. This has an immense impact

on creativity and thought in general.

The religious authority has its own agenda and ensuing interpretation when banning art, and exhibits no remorse in punishing or killing transgressors without any regard for law, civil rights or human rights. Amid the chaos, and relative ease with which an executive order can be given, the role of the intellectual has decreased dramatically, and many writers and artists have simply withdrawn. Cultural institutions have closed down. Musicians, rehearsing in secret, have now stopped carrying their musical instruments in public for fear of the Taliban-like reprisals. What goes on in Iraq today in terms of banning and criminalizing the artist is a clone of what is going on in Iran.

The Conservatory for Music and Ballet is a cultural center from which many musicians and teachers have received their degrees. It supplied the Iraqi Symphony Orchestra with an abundance of brilliant musicians, many of whom have now left to work overseas. The school had already been subjected to threats, before looters smashed pianos and other musical instruments, and destroyed the ballet rehearsal rooms. Teachers from both disciplines have received death threats. The principle ballet instructor, an Iraqi who had studied in Russia, resigned and left the school in 2006. The building itself has been subjected to damage from car-bombs exploding nearby. Many students have since left the conservatory. Among these, my own granddaughter had to end her studies when the family was forced to flee to Jordan for security reasons.

### *Secularism in Danger*

The clearly secularist trend in Iraq came to a complete halt the moment religious forces were able to begin meddling

in the artistic, poetic and theatrical life of the country. This forced many production groups to perform their plays outside of Iraq. Some made compromises, presenting religiously oriented dramas, funded by religious parties and the government. Religious authorities also infiltrated the Writers Union, and especially the Poetry Festival in Marbid. Women have now been banned from the festival as participants for this year. The poet Adnan al-Sayegh received threats; his tongue was cut out because he had written poems with a Sufi bias in addressing the divine, and the gruesome event was filmed on video. He had titled them, "Quarrelsome Poems."

### *New Values Result in New Budgets*

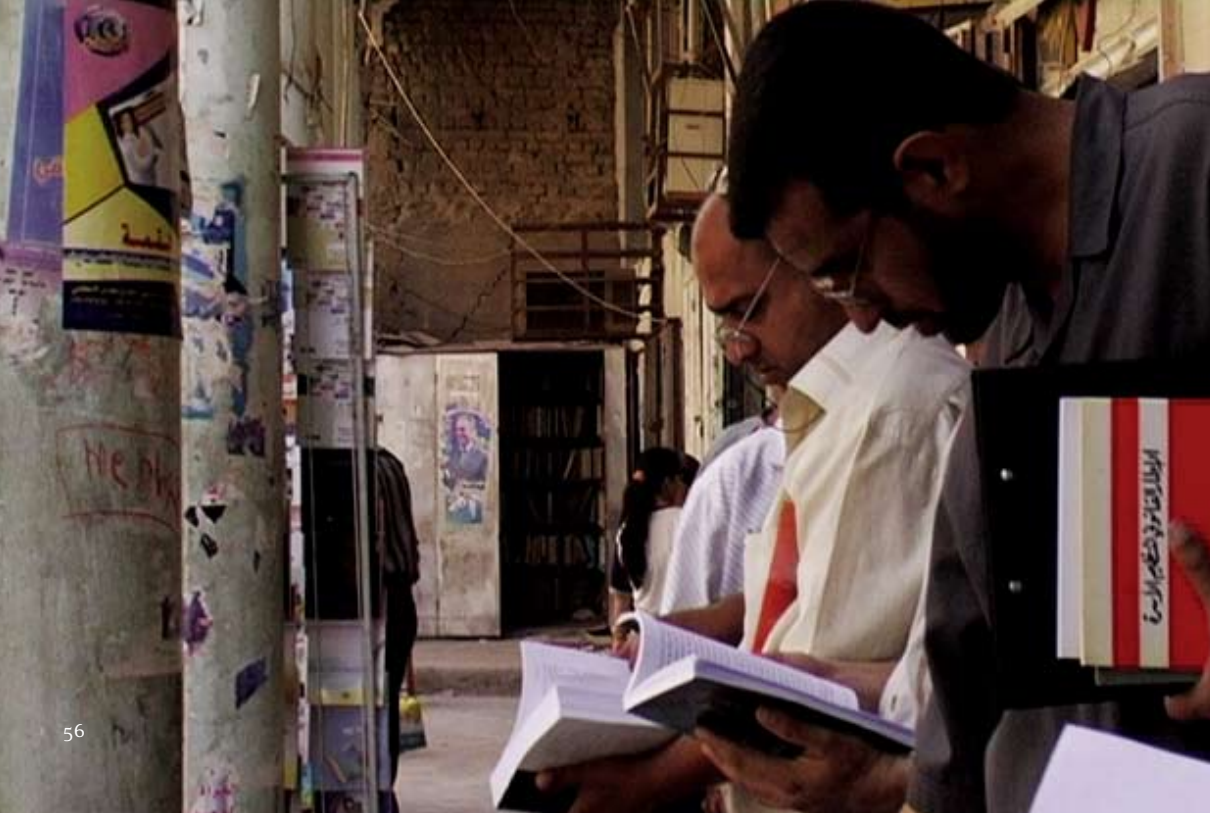
Under the rule of Saddam Hussein, the publishing of work from Iraqi writers - even those living overseas or deceased - was subjected to a basic criterion, namely: does it support the party, or does it oppose the dictatorial regime? This decision was not based on artistic or original merit, which, in general, explains the poor, almost worthless quality of these works. Publishing has faced many new problems as a result of the recent changes made in the Ministry of Culture and the massive lay-offs which occurred when power was transferred from the provisional government to the intermediary. New posts were filled by relatives of incoming ministers, which played a part in limiting activities of the ministry to the field of public relations. The new minister canceled all decisions which had been made by the previous appointee, including a list of books about to be published. The minister then began attending overseas conferences as a representative of Iraqi culture, having no knowledge whatsoever about the issues at hand. Soon after, the new Ministry for













*Previous spread and left: Pictures from the Al Mutanabbi Bookmarket in Baghdad, February 2006, taken as stills from the movie *Connecting Baghdad* (produced by Depoetica, MICT and Melanie Ring) Camerawork in Baghdad: Osama Rasheed.*

Civil Society Organization was established. The first item on its agenda aimed at halting the work of syndicates, unions, and other civil organizations by freezing funding. This brought their activities and any positive cultural influence they had enjoyed to a standstill, making them entirely dependent on directives from the Ministry of Culture, rendering them ineffective and powerless.

Funding was also curtailed for the publication of magazines and journals. The level of hypocrisy involved has been apparent in the government's endorsement of its own publications, propagating its own point of view using public money. There has also been a takeover of government scholarships that had previously been earmarked for independent cultural projects. These have now become a political tool of the state and its radical religious dictates.

Religious cultural indoctrination is available at no cost in schools now amok with religious and sectarian instruction. In addition, of course, the religious parties have innumerable publications and websites, strongly funded by countless sources. I am the editor of a cultural magazine. The government has restricted funding, reducing our budget by half. We had planned on releasing the journal every two months starting with the fourth issue. As a cultural journal, our themes deal with issues of place, Iraqi archaeological heritage, and ideas concerning reconciliation, in addition to coverage and critique of cultural and intellectual projects in other nations. From the current trends, we can surmise that we will be facing more publication difficulties in the future. A political and religious hegemony is set on controlling publication, and curtailing freedom of expression along with any drive toward creativity. The Minister of Culture, set

to be in office for the next four years, is a graduate from an Islamic religious university. It will become more difficult to set up or maintain publication houses, and the trend is toward strengthening religious censorship of cultural and artistic activity, and submerging the country into an age of darkness, and religious and intellectual bigotry. This is a dangerous indicator of the kind of consolidation of radical views to be expected on the local level in the future. Print mediums and cultural activities are totally dependent on government funding. Independent organizations and cultural institutions are in danger of losing their influence and momentum entirely in the coming years.

**Lutfia al-Dulaimi** is an Iraqi writer and novelist. She has published twenty-two books, including novels, short stories, and studies, as well as written three theatrical works. A large number of her articles have appeared in Iraqi and Arab journals. Some of her stories have been translated into English, Italian, Polish, and Romanian. She has authored several studies, including many about the experiences of Iraqi women during previous wars and occupations of Iraq, contemporary Iraqi culture, and one study about the image of Arab women in contemporary media. Al-Dulaimi is the editor-in-chief of the cultural magazine “Hala,” which is published in Baghdad. In 2003 she established the Shab’ad Center for Women’s Freedom in Baghdad.



07

# Like the Ancient Hypatia

A Poem by Siham Jabbar

*Translation, © 2006 Shakir Mustafa, Boston University*

## Like the Ancient Hypatia

My hands are but your hands,  
your mouth but a lip of mine.  
You're part of my darkness, and  
what better than darkness  
for a lonely woman's pedestal?

No, you're not my finger,  
not my hand, or eyes  
bewildered in the dark,  
and not even the darkness,  
for no lonely woman was ever on a pedestal.

Like the ancient Hypatia,  
I was skinned, and I learned  
to calculate on human bodies  
the mathematical odds of survival.

I slowly patched that skin, and squeezed  
the indifferent eyes that watched.  
They were not themselves, but  
I remained the same.

I bathed in all the philosophies,  
and flocked with headless statues,  
as I scrutinized the lynching mob.  
Perhaps they're the Barbarians, or just lost  
Bedouins. The gods have decreed loss  
to grow between the fingers. Every hand is  
a lost hand, and every love a form of savagery.

What do these beasts look for in my blood?  
A hand will tear apart my heart, and  
squander away all its passions. They'll put me  
in a coffin. Will the coffin turn into a weapon?  
And will death stain a timeless wilderness?  
Survival is for the fittest, not for me.

They run in my blood, vessels  
for a wise woman's death. Brains  
are the food the diabolical feast on.  
They revel in your naivety. Silence  
would have spared your life, and patience  
would have tempered your passions.

A perfect mathematical equation  
requires disciples who cherish this  
piece of wisdom. Lock it up  
in a tight glass container.

I remain that lonely woman, and you –  
a perpetual betrayer.

*Siham Jabbar*

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08

Oday Rasheed

# “Baghdad is a City that the Camera’s Lens Cannot Capture”

*An Interview with Iraqi Film Director Oday Rasheed  
by Koumay al-Mulhem (August 2006)*

*Photos: Osama Rasheed*



Born in Baghdad in 1973, **Oday Rasheed** joined the film department at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad in 1998. It took Rasheed only a few months, however, to realize that the filmmaking academy seemed more to offer fixed ideology than it did cameras or equipment. Students even graduated from the school without having once stood behind a camera or having developed even the slightest desire to experiment with film. Highly disappointed, Rasheed left the academy but kept a working space there with his friend Hassan Belassim. After Rasheed had left the school, a large number of students approached him, requesting that he complete their graduate projects for them in return for payment. The outcome was Rasheed having made numerous films in five years, allowing him to gain extensive experience in filmmaking. Oday Rasheed’s first movie was a black comedy about a group of young nihilists in Baghdad, a group that he himself belonged to. This movie was followed by another, which dealt with the end of that movement and the existential destinies of its heroes. Among others, Rasheed has made the following films: *The Entrance* (1998), *Gilgamesh - The Legend*, *The Place* (documentary, 2000), *The Pulse of the City* (burned during the war in 2003), and *Underexposure* (2005). This last film provided the point of departure for the following interview.

**Koumay Al Mulhem** *Let us begin with your film Underexposure, which you shot on a kind of tape that Kodak had stopped producing more than twenty years ago. Where did you get the idea for this film?*

**Oday Rasheed** In the beginning of the nineties, I was a young man who had just put his puberty phase behind him, both intellectually and artistically. The embargo had been put into effect, and its consequences were severe. The United Nations had banned the importation of cinematic material because of any possible other usage. Due to the embargo, there were no films being made at that time. Iraqi cinema had come to a complete standstill.

Rolls of film which had been imported from Kodak in the early eighties did still exist, however. Produced in 1975, the material had not been used since 1982 and had been very poorly stored by the Department of Cinema and Theater. During the first days of the 2003 war, I knew that thieves were stealing everything from the country's various institutions, including this film material. My friends and I were able to save seventy-five boxes of it (each box with around four hundred feet of film). We were able to buy some from the so-called "thieves' market," found some at the Department of Cinema and Theater, and purchased the rest from silversmiths in Baghdad who were using the same material.

Right before the war began, I had the idea of producing a twenty-five minute documentary entitled *Pulse of the City*. Its main theme was how to plot a panoramic shot of Baghdad as a city in apprehension of war. I approached the Department of Cinema and Theater with the project, explaining that it would have no political implications whatsoever with regard to the state or current regime, and that the group working on

the project would be doing it for free. We started using that same kind of film without running any preliminary trials, and the material was to be processed in Damascus. In the end, however, due to the war, the project was not completed, and many of the shots that we had taken were later burned when the Department of Cinema and Theater was bombed. During the war, of course, I experienced a total breakdown and began questioning life, and its purpose. In those moments I was a drowning person. It was my friends who saved me.

**K** *The movie Underexposure is made out of that same old Kodak material. Was it an aesthetic choice to use this outdated material, especially as the title of your film seems to indicate that?*

**O** *Underexposure* is a cinematic or photographic term used to indicate that the film has not been suitably exposed to natural light, or that there has been a problem in exposing it to light during development. When I was preparing the film, my thoughts revolved around this same idea. We too are "material" not sufficiently exposed to light. Hence, the title of the film has a double meaning. I am not saying that using underexposed material is symbolic in itself, but more that it contains references. Why did I use that material? For many reasons: I would not have had the courage to embark on such an adventure had it not been for the genius of the photography director Ziad Turkey, who convinced me that we would be able to translate the colors and conditions of the city through the material. He has immense photographic experience. At the same time, I had no other choice. We wanted to generate a reflective response to what was going on - to the collapse of society, the collapse of the state, and the idea



*Above and following spreads: Shooting of Underexposure in Baghdad*

of occupation. We wanted to respond thoughtfully and reflectively to these ideas and not simply in a journalistic or documentary manner. All of these things came together - the impossibility of importing up-to-date material, the availability of the old film, and the experiments that Ziad had conducted using that material.

**K** *There has been some confusion as to whether the film is a dramatic piece or documentary. In the last scene, you used actual statements given by Iraqi citizens, which gave the movie a documentary tone. On the other hand, the movie followed a dramatic narrative, and you used actors to give testimonies which you had written yourself. It was as if you had finished the film without having settled that issue. Was the film a narrative or documentary?*

**O** In general, the tools of a filmmaker are comprised of a complete script, a well-studied sequence of production steps, and pre-management of actors and production teams, along with the rest of the basic steps involved in cinematic production. When I started the movie, however, I was carrying more the tools of a poet. For me, that was an existential and inevitable necessity. Furthermore, at that time, it was impossible for me to be a filmmaker, although it is true that I was working in cinema, using the film, using the camera, working with angles, and using all sorts of other cinematic tools to complete this project that I dare not call a film. *Underexposure* was not a film in my view; it was a visual diary.

**K** *It appears to me that Underexposure is a film without heroes. Even the central character, that of the director, Hassan, was rather a witness to the movie than a hero.*

**O** The hero of the film is Baghdad, and not what is happening in Baghdad. Baghdad was also ambiguous within the film. Hassan felt that he was losing his city, watching it slip through his hands, whereas his wife was saying, "We are Baghdad. It is only if we lose ourselves, that the city will be lost."

**K** *Baghdad in your movie is not a city, but is described in the movie as "an idea, which the river has split into two, a lost train in Baghdad." Which Baghdad were you talking about?*

**O** That, exactly, is Baghdad. It is a city that the camera's lens cannot capture. Although, as an artist, you still try to grasp whatever you can through it. Baghdad is not defined in the film. Until the moment Hassan (a character in the movie) and I were able to touch upon the city with our meditations and reflections, Baghdad was more like a lover who one is forced to leave because she has committed a grave mistake. The mistake that Baghdad had made was allowing its people to move away from meditation. I do not mean meditation in the Sufi sense, but more a type of reflection that leads to analytical thought and civilization. This type of meditation was prevalent in Baghdad in the 1960s and all the way up to the mid-eighties, when the collapse started. This insistence on its own destruction and that of all those who loved it, that is the mistake that Baghdad has made.

**K** *Why did you decide to stay in Baghdad?*

**O** Because I am a "Baghdadian" and a lover of Baghdad and the Tigris River. My belonging to Baghdad was an absolute given until I came up against its nasty teeth. My first thoughts of running away surfaced when I was eighteen years old. Most of my close friends did just that. There were eight of

us; three have remained in Iraq, and the others have emigrated. Throughout the embargo, during which time I turned twenty, I enjoyed what has been my most fertile period in terms of self-experimentation. I was aware that Baghdad was the ideal psychological terrain for my own education and cultural formation.

**K** *Then Baghdad has been your teacher... but in your film, there are glimpses of western schools of cinema, the modern French wave for example....*

**O** There are two answers to your question. One is technical, and the other is more abstract and related to aesthetics. From a technical angle, this film, in one way or another, belongs to a moment of fusion between two schools: the new

Italian realist school and the French new wave. Along with these elements, there are also poetic cinematic elements. That goes for the technical angle. As for the more abstract: this is not a film, so I cannot categorize it as such. It is, as I have emphasized to you, a visual diary of my thoughts and my relationship to the city.

**K** *You have never left Baghdad and have witnessed its besiegement. How did the influence of these schools reach you?*

**O** One of the main features of Baghdad is that, though it goes through hunger phases, prostitutes itself, and kills its own children, it has always been possible to be artistically and culturally active in the city. In doing so, however, the creation of substitutes or alterna-



© 2003, Osama Rasheed

Shooting of *Underexposure* in Baghdad

tives has been an inevitability for the Iraqi intellectual. Yes, I have undergone a very cruel experience in Baghdad: the absence of film. I was able to read about Godard or Fellini, but it was very difficult to get hold of the films. I did not see the film *Eight-and-a-Half* by Fellini, for example, until after I had arrived in Europe to edit my film after the start of the 2003 war. By the time I had seen it, I already knew every scene by heart. My true education and schooling took place in Iraqi cultural coffeehouses. That does not mean that we did not watch movies, but in general, we cinematographers were born from a literary womb, and learned more from reading about films than from watching them.

**K** *Underexposure includes both theatrical and poetic elements, in addition to it being a movie, as if you needed to let out all kinds of pent up artistic energy - as if you wanted to get away with doing everything all in one movie.*

**O** On the contrary. I told the film crew from the very beginning that we would be unable to produce a great movie, but that we were definitely capable of producing an honest one, which does not necessarily exclude the elements you have just mentioned. There are elements present that might seem non-cinematic when compared to the conventional standards accepted by the Arab world in thinking about film. The combination of all those elements was not based on some kind of desire on my part to translate all that I have within me into film, but was more due partly to conditions related to production, as well as to mobility problems with the production crew. In addition, I allowed myself to think freely and told myself that nobody would hold me accountable for this movie, because, on the one hand, it ignored the

box-office standard, and on the other hand, it formed a complete departure from Arab and Iraqi cinematic heritage. Consequently, I was working in isolation from the culture that produced me. I do not expect to answer to the same kind of accountability, judgment, deconstruction and reconstruction of a film as would be the case with a Yusri Nasrallah film. Mine is a very different situation.

**K** *I want to return to the choice that you took in structuring your movie: a camera within a camera and a film within a film - Brecht's estrangement effect - saying, "Watch out, this is theater." It was as if you were alerting the viewer that this was a movie and at the same time you were saying that this was not just a film, but was life and was actually taking place.*

**O** That was my view of life then. I was trying hard to find a psychological balance. It was healing for me to reduce all what I was seeing in life down into dramatic elements. When I would spot someone breaking in and stealing something from the Department of Cinema and Theater in Baghdad, I actually wanted to shoot him (of course, I did not and do not own a gun); but instead, I would transfer the bloodthirstiness which I felt toward the thief into a dramatic element. I would turn my head and look for the camera and for a director who would say to me after a while, "Cut! End of scene." I would tell my friends that this was not part of real life and that the scene would end, saying, "The fire will end, the destruction will end right?" I became like a mad man asking a crazy question, and this phase carried on into the making of the film. I was not thinking of Brecht or Godard. I was only thinking of someone saying, "Cut!"



**K** *Sex was present in one scene, but in a very minimalist way. Despite the scene having sexual implications, that dimension was not fully developed in the film, though there were opportunities for this to happen.*

**O** This is one of the most important comments I have heard. We - that is we in the Islamic world - have a triangle of taboos: religion, politics and sex. Nevertheless, it is possible to discuss these taboos, but not at that particular time, due to what Baghdad was experiencing as a result of the invasion in 2003. In those days, we did not breathe in the normal way, we panted. I want to add something else here - a personal observation - which is that my hands are tied when it comes to addressing the subject of sex.

We had two main actors who withdrew from the project before the shooting because they were worried about the film being too experimental and uncertain about what its message might be. As you know, this can be a problem in our society. In Baghdad, we still lack a code of ethics for filmmaking, and are, therefore, now trying to establish one. In our cinematic tradition, an actress is simply a woman who stands in front of the camera to say a few socially oriented sentences. Outside of that framework, topics simply cannot be raised. I would not have been able to produce the scene that you have mentioned, with its simple sexual innuendos, had it not been that Maryam Abbas (Maysun in the movie) is an Iraqi actress who lives in Germany, and not in Baghdad.

**K** *What does it mean to you that your film is number one hundred among Iraqi films, and that it is the first film to have been produced after the arrival of the coalition forces in Baghdad?*

**O** Will you write down what I say?

**K** *Of course!*

**O** Shit.

**K** *Let us leave numbers aside then. I would like to ask about your generation when it comes to cinema. What are its current themes? What is your reading of the young filmmakers movement in Iraq today?*

**O** I cannot talk about my cinematic generation in the true sense of the term, but I can speak of friendships. Throughout the nineties, there were only two of us, Hassan Belassim and myself. We failed terribly in provoking and winning over other students in the film academy at the College of Fine Arts, meaning those closest to us in age. Both of us were erupting with energy, but Hassan could not bear it, and he emigrated in 1998. I stayed behind on my own. Recently, another small phenomenon appeared, represented by two other young men, Haidar al-Helo and Murad Atshan. These are friendships, however, and not generational movements.

**K** *You and your friends formed a group and called yourselves "Survivors." What did you survive?*

**O** The poet Faris Harram, who had cooperated with us in writing the script for *Underexposure*, suggested using the word. We had survived the authority of official culture. We had met each other in the 1990s, and a group of friends was formed in which all of us agreed to reject much and accept little. Art constituted our main connection. Some of us were poets, some were artists, and others were involved in theater. Though we had given ourselves a name, we were not very well known in the nineties. It was a group concept similar to that of the Iraqi cultural coffeehouse. For us, the idea was more a declaration of doubt than

of certainty. We escaped being tainted by the official institution, but were we saved from the occupation? From religion? The group has since collapsed.

**K** *What do you mean by collapse? Was it because of personal or intellectual disagreements?*

**O** An important part of the personal relationships fell apart, and intellectual disagreements and opposing positions developed - in short, what happened to Iraq is what happened to the group.

**K** *Is this the current trend for cultural movements in Iraq? Or are there any new movements in the post-Saddam era?*

**O** Right now there are religious trends. The only clear phenomenon in Iraq at the moment is sectarian and ethnic polarization.

**K** *What happened to the influence of the '60s and '70s generations on you as intellectuals and artists? Was your boycott of this group final?*

**O** With regard to the cinema, they had no influence at all. There were some Iraqi films, but they had no lasting educational effect on me. I've watched films from this era because they are accessible and easily digestible in that you leave the theater without being upset about anything. Iraqi cinema has not been born yet. We do not have a cinema and we cannot talk about one.

**K** *But the influence of those groups was not only related to cinema, was it?*

**O** Let us speak about three cultural trends that have affected not only Iraq, but the whole region. The first was the Iraqi poetry movement that began within the context of modern classicism with Al-Jawahiri, and then moved toward

modern poetry with Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Nazik al-Mala'ikah, al-Bayyati, and Boland al-Haidari. The second trend was the Iraqi visual arts movement that began with Jawad Salim and Fa'iq Hassan and still continues. It is a very important movement that has clearly had an impact on the region. There are also other names. Most of them have stayed in Iraq and have never lived in exile, but nevertheless have had a great influence on the formation of the cultural movement. There are some exceptions, of course, such as Jabr Alwan, who started living in exile for ideological reasons and ended up staying there for practical reasons. The movement continued with young Iraqi artists from inside such as Dhiya' al-Khuza'i and Ahmed Nussaif.

**K** *And the third influence?*

**O** Yes, the third influence is the Iraqi literary movement. Though the production has not been voluminous, there are Iraqi novelists and writers such as Fu'ad al-Takarli, Gha'ib Tu'mah Farman and, recently, Ali Bader. In terms of short stories, Mohammad Khoudayyir is an important name and there are many more.

**K** *Most of those who you have mentioned are from within Iraq. What about interaction between those who have moved overseas and those who have stayed in Iraq? Has geography determined their identities, or is there a continuum?*

**O** Of course. Those who have left have formed a continuum with those who stayed. Evidence of this can be seen when tracing the achievements of those who have moved overseas: many of them did not contribute much. We need to differentiate here, however. Those who left in the '60s and '70s did so for ideological reasons. They took a stand





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and settled in exile. There, they continued to take a stand, and produced work to present their points of view. They laid the cultural foundations together, regardless of whether they were leftists or existentialists. The intellectuals who left in the nineties, on the other hand, produced less and were weaker in terms of content. They had only left because they had become bored. Most of them, not all of them, had been very influential and had been known prior to leaving as being important pillars of official Iraqi institutions. For those of us who stayed, however, the kind of pressure we were exposed to in the 1990s served as a true incentive for searching and questioning. Take Ali Bader as a writer, for example. All of his novels, first published at the beginning of 2000, had been written in Iraq during the 1990s. I have read most of his work, including *Papa Sartre*, which was also written in Iraq. Many other Iraqi intellectuals were producing work during that same period. I personally was not involved with any governmental institution related to cinema, because they were mainly associated with state propaganda. Intellectually this created a problem for me, and at the same time affected me artistically.

**K** *Do you think the current political situation in Iraq allows for any artistic output?*

**O** No, not in any way, and it won't in ten years from now either. The situation now is totally dark. There is no hope. The religious power is consuming everybody, and the politics of elimination and exclusion are besieging everyone. The restrictions which were in place during Saddam Hussein's rule were less constricting in comparison with what is happening at the hands of the religious powers. This certainly is not an advertisement for

Saddam Hussein, but being a researcher of existence today is a big problem. If you decide to discuss religious symbols active in Iraqi politics, for instance, you are putting your life in danger.

**K** *Nevertheless, you did manage to show your film *Underexposure inside Iraq*. What was the reaction?*

**O** No one paid any attention to it. It had one showing in Baghdad, attended by a few of the Iraqi cultural elite, who had very positive responses to the film. It was also shown in Kurdistan over the course of the Al-Mada Cultural Week festival, and reactions there were even more positive.

**K** *It was also shown at several film festivals overseas, in Berlin and Rotterdam. Did you notice any differences between the receptions given by Iraqi and foreign audiences?*

**O** The overseas screening was controversial in the sense that it revealed how it is expected of Iraqi directors to present images to the West of children crying, wars, missiles or other tragedies. They do not expect a work that asks the viewer to think. They expect a Swedish film to do that, but not an Iraqi film. The Western viewer does not give me any rights. I do not have the right to think on their behalf. I only have the right to display my tragedies. This is our fault. It has to do with the kind of cultural output which our region exports to the West. The West cannot be blamed. After a year-and-a-half of showing the film at festivals, this is the most important impression that I received. We, for the West, are the "others." We are inferior, or low-level. The issue here is that our work is not even being discussed on the level of cultural entertainment. The issue here is one of entitlement; it is not your right to think.

Look at Iranian cinema: the films that are celebrated in the West are those that often senselessly address emotion, which happens to be exactly what the West expects from a place like Iran. An exception must be made for the Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami, but, nonetheless, there is a two-fold condition to the acceptance of his films on the part of the West. They accept him, because he is a genius for one thing, but also because he makes films about living in a religious environment in Iran, which the West considers to be the most important example of “political Islam.”

**K** *What will you be working on in your coming movies? What will you be looking for?*

**O** I will be looking for people who are underexposed of course. They might be Iraqi or they might not. This I have not yet decided.





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09

Mohamed Mazloom

# Nightmares of the Returning Gilgamesh

*Article from the Book The Generals' Spring & the Hallajs' Spring Festival\*  
(pp. 59-63) by Mohamed Mazloom - published by Nainawa  
Publication House, Damascus 2003*

\* Al-Hallaj was a Sufi opposed to the Abbasid State. He lived in the first half of the 10th century and was killed on charges of heresy. His four limbs and head were cut off, his body was burned, and his ashes were thrown into the Dijla River. His head was placed on the Baghdad bridge for several days. Al-Hallaj used to say that the day of his killing would represent his own Spring Festival (Nayruz). Therefore, orientalist studies drew parallels between him and Jesus Christ, especially some of the studies by Louis Massignon and Ignaz Goldziher.

I cannot be sure if a definable distance exists between a person in exile and his or her homeland. I am not so sure that concrete physical separation can support this assumption. Maybe the opposite is more true. Gilgamesh, for example, most likely chose distance as a means by which to comprehend his own country! He probably would not have been able to rediscover his own city, although he was its ruler and God, had he not distanced himself from it, and had he not lost it - the second loss he experienced - even if this separation evolved into a blind journey in search of an unattainable immortality.

Exile is therefore another Gilgamesh experience, though now a forced one, which transforms the presumed physical separation from the homeland into a body of transparent waters, allowing one to gaze through them and recognize the matters at hand with more clarity. It is not unusual for the homeland and its citizen to reflect one another in these critical moments. Exile then becomes the testing ground for truth, posing difficult questions in regard to the past, and what is to come. The clear waters are not free from the murkiness of fear, however. That fear can turn to horror concerning the future of the homeland.

Those who know war know destruction;  
it is like the poet Zahir b. Abi Salma said:

*What all is war, but what you have  
learned and tasted  
Anything other is hollow talk*

Going back as far as the tribal warfare recorded in the poem of Zahir, and continuing up until the present time, which is witness to invaders who have come from many sides, war has always translated into one thing only: the opposite of life. In one of its ugliest manifestations, war borrows the face of the tyrant to turn and confront us from an unexpected direction!

Today's "year zero" returns Iraq to its own history, a history written with the ashes of incendiary fires, with its sons fleeing in all directions on the one hand, and its exiles returning to their own homes on the other. I truly do not know if distance today can be defined through the experiences of refugees, or the masses of displaced people, or the exiles returning to burning cities to live out a sense of loss! Distances begin to take on the forms of lines which have been drawn on ashen roads, resembling the traces of people who have lost their way and have never arrived.

Any distance from the homeland need not be physical or temporal; I believe that terms like homeland and identity represent a more composite and complex phenomenon. Iraq today is more to me than a homeland in the political or social sense. Identity, in addition to homeland, becomes part of the journey. I believe that I have obtained a clearer understanding of my own homeland since having left it. Exile imposes a composite identity, subject to constant change and redaction in reaction to the numerous elements which ceaselessly influence it. Though the Iraqi

tragedy is only one example of this, being an Iraqi today means undergoing an increase in the pressure and complexity imposed on a sense of identity that is already lost and frightened.

Exile disrobes older identities, revealing the illusion of their stability, and subjugating them to fluctuating variables. Those who live in foreign cultures under strange names, colliding with many languages, are more exposed to that type of violation. It might well be that my residence in another Arab country since having left Iraq twelve years ago has shielded me from that kind of experience. Apart from Baghdad, I have only been to two other Arab cities: Damascus and Beirut. My personal identification card was not checked once in either of the two cities! (I did not carry it with me in the first place). Looking closely at existence, memory, and sensitivity as dialectics of identity, I have come to the conclusion that these three factors undergo a kind of exposure; a severe period of trial, which is to be repeatedly experienced in other confrontations. The outcome is difficult to predict, especially if we assume that, in returning to the home country, we are in fact returning safely to the old identity.

Aside from the question of identity, a true intellectual is one who is constantly in a state of exile, even when residing in his or her own country. I consider myself, in this wider sense of the term, to be a "true exile," going back as far as the one-party system in Iraq, with its falsification of consciousness, and dissolution of individuality, long before having physically left the country. It is, of course, no wonder then that very few writers and literary figures from my generation remained within Iraq.

Those who did remain in this older “true exile” are either now still in prison, have been crushed, and swept under the gigantic wheels of the dictatorship train, or have died before reaching the age of forty! If I were to go back to Iraq, I would not define it as returning from exile. I probably would visit family and friends and simple people in my city of Baghdad. It might then be appropriate to get a permit allowing me to travel down other roads, following new maps on other journeys. At present, I am forty years old and do not possess a passport to my own country or to any other. Exile gives birth to many questions; that is why I always imagine poets as being exiled (here I use the term poet in the wider metaphorical sense). I would not consider returning to a place and finding everything gone, as if we had missed each other on our routes coming and going, to be a homecoming.

Perhaps memory is the closed road that has prevented me from completing my journey of return. The memories I have of my country are bloody and painful, and reliving them is like tight-rope walking over a chasm of fear. With the exception of the intimate and warm moments of my childhood, which passed as if gone forever, and memories of childhood friends who later became heroes, suffering through wars and imprisonment, or in better cases, also finding themselves in exile, aging prematurely (another kind of exile). Aside from those, the faded black-and-white film of my memory details an overbearing nightmare. Today, the joy of these sweeter moments is blocked out, and I am always amazed to see how others anticipate experiencing nothing but joy upon returning.

The winters filled with war, the snow traps that swallowed tanks and soldiers

like quicksand, guarding the traces of death as they stealthily sought out our camps. The dangerous roads of killing, capture, and humiliation awaiting those who had managed to escape other more cruel and trying ordeals. Black banners hanging from what was left of the desolated walls in the rubble of poverty stricken villages, stretching down from the North to the South. These are memories of the land that invented the wheel, its famed magic now having metamorphosed into an owl impassioned with destruction. Its poets became the first ones to leave, banished to a new Andalusia.

Exile has become a natural component of Iraqi poetry: from Abd al-Muhsin al-Kadhimi, who was buried in Egypt in 1936, to the figureheads of classical and modern poetry who are now buried in Damascus, London, and other cities. The poetic output of those termed pioneers is centered around “exile” as a concept, subject, impetus and even destiny; from “Strangers in the Gulf,” by Al-Sayyab, to the songs of Al-Bayati; the self sufficiency of Boland [al-Haidari] and Nazik [al-Mala’ikah], to the perseverance of Sa’di [Youssef] in overcoming the imaginary distance between isolation and constant dialog with the homeland. There is also the painful sorrow of [Muzaffar] al-Nawab with his struggle in the wetlands, which never cease in lighting their metaphorical boats, as a revolutionary gesture in the night of language.

This overbearing inheritance of pain and cruelty structures the everyday nightmare accompanying Iraqis in exile, a nightmare I had witnessed in many of those who had withdrawn into exile before me. After it had become a part of my night, I discovered that it was a pervasive characteristic of Iraqi exile; I still do not know if it is part of

the exile experience in general.

Every time I return in a dream to my country to see my family and friends, the dream changes into a terrifying nightmare, with deadly pursuits across vast landscapes, filled with land mines and guns, directed at me from every corner. In each of these dreams, however, I am able to escape, because I know the road to Damascus. I know the route of smugglers on mules, with its untamed landscape, waterways and boats. It is a marathon across a world of maps, filled with borderlines and checkpoints. Did my escape through the mountains of Kurdistan, and across the Khabur river have a hand in weaving this nightmare, with its jailbreak maps?

A month ago, during a trip to Kurdistan, I finally ended the internal dialog that had been extended over the past twelve years. It was there that I said, "I am returning to the homeland." At that very moment, however, I witnessed a new feeling of estrangement. I realized that a sentence of eternal exile had been delivered. If only the river of life would redirect its flow. If only the mouth would remember the source. The flow of the river is only known by others; it is kept in motion by the ever-flowing force of life, and allows no looking back to find the way of return. The only benefit to this journey has been that it was able to extirpate the nightmare that has accompanied me over the past twelve years. I now dream of returning to the homeland, unaccompanied by nightmares on my way from my home to the coffeehouse. Another larger nightmare, however, now dwells throughout my days: the war. It is a high and obscene price to pay for paving the way of return, and allowing the poets to go back to their homes.

**Mohamed Mazloom** is an Iraqi poet, born in Baghdad in 1963, and currently living in Syria. He was drafted into the army during the Iraq-Iran war, and fled from the Iraqi dictatorship's tyranny to Syria in 1991. All of his books have been published outside Iraq. His poetry books include *Ghayr Mansus 'Aleyhi - Irtikabat* (Unscripted-Confusion), *Al-Mutakhir - 'Abiran Bayn Maraya al-Shabahat* (The Late Passing amongst Mirrors of Suspicions), *Mohammad wa'latheen Ma'ahu* (Mohamed and Those who are with Him ), *Al-Naim wa Siratuhu Ma'arek* (The Sleeper and his Life of Battles), *Andalus li Baghdad* (Andalusia for Baghdad), *Iskandar al-Barabira* (Alexander of the Barbarians). His prose and academic books include, *'Abdel Wahab al-Baytani - Kitab al-Mukhtarat* (Abdel Wahab al-Baytani - Selections), *Rabi' al-Jeneralat wa Nayruz al-Hallajin* (The Generals' Spring and the Hallajs' Spring Festival), *'Iraq al-Colonialiyya al-Jadida* (Iraq under Neo-colonialism), *Al-Fitan al-Baghdadiyya - Fuqaha al-Marins wa Ahl al-Shaqaq* (The Baghdad Dissensions - The Marines' Scholars and the People of the Divide).



10

Naser Hasan

# Radio Baba Gurgur

*A Field-report on Community Broadcasting in Kirkuk by Naser Hasan (March 2007)*

*Translation by Ghenwa Hayek*

After the fall of the previous Iraqi regime in April 2003, I returned to the city of Baghdad, from which I had been exiled for more than ten years due to my opposition to that regime and my belonging to the Kurdish resistance. On June 28, 2003, I was elected head of the Union of Iraqi Broadcasters and Television Workers in their first free and democratic election. It was also at that time that the Iraqi Media Network made me responsible for running their outlets in the northern Iraq region, and I therefore settled in the region's center, Kirkuk. There, we ran only a single television station, Television Kirkuk al-Mahali, which had previously belonged to the then deposed

minister of information. Two months after refurbishing the television station, I established Radio Baba Gurgur, and worked to merge the human and material resources of the two stations. Part of this effort resulted in employees working at both the television and radio stations. This practice continues up to this day and has enabled the station to develop drastically in a short period of time.

The work force at Radio Baba Gurgur includes a mixture of four Iraqi ethnicities: Kurds, Turkmens, Arabs and Chaldean-Assyrians. Because our programs aim at targeting all listeners in our multifaceted city, we broadcast in all of Kirkuk's different languages. Our policy

is not to increase the linguistic divide between these communities at our station and not to dedicate certain timeslots to particular groups, meaning: not to give two hours to Kurds and two hours to Arabs, etc. To this end, our programs are linguistically mixed, and we have been helped here by the fact that many of our presenters at Radio Baba Gurgur know most of the languages used in Kirkuk (Kurdish, Turkmen, Arabic and Assyrian). Accordingly, our programs offer a linguistic and cultural mix, which is further encouraged by the various discussion topics which are proposed on the shows, the phone calls received from listeners, and the music and songs which are played as well. This policy has led to an overall increase in our listeners, as well as an increase in listeners across the cultural spectrum. It has also led to increased competition between our station's employees in learning more local languages and interacting more systematically with listeners.

The social radio project in Kirkuk has started to bear fruit, and listeners and city dwellers have been benefited in many ways. In the village of Dakuk, for example, people had no drinkable water for many months; however, through the program *Bayn al-Mustamiin* (Among the Listeners), broadcast in four languages, we managed to apply pressure on the municipal authorities in a two-hour live broadcast, confronting them with citizen complaints and numerous telephone calls from listeners, finally leading the municipality to repair the water systems, supplying clean water to the villagers by the next morning. In addition, resulting from a campaign aired the night before on *Bayn al-Mustamiin*, three kilometers of flowering trees were planted between the fourth bridge and al-Wilada bridge on the Khassa river

in Kirkuk along the roadside by young volunteers who had listened to the show, along with some Kirkuk inhabitants as well as station employees. These are achievements which have resulted from a high degree of cooperation between the station and its listeners.

Another example of how we turned our station into an active community radio station is when we went on the air asking listeners to donate blood to a young girl who had been run over by a car. Within two hours of broadcasting, we managed to get donors to Kirkuk General Hospital, where the little girl's life was saved. The next day, because listeners were calling in to enquire about the little girl's health, we asked the hospital director to come on the air and talk to them. Though we had mentioned in our broadcast that the girl was of Arab descent, two of the donors were of Kurdish descent. I believe that we have managed to bring the community together on this and many other occasions.

It is indeed true that Kirkuk has a special status within Iraq, but I believe that the media's depiction of Kirkuk as a "city on a volcano" is somewhat exaggerated, particularly if we isolate the armed operations and violent incidents happening all over Iraq from the specific nature of the case in Kirkuk. There is certainly political tension, but it has not crossed over into armed civil conflict, and I do not believe that this will happen; civilians here are from four different groups which have had a great deal of interaction with each other and, to a large degree, have already integrated. Four years after the regime's collapse, citizens have begun to pay more attention to Kirkuk's larger economic, social and legal interests, despite the constant attacks on civilians.



Our employees are willing to make sacrifices and to provide people with what they want and need to hear. We are working to implant a culture of forgiveness and brotherhood, and to reconstruct this ethnically diverse city in a multi-ethnic way. In the radio station's slogan, we often repeat "Baba Gurgur... Radio of Brotherhood," referring here to the brotherhood between the four ethnic groups which make up Kirkuk's population. Now in Kirkuk, Kurdish politicians have initiated a civilized debate with their Arab and Turkmen counterparts about normalizing the situation. The Chaldean-Assyrian population has dwindled in recent years but does not seem to be against normalization. It appears to me that they understand and agree with the Kurds on the major issues, especially because they have sought refuge in Kurdistan after having been targets of systematic extermination in southern and central Iraq.

Despite the region's vast wealth, the economic situation in Kirkuk is a catastrophe. Economic projects are not moving forward effectively, and there are enormous administrative problems between the provincial authorities and the central government in Baghdad. These problems speak in favor of Kirkuk gaining autonomy or joining with Kurdistan, especially because people here do not benefit from the presence of the central government in any tangible way.

In the midst of this complex situation, media professionals, including employees at neutral stations representing all segments of the populace, are exposed to many dangers.

Our station has endured two bombings by terrorists and unknown armed men, and we were forced to rebuild the station twice. Due to the great efforts of our young employees, however, we were only

forced to go off the air for a few hours. The first explosion occurred in November of 2003, and the second happened three years later in September of 2006. The total number of injured people in both incidents amounted to sixteen, including broadcasters, reporters, and artists.

Outside the station, our employees have been victims of armed attacks, which have led to the deaths of three employees and the wounding of two others. Our correspondent Asseel al-Rubai'a was injured while preparing a report on the dismantling of a car bomb. The first bombing marked the first time that any office or media establishment had been targeted in Kirkuk, and the bombing preoccupied the thoughts of citizens for many days. The second explosion, on the other hand, was just another everyday occurrence, as explosions and suicide attacks have become commonplace over the last few years. In fact, we are often amazed when there are days on which no explosions, kidnappings or murders take place!

My personal goal for the near future is to focus on broadcasting the station throughout the entire countryside, reaching the farthest areas of the province, particularly communities with mixed languages, religions, and ethnicities. We should not focus on the provincial center only! It is my firm belief that women living in the provinces, in particular, are in dire need of us, in addition to other rural dwellers who need awareness, culture, and exposure to a culture of minority rights. We also need to limit the impact of inherited traditions and rituals. In order to increase our transmission range, we are trying to acquire the resources we need to expand our current equipment accordingly.

The achievement of this goal does not only require advancement in mate-

rial and technical resources, however, but also requires finding the ways and means with which to develop and train young media professionals, and with which to enable them to devote a full-time amount of energy to the station. Recently, we have been able to expand our network on the Internet through MICT, and our voices now reach across the world. We also aim to participate in conferences and workshops locally, regionally and nationally. So far, five of our employees have already gone abroad to improve their technical skills in the field of media. Baba Gurgur's listening base has increased greatly since our participation in the ninth international AMARC<sup>1</sup> conference, which has allowed us to adopt the concept of community radio and apply it to many of our programs. The recent workshop in Erbil, in which members and employees of other stations also took part, proved that Baba Gurgur is qualified to lead such developmental efforts in the future. Radio Baba Gurgur has not only achieved a local reputation but a pan-Iraqi one, and has received much praise from other media and cultural organizations. In Iraq, we are in constant need of development and training in media skills, especially so that we can form a free and independent media, which is objective, and far-removed from the narrow-minded ideology currently dominating the Iraqi sphere.

<sup>1</sup> The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters, AMARC, is an international non-governmental organization serving the community radio movement. Its 9th world congress was held in Amman. Radio Baba Gurgur participated in this conference along with other Iraqi radio stations.

**Naser Hasan** was born in the city of al-Khaniqin in 1947 into a family that absolutely loved art and culture. His brother Jaafar was the first of the family to enter the professional world of culture when he became a singer. Naser Hasan finished his studies at the Baghdad University of Fine Arts in 1971 and began working as a director and actor in radio, television, and theater. Hasan participated in establishing the Union of Iraqi Artists (1968), the Sun Company for film and television production, and the Association for Art & Kurdish Arts (1970). He has participated in numerous festivals, such as the Palestine Festival in Baghdad (1976), the Kuwait Festival (1976), the Moscow Festival of Films for Tourism (1980), and the Green Footcloth Festival in Berlin. He quit working in the Iraqi media in 1991 and travelled to Kurdistan, Jordan and the Arabian Gulf, finally settling in Yemen for four years. In 1997, he returned back to Kurdistan, where he worked to establish the official radio and television stations in Iraqi Kurdistan and also helped to establish Kurdsat Satellite TV. In June of 2003, Hasan was elected president of the Union of Iraqi Broadcasters and Television Workers. Since October 1, 2003, he has been the manager of Kirkuk TV, which belongs to the state-run Iraqi Media Network. Only a few months later, he founded Radio Baba Gurgur, which he is still directing today.

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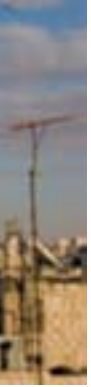


11

Haider Saeed

# How Small the State, How Grand the Idea

*Thoughts on the Relationship between the Intellectual and the State in Iraq (July 2006)*



It can be safely argued that the socialist regime which ruled Iraq from 1968-2003 (known as the Ba’th regime, or the rule of Saddam Hussein) was the first state in the modern history of Iraq to position itself as the sole director, supervisor and controller of the country’s cultural process as defined by cultural institutions and public activities. The stronger the state became in supporting society and controlling social relations, the more it also tried to exercise control over cultural activities by co-opting its institutions into the governmental apparatus. An independent field of culture in terms of ideas, thought and content did continue to exist and develop, but only removed from institutional struc-

tures, and without the benefits of any institutional support.

Before the Saddam Hussein era had begun, notions of state control in relation to culture, or of culture being somehow associated with the state, had not existed. The Bazaar of culture, in its multitude of forms, including publishing houses, magazines, journals, intellectual forums and unions had not been subject to state control in any way. In Iraq, the steady process of co-option can be traced back to the coup of 1958 (sometimes referred to as “revolution”), and took a dramatic turn with the coup of 1968, when the Ba’th Party came to power.

The first event allowed for the emergence of a highly centralized state, which incorporated all social activities, or all things which we now refer to as civil society, including unions, syndicates, and any other independent institutions, into its sphere of power. The second event led to the emergence of “state capitalism,” with the state acting as the sole breadwinner, employer, producer, buyer, merchant, importer and capitalist for all modes of production. State ownership and control was further consolidated with the nationalization of oil companies in 1972, allowing the state to benefit enormously from the oil boom of the seventies, and through its monopoly on oil profits, to further precipitate centralization and state control.

### *The Political Intellectual*

Fadhil al-'Azzawi prefaced his book, *The Living Spirit* (1994), by criticizing an essential trait that pervaded Iraqi culture: the partisanship of the political intellectual. In order to understand its dynamics, we need to first examine the formation of the Iraqi intelligentsia.

The end of the 1940s witnessed the emergence of the “partisan intellectual,” who, as an individual, was affiliated with one party or another and rallied around its ideology. One could also say that the partisan intellectual emerged out of the political party experience in Iraq. More precisely, both the intellectual and the party appeared along with the emergence of the modern state in Iraq, and were based on the political experience of the West. The older cultural memory of the region, however, does not include the intellectual in this modern sense, but instead recognizes older definitions of the term; among them, the *faqih* (religious scholar) or the poet. It does not recognize the concept of a party but

rather embraces that of *khilafa* (succession), or of the traditional authoritarian concept of *saltanna* (sultans). Since the 1940s, most intellectuals in Iraq were partisan intellectuals.

We should also note that terms such as *intellectual*, *culture*, and *cultural institution* are not global terms, independent from cultural and historical influence, but are instead defined more specifically within the Iraqi cultural context. In this context, *intellectual* refers solely to the literary writer and artist. *Culture* refers to literary and artistic output, and *cultural institutions* are those organizations such as syndicates, unions, or publications associated with the *intellectual* and *culture*. In addition to these, however, there are many cultural institutions (perhaps those most essential) that do not fall under the rubric of *institution*, such as cultural forums, coffee-houses or bars frequented by intellectuals. On a more abstract level, there is also the understanding of *generation* that has played a role in Iraqi culture in organizing the movement, congregation, and orientation of artists and intellectuals. We consider all of these entities to be “institutions” in the sense that they are the organizing forces behind intellectual movements. In the following, we will abide by these definitions when talking about intellectuals, culture and cultural institutions in Iraq.

Therefore, the cultural spectrum in Iraq has been largely confined to literary and artistic output, concepts, generations (as institutions), and intellectual forums. This confinement is especially important in that it shows the failure of Iraqi culture in producing such important institutions as universities, academies and research centers.

Throughout Iraq's experience with the party concept (from the latter part

of the 1940s to the end of the 1970s), Iraqi intellectuals belonged to two main parties: the Communist Party and, to a lesser extent, the Ba'th Party. Hence, there was the Communist intellectual and the Ba'thist intellectual. These two intellectual camps had serious ideological conflicts, directly paralleling the ideological poles of their respective parties. Conformance to party lines on the part of the intellectual led to an uncritical adherence to ideology propagated by party leaders. The intellectual was rendered incapable of creating culture independently of the Party and its ideology, and became a mere tool for fighting ideological battles. The moment the intellectual began to express cultural independence, he or she would be fiercely repressed by the ideology of the Party. Parties became the official sponsors of culture. A major part of the definitions and concepts to take hold of the literary and artistic fields of thought in Iraq at that time were born from the womb of communist or socialist ideology (social realist critique, socialist party commitment, socialist literature, etc...) or even directly influenced by communist theorists from the Party. The core of literary production from that time, including the poems, stories and novels by prominent Iraqi literary figures such as Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Abd al-Malik Nuri, Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayyati, Gha'ib Tu'ma Farman, were borrowed from communist thought. Furthermore, many academics now believe that the movement of free poetry (the largest experimental movement in the entire history of Arabic poetry, led by Iraqi poets) developed as a result of sponsorship and ideological support from the Communist Party.

### *From the Partisan Intellectual to the State Intellectual*

When the Ba'th Party came into power after the coup of 1968, Ba'thist intellectuals were placed into government positions as part of a larger Ba'thification process. The allegiance of the partisan intellectual, along with their function as an ideological tool, was shifted from the party to the state.

After 1968, Ba'thist intellectuals experienced an immense sense of euphoria due to the triumph of their party and its ascendance to power, and looked forward toward playing an important intellectual role. The new one-party state, however, did not view its party-intellectuals as working partners, but instead, worked toward making them a tool of the state/party project. Along with the change in power, the Iraqi State inherited the contract of allegiance which had existed between the intellectual and the politician. Any attempt on the part of the intellectual to move outside of the state's ideological and cultural framework resulted in the state re-routing that movement back to itself.

In 1969, a number of intellectuals, both Communists and Ba'thists, published an avant-garde literary magazine named "Poetry of 69." It reflected a new sensibility in Iraqi cultural thought, and represented a rare moment in which the Iraqi intellectuals were able to think with the purity and clarity demanded by their field, establishing a space in which to take a less partisan position, and setting themselves free to ponder their hidden dreams. The magazine was influenced by many contemporary trends such as the student rebellions in Europe, and the then modernizing trend in Arabic literature, moving away from ideological conformity at a time when conformity was the dominant force in

Iraq. The magazine was not a product of the ideologies propagated by the parties then in power. Therefore, it was rejected by the Ba'thist State and, to an extent, by the leadership of the Communist Party. Its publication was halted after four issues.

This incident was not done simply in passing, but was meant as a symbol, and was part of a bigger message. After taking power, the Ba'th Party sought systematically to destroy private projects undertaken by intellectuals in order to subjugate them to the cultural policies set by the Party.

On a more profound level, this incident reconfirmed and solidified the existing position of culture within the ideological, political and social structure of Iraq, meaning within the bounds of state control. Let us recall the two important transforming factors to occur after 1968: the centralization of the state and the establishment of state capitalism, followed by the emergence of individual power within the Party, curtailing many of the historically ideological trends of the Party. After the coup of 1968, the Party redefined its relationship to political rivals by revoking the agreements which had been made with the Communist and Kurdish parties, which finally ended in the government suppressing all political opposition leadership. These changes affected Iraqi culture in two distinct ways:

1. The State became the sole sponsor of culture. This occurred through a process which we can call the *participation of the state*, meaning the change from party to state sponsorship. The term *sponsorship* here does not refer to the provision of facilities and financial support, but to a more general process, whereby the state seeks to tie all cultural output and processes to itself,

gradually cultivating and propagating the belief that cultural institutions, in general, cannot exist outside of the state's sphere. This we can call the *state paternalization of culture*.

2. The relationship between Ba'thist and Communist intellectuals was reframed. The dynamics of their relationship changed, and an ideological conflict between two parties on equal footing took on the form of a conflict between the State and any opposition to it, producing two distinct cultures: the culture of the State and the culture of the opposition. This created a fundamental dualism in Iraqi culture that expanded out beyond the narrow definition of the Ba'thist and Communist intellectual. There was now an official state culture and an unofficial opposition culture, the former being propagated in media and school curricula, and the latter in coffee-houses, bars, and other places where intellectuals gathered. The second of the two was most commonly regarded as being the authentic culture of Iraq, whereas state culture was seen as propaganda or counterfeit culture, and was thoroughly despised by adherents to the unofficial culture because of its state sponsorship.

These two points delineate the relationship of the state to culture in Iraq: The state is the father of culture, but is also detested. To be more precise, there is a belief in the State's role in supporting and being involved in culture, but its officials are hated.

### *The Disorientation of the Neo-liberal*

The relationship of the Iraqi intellectual to the state is of an Oedipus-nature. The Iraqi intellectual has inherited the paternalization of the state, and at the same time, its opposition. What is different from the Oedipus story, however, is that the Iraqi intellectual was not



able to kill his father (the state) and was not able to replace its officials. Instead, the state and its officials were killed by foreign hands on April 9th 2003.

The Iraqi intellectual has been living in a state of disorientation, because the state/father, which he had hoped to reform by replacing its agents, came to an abrupt end as a sponsor of culture, and because of the dominance of a neo-liberal model in post Saddam Hussein Iraq. This model seeks to limit state sponsorship, placing culture at the mercy of free-market forces. The disorientation of the Iraqi intellectual resulted from the conflict between the neo-liberal model and his own dream of a state sponsorship that is paternal and nurturing, a state that could have replaced the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'th Party with acceptable leadership.

There is a problem with applying the neo-liberal model to a country like Iraq, which has just recently emerged from out of a period of disfigurement, where the individual was tied to the state. But there is a more essential problem related to the intellectual's distorted perception of the state and its role. As much as there is a need to refine the neo-liberal model, the essential battle seems to hinge on the intellectual's ability to revise his own vision of and relationship to the state. This might be the only way for the date of April 9th, 2003 to have indeed put an end to the burdensome heritage passed on to us through years under Ba'th Party rule.

**Haidar Saeed** is a writer and researcher who lives in Baghdad. He was born in Najaf in 1970 and obtained a doctorate degree in linguistics. His writings deal with literary criticism, linguistics, intellectual and cultural issues, and political analysis. Saeed is a frequent guest and speaker on various Arab radio and satellite station programs. From 2003 to 2005, he worked at the Al-Mada newspaper, which is published in Baghdad. In addition, he participated in establishing a number of independent research centers in Baghdad, such as the Iraqi Cultural Platform and the Iraqiyyat Studies Center.



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Muhannad Rasheed

# The Last Breath

*Pictures of a Butoh Dance Performance by Iraqi Dancer Muhannad Rasheed on the Al-Mada Cultural Week in Erbil (May 2006)*

**Muhannad Rasheed** was born in Baghdad in 1985. Rasheed started painting at the age of three and entered the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad at the age of sixteen, where he studied painting in the visual arts department for two years. Later he decided to join the theater department where he began working on various cinematic, theater and dance projects. Dance became of particular interest to him, and he proceeded to present several dance performances in Baghdad, such as *Oedipus*, *Fire from the Sky*, and *The Bald Headed*. In addition, he specialized in the Japanese *Butoh Dance* and has presented a number of experimental works addressing this dance form at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad. In 2006, he took on his first project as director, choreographer and performer. It was called *The Last Breath*, and was presented at various festivals, winning him a number of prizes.





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Thawra Yousif

# Searching for an Image of the Future of Iraq

*Interview with Theater Professor and Artist Thawra Yousif by  
Fa'iz Nasser Al-Kan'ani (May 2006)*

**Thawra Yousif** was born in Basra in 1959. She received her masters degree in Bio-Mechanics (the technology of the actor's body) from the University of Baghdad in 1996, and obtained her doctorate in Philosophy and the Art of Acting from the same university in 2004. Yousif taught at the Fine Arts College at the University of Basra from 1992 to 2006. She is a member of the administrative board of the Theater Alliance in Basra, and of the Iraqi Council for Peace and Solidarity - Basra branch, as well as an activist in civil society, and a member of the administrative board of the *Naltaqi* (Let's meet) Organization for Culture and Arts. She left Iraq in 2006 after an attempt had been made to assassinate her.

**Fa'iz:** *You have been working in theater for a long time now. Which subjects captivate your interest most?*

**Thawra:** Women naturally. In the nineties, I presented a piece entitled *As Fast As Possible*, which was a feminine monodrama that discussed the struggles women encounter in the long absence of a husband who has yet to return from war. I am a women's rights activist, and it seems that I am destined to continue that line of work for as long as women are oppressed or denied their rights.

**F** *According to your personal experience, what was the state of the theater under the fallen regime? Was there active production during the reign of Saddam Hussein?*

**T** If we tried to divide the era of the past regime into decades, we could say that the first ten years, prior to the rule of Saddam and after the Ba'ath Party came into power - that was in the seventies - was a phase full of exceptional theatrical productions, in terms of the ideas behind the scriptwriting, vision in directing, and also acting, especially concerning an ability to understand the characters. This remained the case until the end of the seventies, and can be attributed to the kind of competition between opposing political visions which existed at the time, and to the many currents that prevented the formation of a threat against cultural undertakings. The political race had a dynamic effect on the cultural movement, and here I am thinking specifically of the competition between Communists and Ba'athists<sup>1</sup>. In the eighties, the standard dropped on many levels: approaches in production, scriptwriting, and directing all sought to appease the audience first. This resulted in content, as well as the entire production process, becoming of secondary

importance. In the end, content became irrelevant, and the main focus became profit, as opposed to literary, cultural, or social value, regardless of what could be presented on stage or not.

**F** *Was this due to the Iran-Iraq War?*

**T** Personally, I do not place much weight on the war argument. The artist should be skilled enough to produce mature works of art which are capable of lessening the burdens of war, without lowering the standards. Comedy, for example, can be very provocative. Iraqi theater in the eighties did not produce a single "black comedy," but instead, a great number of complex trivialities. These kind of trivialities destroyed the seriousness in theater, robbing actors of their roles as educators of the people; they became merchants, with profit as the main driving force.

**F** *What kind of censorship was there? Did the government or any other specialized educational institutions subsidize theatrical productions?*

**T** We could not overstep the restrictions imposed by the state. The script itself was subjected to the scrutiny of a "state expert" who would then determine if the content was fit to be called "sound thought." Even thesis topics at universities were subject to that kind of scrutiny. The state made sure that nothing in terms of content would endanger what it called its "principles." These were clearly defined guidelines which prohibited any thought that might be contrary to the will of the regime. That censorship was primarily a political one.

**F** *Were topics dealing with daily life easier or more accessible to the audience, therefore bypassing the regime? Did writers resort to symbolism or the*



*use of masks, so that an allusion to tyrants in the Ottoman period, for example, could be read as a reference to the current one?*

**T** Of course. Theater often includes allusions to current conditions, like in the play *A King of His Times*, by the playwright, Haidar Man'athr. The heavy presence of censorship made many of these popular productions very serious works. In my view, the state was not really all that naive about the use of allusion, however. Artists were in constant struggle with very cautious government employees who were careful to follow the instructions of the state when dealing with cinema and theater. The artist Ghanem Hamid, for instance, insisted on presenting his play *The Mummy* even after the censors had rejected it. He did that by obtaining a ministerial order (that is a higher level than that of the censors). In that case, having understood the position of the small bureaucrats who had only wanted to protect their jobs, the ministry reversed the decision. Constant struggle between the artist and the censor created a kind of camaraderie between opposites. In my view, the government allowed for a certain number of loopholes, so that the strangled audience was able to breathe, though it was certainly stricter with the television medium. As for the cinema, the censors were so strict that they were on the verge of eliminating that sector completely from the Iraqi cultural sphere. In terms of financial support, there was a budget for the theater, for visiting production groups, and for working together with other groups at international festivals.

**F** *What about the audience? How was the attendance? What kind of audience was it?*

**T** The elite came, of course. All the same, attendance at the Theater Forum<sup>2</sup> in Baghdad would not exceed one hundred people. The people in charge of higher art were appointed due to their political views (as always is the case). The ministers of culture were usually people who did not like theater, or did not understand what it was, beyond its being a part of their bureaucratic and administrative paperwork; they were simply appointed by a presidential decree - these factors create a general problem. If politicians studied the questions that artists pose on social issues, the whole society would benefit from the engagement, then recognizing that the theater is as sacred as bread. But under the given circumstances, audiences prefer going to low-brow shows, in order to forget their very heavy burdens. This is the market, and this is what is offered, all the while harming theater as an art form.

**F** *What was the aim of a theatrical production during the times of the regime? Was it entertainment, enjoyment, advertising the state's policies, aggrandizement of the state's leader, or did it seek to influence social and political forces?*

**T** There were certain types of works that were directed in a way which aimed at educating the soldier. These had clear messages, such as how a soldier should never run away from the battlefield, or never back down in the face of war, regardless of whether or not the state was justified. They focused on how a man would otherwise lose his honor. This type of message was included in many

<sup>1</sup> There was a coalition between the Communists and Ba'thists in Iraq that lasted from 1973 until 1979. This period witnessed a remarkable flourishing in the artistic and cultural sphere.

<sup>2</sup> It is located in Al-Rashid Street and shows experimental theatrical works.

productions such as the play *Modern Love Story*. On the other hand, there was another didactic function which had the purpose of creating leadership. Its message focused on the importance of respecting and honoring the regime, and how that was supposed to be the highest duty of the citizen. As for other issues, they were irrelevant. Commercial entertainment theater had secured the endorsement of the state, at the expense of more serious theater. That is one way in which the regime had discovered the importance of occupying the minds of its citizens, or whatever was left of those minds. The regime did not want the citizen to think, panting along from one war to the next, and it supported that type of theater both directly and indirectly. That kind of prostitute theater, in particular, did not have any shortage in funding. That explains why its illiterate directors became so widespread, lowering the standards considerably. The state supported the regressive tendency, giving it publicity, providing it with halls, and allowing the salaries of these actors to reach more than three million Dinar per person, whereas the serious actor was struggling on a pittance. Many then turned to that type of theater for work, because the state had created a terrifying equation: either become an impresario and clown of this ridiculous theater and rake in the riches, or expect to be completely trampled down. It was as if the state said to the true artist, "Go burn your ideas, and join the others." One has to consider that the audience of *The Sixty Chairs*<sup>3</sup> only totaled twenty, whereas tickets for the commercial theater had to be reserved in advance.

**F** *How do Iraqi playwrights and those working in theater and living in Iraq view their counterparts overseas? Do*

*they regard them as traitors, and their work as ineffective, far away from any Iraqi reality, due to their physical distance from the homeland?*

**T** One can divide Iraqis working in theater in exile across various time-frames. There were those who immigrated in the seventies, those in the eighties, and those in the nineties. Some of them also experienced what we had to endure. Some of them, however, enjoyed the protection of the former regime, and have now come to say that they had been objectors to the regime when, in fact, they are simply lying. I have no respect for this type. I do respect, however, those who left and formed their own serious groups, refusing to return because of a fallout with the regime, and continuing in the creative trajectory. We keep an eye out for this type here in Iraq - these are artists who I respect, because they have stood by their principles. As for the artists who stayed and were unable to leave, they were forced to do one of two things: play along with the regime, or die. Dying took on many forms. Estrangement, elimination, or constant struggle: all of these resulted in a kind of death. Some of the theater-in-exile experiments became accessible to wide audiences because of their exposure to international culture, whereas we lived here in a closed environment, a type of communal punishment. But they were free from real suffering, especially during the nineties, with the embargo and the sanctions. They were unable to mentally construct the Iraqi experience, unlike those working in the theater who remained in Iraq and were able to express the Iraqi situation with more precision and realism. Any of us would have left if the conditions had been right. That is why those who have been working in theater within Iraq look upon

their overseas counterparts as their inseparable complements. We took pride in the works of our colleagues and mentors, those like Jawad Al-Asadi and 'Awni Karoumi. There is not one Iraqi who considers his or her colleague overseas to be a traitor. We all stood together against the regime, but still were ruled by it.

**F** *Are there any new subjects to be found in the plays which have been performed since the 2003 invasion?*

**T** We are a people famous for our love of the past. As it is now, the picture of the new Iraq has not yet emerged. Its features are not yet clear to the Iraqi intellectual. We still need years for the dust of our daily lives to settle. What is being shown today on the stage is mostly about past experiences, which were prepared for us by the regime before it ended. The question should be posed as to whether these works can help us in overcoming the kind of repeated suffering that we are bound to endure. Have Iraqi dreams and desires from the Iraqi street been expressed in a way allowing them to become a vision? I call these works the works of those who cry over our pain. We do not need these works. We need works like those of Brecht, works that shock the people, shocking them into participating, waking up, and thinking. This is very difficult to accomplish at the moment. So far, there have not been any productions that have attempted to bridge the gaps created by sectarian division or seek reconciliation. Most of the pieces that are on production right now or will be showing throughout the next year are simply opening the wounds of the past. This transfixes the mind of the audience toward a set point, that being that they have wasted their lives moving in the shadows of the overthrown gov-

ernment. These pieces do not attempt to help audiences in establishing a more positive approach, or rebuilding their lives. If they were to do that, they would be participating in rebuilding Iraq. Am I capable of presenting work that would address sectarianism? It is difficult to do that because, for one thing, it is not even clear who is killing who! Sectarianism between which factions exactly? That is one reason why artists try to distance themselves from this issue, instead of following a course of confrontation. Because of its potential social and political impact, working in theater has always been dangerous, regardless of the subject matter. Attempting to address such a loaded theme today would be absolute madness.

Conditions are totally unsuitable at the moment. In the past, we would present a script that you could not push past the red line called Saddam Hussein, or the other red line called the Ba'th Party, and you knew all the rules and taboos. Now, you cannot even find out who the censor is, or how many there are. You are free to depict or address serious problems, such as sectarianism in Iraq, but everyone is too afraid to do so.

**F** *Are there any remarkable pieces playing at the moment? Are any of them capable of fighting against the hegemony of the conservative religious-minded, against violence, death threats, or even the murder of artists in general?*

**T** Any theater production depends on the existence of a theatrical company, especially one that is willing to fight. When you produce a play, it has to be done with a script writer who is capable of imagining the danger in front of

<sup>3</sup> A theater established by Awni Karumi who died in Germany in 2006.

their eyes. The same goes for the actors. They have to be able to keep in mind that this production is different from all past productions, and that it marks a departure from those shown so far at the National Theater, where the security or intelligence car might be waiting outside in order to arrest the producer, actor, director or writer. A member of a production company might get killed while rehearsing, with nobody knowing which sectarian group or gang was behind the murder. Rumors might spread about a group preparing to produce a play dealing with a certain kind of issue. This alone could have catastrophic consequences. Producing theatrical work dealing with difficult themes today is therefore entirely impossible, unless work on the play is undertaken with the understanding that it just will not be presented in Iraq. In my case, whenever I discuss an idea for a production with directors, I tell them in advance that the play will not be shown here, but that it would be possible to perform it in Kurdistan, or in any other Arab country. Simply stated, I am not ready to become a corpse with six or seven bullets in my head.

**F** *If a play were performed, would there be an audience to attend it under the current security situation?*

**T** There is an audience, yes, the elite. This audience has existed since the end of the last century.

**F** *How does increased religious fanaticism in Basra affect the city's cultural life in general?*

**T** The truth is that the provinces were never on an equal footing with the capital at any time. It was always ahead of us with funding, and encouragement, and so on. The irony of fate is that, now,

the capital is on the same footing as the rest of the country, and today, it is even worse off. Theater there is experiencing complete deterioration, and they too are affected by the religious factions attending their productions. The situation is not limited to Basra, but is true for all of the other Iraqi cities as well, except for those within Kurdistan, which is very different from the rest of Iraq, because there is stability there.

**F** *My question was more about the effect...*

**T** The arts that are directly affected are the ones that require cooperation, rehearsals, and space. But where? One could use a borrowed hall from one of the organizations, but imagine if part of the show required music! Or sound effects! These cannot be hidden. The art forms most directly affected are theater and music.

I have done a study on the relationship of theater to religion, collecting the opinions of religious scholars such as Muhammad Hussein Fadhlallah<sup>4</sup>. I found his perspective reasonable when he asked why the theater should be prohibited, and added that there was no need for that being the case. If it is not considered to be an art form, it can at least be seen as an educational tool, as long as it does not contain immoral themes or raise issues that religion rejects. We are in agreement then; we need a clear Qur'anic verse, or a saying from the Prophet that would clear theater prohibition. I myself have read the Qur'an, not extensively, but I fast and pray and I read the entire Holy Book during the month of Ramadan. Yes, there is an objection to idols, for example, going back

<sup>4</sup> A Lebanese Shi'ite religious scholar who has engendered progressive thoughts, especially in regards to art.

to the days of the Prophet, Mohammed's Revolution, but not to theater. Islam is a religion that encourages thought and vision. The theater that we want is one that embraces humanity in the wider definition. Shouldn't it be a crime that a man in dirty sirwals can come along, taking up arms against scholars? Directors, anthropologists, engineers, and sociologists; these are all scholars, and should be allowed to coexist with religious scholars, each one complementing the other. Islam has never adopted the bullet as a means of negotiation. Legislation in the Islamic Republic of Iran even protects the theater, and that system is dependent on the verdicts of the Ayatollah. This is what always bewilders me: Iran is so much more advanced than we are artistically, and there is no way that we will be able to compete with them until security is restored. The Iraqi Constitution does not have any clause to protect the rights of the theater, or in support of women venturing into the art world. With such serious denials of basic artistic and women's rights, what do you expect tomorrow will look like?





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**Jamal Ameadi**

# Journalists are the Last to Know

## Analysis of the Problems Facing Media in Post-Saddam Iraq by Jamal Ameadi (May 2006)

\* This essay does not address the problems of the media in Iraqi Kurdistan due to its specifics and the researcher's lack of necessary scientific material.

In the wake of an authoritarian regime in any nation, media structures there are bound to unravel into a state of near chaos. This is evidenced by haphazard management of journalistic work, non-adherence to the minimum standards of independence and responsibility in print media, an absence of transparency in regards to sources of funding, and a complete lack of profes-

sionalism, objectivity, and editorial policies in organizing work within media establishments. In addition, a multitude of conflicting journalistic concepts and theories that dictate media work tend to surface. These phenomena have severely harmed the Iraqi media, as has also been the case in other nascent democracies still emerging from authoritarian rule. My own experience in working in

the media over the past three years has motivated me to outline here the most pressing problems currently facing the Iraqi media.

### *The Political Problem*

Discussion of political problems in Iraq leads us to focus on three phenomena still ruling the country today. The first of these is that we have a local society, but not a civil society. The second phenomenon is that we have movements, but not parties, and the third is that we have a government, but not a state.

With regard to the first phenomenon, we need to be aware of the fact that civil society is the product of a centralized state and is structured around a number of state supporting institutions, even when these same institutions monitor or even criticize the state's performance. It is indeed the very aim of these institutions to pressure the state to develop into an ideal entity. Civil society is the direct result of a civil state, each complementing the other. Local society, on the other hand, in its adoption of non-civil values from pre-state society, is the antithesis of the civil state and is ruled by an entirely different set of relations (tribal and familial for example). It therefore impedes the development of the state into its ideal stage through resistance to the centralization of authority. With the emergence of the state, however, civil bodies develop which no longer aim at hindering the centralization of government, but rather at functioning as watchdogs, halting the development of monopoly, and guaranteeing an even distribution of power.

This leads us to the discussion of two other realities which are interconnected, as well as related to the first point. Most of the parties to form the

government in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq have been more similar in nature to movements than to parties, as they have been unable to break free from their affiliations with locally based movements and have failed to stand for a national identity. In other words, the parties and their agendas are products of religious groups (Christian or Sabaeen for example), ethnic groups (Kurdish for example), sectarian groups (Shi'ite or Sunni for example), or other groups solely concerned with their own interests. Most of these parties failed to offer a sense of Iraqi identity at a time when Iraqis were in need of a bonding force which could help draw them back into a unified national state after the fall of the "father" figurehead who had forced them into a nation by repressing all smaller cultural identities. As a result, we have been left with movements as opposed to parties. Due to this, we find ourselves facing an authority or government, without the existence of a state consisting of national institutions. Our institutions have remained partisan and, therefore, remain vulnerable to total destruction in the event of a change of power.

All this has led to the rhetoric of those in power becoming many-sided and often contradictory. It has been difficult for the media to filter the opposing rhetoric issued by government supporters and by the opposition. Media outlets have been faced with floods of conflicting statements and declarations, along with positions reflecting local identities, which has led to confusion and fragmentation within media institutions. Furthermore, media institutions have become biased, and partisan or sectarian. There are Sunni, Shi'ite, and Kurdish media institutions, as well as others.



### *The Security Problem*

Today, I received a report issued by an Iraqi website called, “Journalistic Freedoms Observatory,” which, in coordination with other Iraqi and foreign NGOs, seeks to document attacks made on Iraqi journalists. The report was issued on the occasion of the “World Press Freedom Day,” and documents 109 assassinations of journalists since the start of the military operation to topple Saddam Hussein’s regime. The statistics reveal a harrowing number, surpassing the number of journalists killed in any conflict in modern history.

Exacerbated by the foreign troops, Iraqi political parties, militias, armed groups and organized crime, the deteriorating security situation has had a noticeable effect on media staff. Iraqi media personnel are still vulnerable to the dangers of assassination, injury, kidnapping or imprisonment, and no serious steps have been taken to protect them. This has had a grave effect on the freedom of speech, and on the freedom of the press in Iraq.

The armed groups active in Iraq are ruled by short term strategies that are often unplanned and ever changing. Journalists have been selected as targets because they have either objected to political agendas endorsed by these groups, or simply in order to create chaos, among other possible reasons. What journalists are experiencing is the result of the post-Saddam Hussein Iraqi authority or government loss of control over security, and their inability to provide the protection needed by media personnel. In addition, the large number of Iraqi news outlets to have emerged since the fall of Saddam Hussein has created a new impediment to any genuine desire to offer such protection. It has become possible for any person to establish their own media out-

let, with any number of employees. This has created a media sector larger than that which is needed in Iraq today.

### *The Economic Problem*

There are a number of financial matters affecting the media in Iraq, for example the consequences of unemployment, poor salaries and working conditions, and the many sources of funding affecting the media’s autonomy and independence.

The unemployment problem continues, despite measures taken which have improved the situation somewhat. A directive which had been issued by Paul Bremer eliminated the Ministry of Information entirely, and resulted in a loss of jobs for 6,800 media personnel. A large percentage of them have now been transferred to the Ministry of Culture, and others were forced to retire.

Journalists, especially those working in the private sector, suffer greatly from the absence of protective legislation, such as payment guarantees, medical and social benefits, and other rights. Journalists are subject to job termination without prior warning at any time and are denied any rights in such cases.

In terms of funding, there are many different sources with conflicting political, economic, intellectual, and cultural agendas. There is foreign funding, government funding, and party funding, along with funding by smaller, more specific local groups. This multiplicity of funding sources continuously threatens the pretense of independency held by media institutions in Iraq. The fact of the matter is that these institutions are not independent, at least not on the political and economic level.

### *The Legal Problem*

No matter what level of freedom media personnel might enjoy, they cannot function in a void, but need a framework of laws and regulations to enable them to work effectively. When this is not the case, freedom can lead to chaos. The Iraqi media has been suffering from severe legal problems, which have manifested themselves in the following ways:

The old laws governing publication and crime are still in effect, despite the fact that they contain passages which are in direct conflict with the constitution.

There is no Iraqi journalistic code of ethics. Attempts made to draft one such code did not receive the needed attention because it was believed that only a minority of people working in the Iraqi media were involved in the drafting.

Information is still monopolized by the foreign troops and specialized government agencies. It remains difficult for Iraqi journalists to gain access to it. Iraqi journalists lack any legal framework specifying their right to have access to information and to use or broadcast it as they please.

The monopoly on information has led to a lack of transparency. The adverse effect of this can be seen in the diminishing role played by the media in illuminating negative trends such as corruption.

The three registered unions for journalists in Iraq are suffering from severe division. There is no tangible movement towards coordination, and no set of unified laws governing union practices. This is largely due to an inherited mutual distrust among the various leaderships which continue to dominate in modern Iraq.

Hopefully, the pending law concerning article thirty-six of the Iraqi constitution will address these problems, or at least some of them.

### *The Professional Problem*

Despite the enormous number of Iraqi media personnel, the percentage of genuine professionals is alarmingly low. Projects designed for training and development are primitive, and there is no comprehensive plan to address this immediate need. This necessitates the establishment of an Iraqi media development center which must be funded by an independent source, guaranteeing autonomy and professionalism.

Current journalistic theories and concepts found in most Iraqi media outlets are still based on authoritarian, propagandist ideas, despite the fact that a good amount of institutions have declared their adoption of liberal concepts. Most Iraqi media personnel still operate as if they are “thinkers for the nation” with a monopoly on knowledge and the truth, which has given them the right to direct public opinion. They do not offer the wider public any range of choices, denying readers and viewers of their right to choose. This kind of behavior might be justified in the early stages of state-building, but only if the liberal media institutions come up with a plan for a gradual shift toward more liberal concepts and theories in media work, thereby reflecting the actual development in the state-building process.

And finally, improvisation is the prevalent working strategy on management levels in most Iraqi media institutions. Because there are very few creative administrators running such institutions, there is a dire need for specialized training programs in that area.

### *Conclusion*

The problems facing Iraqi media institutions are multifaceted, but advancement on the political front seem to be essential for any improvement to the

media landscape. A poor and improvisatory implementation of consociational democracy has subjected Iraqi society to the hegemony of religious, national, sectarian and tribal values. It has become an anti-state society. In order for consociational democracy to work – and this point has been overlooked in the implementation of the model in Iraq – the players in the political field must be organized into parties and not movements. The existence of movements in place of parties has led to the lack of two main features in Iraqi political life: political opposition, and a check and balance capacity between the branches of the government. Consensus among the movements has resulted in a parliament based on consensus among the main political groups represented, producing a governing council and a cabinet consisting of members from those same agreeing parties.

These problems require serious thinking concerning the perception of the state held by the local society in Iraq, about studying the reasons for the existence of the “alternative state” among the local society, and about merging local cultures into a national culture as a means of eliminating the threats posed by these local communities to the state. Local society should be treated as an intellectual concept prevalent in Iraqi society, and not simply as another set of structures and forms to be addressed. This is how non-civil actors continue to be treated as civil actors, allowing them to form their own elected councils and run their own affairs, placing a burden on state building efforts. There are other examples, such as the adoption of a policy of appeasement toward religious, ethnic, sectarian and tribal groups, with administrative and political posts being promised to them, especially during

party electoral campaigns. There is also the reliance of politicians on their geographic, tribal, sectarian and religious affiliations during their election campaigns and in their media statements.

In this regard, the Iraqi democratic experiment remains a sham. It has formally created democratic institutions, but these have remained devoid of content. This has had a negative effect on the fourth estate, represented by the press. The development of an effective media can only be successful within a healthy political atmosphere including a clear form of opposition and a properly functioning system of checks and balances.

## *Selection of Iraqi Media Publishing and Broadcasting Outlets in Arabic*

### *Newspapers*

Al-Basa'ir / Higher Council of Islamic Scholars  
Dar al-Salam / Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP)  
Al-Hawza, Ishraqat al-Sadr / Sadrist Movement  
Al-'Adala / Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)  
Al-Bayan / Islamic Da'wa Party  
Al-Bayyina / Hizbullah Movement in Iraq  
Al-Ta'akhi / Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)  
Al-Ittihad / Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)  
Al-Sabah / Iraqi Media Network (IMN)  
Al-Mada / Independent  
Al-Zaman / Independent  
Al-Sabah al-Jadid / Independent

### *Radio Stations*

Radio Dar al-Salam / Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP)  
Radio Nawa / American funded, broadcast from Kurdistan  
Radio Voice of Iraq / American funded, broadcast from Prague (Czech Rep.)  
Baghdad Broadcasting / Iraqi Media Network (IMN)  
Radio Dijla / Independent  
Radio Al-Nas / Independent

### *Satellite Stations*

Al-Furat / Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)  
Biladi / Islamic Da'wa Party  
Al-Anwar / Shi'ite channel under authority of Marja'iyah Al-Shirazi  
Baghdad / Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP)  
Al-Rafidain / Higher Council of Islamic Scholars  
Kurdsat / Official Kurdish channel broadcasting in Arabic  
Ashur / Chaldeo-Assyrian Movement  
Al-Iraqiya / Iraqi Media Network (IMN)  
Al-Hurra Iraq / American funded, headquarter in Baghdad  
Al-Sharqiya / Independent, headquarter in Dubai  
Al-Fayha' / Independent, headquarter in Dubai

**Jamal Ameadi** was born in Babylon in 1968. He received his master's degree in Arabic Language and Art. He is a freelance journalist and has worked for the BBC network, and as an editor for the Iraqi Al-Mada newspaper as well as "Naqd" (Critique) Magazine, "Al-Thaqafa Al-Ajnabiyah" (Foreign Culture), and "Al-Tali'ah Al-Adabiyah" (Literary Avantgarde). Ameadi is also a member of the Advisory Board of Iraqiyat Studies Center. He is specifically interested in forming new media regulations for Iraq. Freedom of the press in Iraq since April 9th 2003 is one topic that he is currently working on.





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Ahmed Nussaif

# “I Absolutely Love the Real Space that I live in”

*Interview with Iraqi Painter Ahmed Nussaif by Iraqi Filmmaker Oday Rasheed (February 2006)\**

\* The interview was conducted for the movie *Connecting Baghdad* (produced by Depoetica, MICT and Melanie Ring)

**Ahmed Nussaif** was born in Baghdad in 1967. He graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad in 1992 and has held several exhibitions in Iraq and other Arab countries. One of his most important international exhibitions was held in 2003 in Gallery M in Paris. Nussaif currently lives in Baghdad and is occupied exclusively with painting.

**Oday Rasheed** *How would you describe your state of mind now, in the post-war era?*

**Ahmed Nussaif** I imagine I haven't changed all that much. I still speak the same language as before. What has changed is that one is now free to say whatever is on one's mind, although there are those who tend to speak much louder than before, and whose voices have become overbearing in the intensity of their volume.

**O** *To what extent does the ever present idea of mortality, and the death surrounding us influence your inner rhythm and the rhythm of your canvases?*

**A** To a very large extent. I actually wanted to paint about personal issues that involve how I think, live, feel and taste things, but I began to feel ashamed. I began to think, "No, there is a larger cause here, there are innocent people dying." I am very attached to myself and to my own life. I do not want to die, but I cannot overlook this tragedy. There are innocent neighbors of mine and other people around me who are dying in these explosive waves of violence. My paintings are starting to reflect this in one way or the other.

**O** *Where is the Iraqi artist heading?*

**A** Many artists coming back to Iraq have brought modern concepts along with them, but those of us who have stayed are still more classical in our approach to art, although there are a few exceptions. Among these, Hana' Mal Allah is a painter who has accomplished much, as is Karim Rasn, although I am disappointed that he now somehow seems to be exhausting himself. The same holds true for Daya' Al-Ghaza'i, who is a great artist and paints very beautifully, but of whom I also have a

somewhat critical opinion. As for our younger friends, they are still drawn toward more classical concepts and techniques.

I actually belong more to this last group as well. We are all using the same old material and are working in a way which is far removed from the modern global artistic language. This also works toward our advantage at times, however. We still respect the painted canvas as opposed to the constructed one. The constructed canvas is made using a mixture of techniques, rhythms and surface treatments. We are looking for the painted canvas, which stays in direct contact with your feelings, your hand, your thoughts and your eye.

What I mean with the classical approach here is that the painter starts by using the brush, drawing lines and covering the canvas until things start to mature. It is not until that point that he or she will then start to express themselves in a new way, creating new and non-representational shapes and forms. This kind of approach in letting the piece gradually mature is the one an artist must take. For the most part, I think that we all work in this way. Iraqi artists are heading in a certain direction, and, although we are exposed to new and different ideas, we still often tend to work within this classical framework.

**O** *Let us discuss the youth of Iraq, not artistically, but rather in terms of the political circumstances that they have lived through, and how these have changed. Let us discuss the nineties in particular, the decade that formed us in many ways, and the state of visual art during that period.*



**A** Toward the end of the nineties, especially starting in 1998 moving into the new century, and leading up to the moment of change in Baghdad, I personally took some important steps forward. In the nineties, I began to understand what I wanted from my paintings and began to be able to translate my feelings. We were independent of and far removed from politics. We were also clever in dealing with the regime's "if you're not with us, you're against us" idea and managed to evade much of the hardship and harassment.

It was at that time that I began to feel I had my own space within the Iraqi visual art milieu. That period really formed me. I was able to concentrate many years of experience and work into four or five years, and I started feeling that I was mastering my paintings, producing them in a more professional way. At the same time, I am afraid of professionalism. I see it as a constraint. That is why I am still someone who experiments, and who keeps trying out new things, regardless of how silly or lousy the results might be. I do work seriously, however, and am usually capable of producing mature paintings.

**O** *Generally speaking, events in the nineties were highly influential toward our cultural and artistic lives. Events abroad, the embargo with all of its ramifications, and the isolation enforced on us by the state with which we refused to be reconciled. Where is Ahmed in all of this?*

**A** The siege was a tremendous disaster. I perceive it as being a kind of project designed toward achieving the disfigurement of the human being. Humans were transformed into something previously unknown. We began to heave and gasp. This was definitely reflected in our artistic and creative output. During

the embargo, I was forced to work at a furniture and carpet cleaning company. I lectured at the institute of applied arts three days a week and cleaned furniture on the three other workdays. I was also a street vendor. Doing all this enabled me to escape the influence of the single-party authority. By the way, I have always found the idea of authority in general utterly and completely disturbing. My efforts were not just in response to the authority exercised by Saddam Hussein or his government, but simply because the idea of authority, in general, has always been disturbing and stupid in my opinion. I still feel the same way today.

Times were extremely difficult, but we managed to save ourselves. We were able to preserve our spirit, meaning the spirit of beauty and life. I think that I really achieved something during that period, and I respect my achievements. During the embargo, I painted absolute beauty, far removed from the traditional tastes celebrated and the expectations which most shared at the time. I painted Ahmed Nussaif in all his simplicity and impulsiveness. Along with my paintings, my techniques also became more simple.

That was the idea really, to simplify things. Though simple, the end result was beautiful. The paintings were turned into collections of beloved spaces, which were also easily accepted by others.

**O** *Your relationship to space?*

**A** I absolutely love the real space that I live in. I interact with it as if it recognizes me, and I long for the things inhabiting this space to do just that. I do not want to be a stranger to these things. Of course, there are disturbing and disgusting areas in this space as

well. I paint here in Baghdad but live in a house in the suburbs. I face trouble on the way to my studio every day. I am also confronted with the effects of a growing consumerism, and the loud voices are becoming more and more difficult to endure. During my commute, however, it is always as though I am seeing the city for the very first time, and it fills me with a yearning to be renewed along with it.

I graduated from school in a time of hardship, shortly after the 1991 war, and was confronted with the transformation of a thriving place into a pile of rubble. My project was therefore based on destruction. I painted burnt cities and disfigurement. The buildings had all been destroyed. These scenes produced a sense of terror, and they influenced me on an abstract level, especially because I love to be a part of the street. I love the sidewalk and its details. The question is more about how my mood was, welcoming the street in this place, on a human level of course.

There is a book on the aesthetics of space. I read this book at an early stage of my development as an artist, and it really translated space beautifully. It explains how you experience the human situation in a space and lends life and fantastic beauty to space.

**O** *How can you describe the changes which have affected this space over the last few years?*

**A** The geography of the space in Baghdad has changed considerably. Of course the war is one factor that has induced change, but sometimes I feel and say that the war has not been the main reason for this change.

Humans have the need for change in many ways, even on personal levels. Our hairstyles, bodies, beards and

clothes can all be changed according to our states of mind. Even the forms of our faces change with our thoughts. As I see it, Baghdad and its people seem to love the dynamics of crowdedness. Evidence of this can be seen in up to three families sometimes living under one roof. We are used to this kind of concentration and I personally have no problems with it. Even on the streets, people tend to stay in densely crowded places. They do not feel the need to be especially mobile or constantly on the move. The streets of Baghdad are already narrow, and many routes have now been closed down. If it was not for this tendency of loving crowds, there would have been a huge amount of transit and mobility problems. People here have a frightening tendency to concentrate themselves together.

**O** *What is the most dangerous thing facing intellectuals, in your opinion, and what dangers hinder their abilities to produce cultural output?*

**A** Becoming politicized is the biggest danger, and the stupidest. That is, becoming a follower of a political cause. Politicians have a job, namely politics, and they are not there to make followers out of intellectuals. Traditional politicians strive toward exercising authority, which is not the case with intellectuals. Politicians, however, should consider the points of view of intellectuals, and intellectuals should certainly have a leading role to play because of their close relationship to society. Having said that, I believe that a great danger would be unleashed if they were to become politicized.

**O** *Don't you think that there are indeed intellectuals who have gone down this very path?*

**A** There are definitely many who have. We are talking about disfigured people though, who have no discipline, no self respect and no respect for their own creativity. It is easy to follow down that path, certainly if one is striving for the better life and material gain which seems to be promised in return for doing so, but I must reassert my hatred here for the idea of authority. I have no respect for any authority.

**O** *Regarding new developments in Iraqi politics, we have witnessed the arrival of a new kind of terror to the country's political arena, which some are calling "the turbanic icon." Where do you stand on this?*

**A** Religion is wonderful, but when religion enters politics, it becomes disfigured! My advice is: love the creator (Allah) in a beautiful way, and get to know him better. Allah is too fascinating and beautiful for us to limit him to certain forms of dress, ideology or manners of speech, or to allow ourselves to be limited to accepting the enforcement of certain things as taboo or forbidden... The turban is beautiful, when it is contented with getting to know itself and Allah better, but it would be terrifying if it entered into politics. It would be catastrophic.

**O** *What is the biggest source of danger in your opinion?*

**A** Death. I fear death, and I do not want to die. I do not know what comes after that. For me, death is final, and I fear that reality.

**O** *Thank you Ahmed. I am happy to have heard your words.*

**A** Thank you Oday.



16

Fu'ad Shakir

# The Sun of Baghdad

*Photography*

A person can only gaze with reverence upon the thresholds of those winding Baghdad neighborhoods with their narrow dust-filled alleyways; then, to enter them swimming upon the last golden ray of the setting sun. These places, which can be considered as *atlat*\*, are condensed short cuts to the ego, and have imprinted many things upon our memories and our selves. Their ancient walls and windows and balconies that look out onto welcoming spaces often evoke nostalgia in us, and a desire to

regain their distant past as well as the past of those who inherited love and physical belonging to their place of origin, the first cradle of the living and the departed.

*Fu'ad Shakir,  
Photographer and Critic  
Baghdad, 5/12/2006*

*\*Atlat is a word that refers to the ruins of ancient Bedouin encampments, upon which it was common in the pre-Islamic poetic tradition to stand and bemoan the lost loved ones who had moved on.*









**Fu'ad Shakir** was born in Baghdad in 1949 and he started his career in photographic art in 1962. His work deals primarily with oppressed and deprived segments of Iraqi society. Shakir has worked for several Iraqi media outlets and press institutions such as “Al-Joumhuriyya” newspaper, the magazine “Alif Ba’,” and he currently writes photography critique for “Al-Sabah” newspaper. He has held around thirty exhibitions, among them an exhibition titled *Abandonment of Places* held in Baghdad in 1991, *The Cycles of Light* at the National Museum for Modern Art in Baghdad in 1992, and internationally, an exhibition called *Daytime of Iraqi Cities* that was held in Ohio in the United States of America in 2001. He was awarded inter alia the bronze prize at the Baghdad International Festival for Journalistic and News Photography in 1991 and the silver award at the same festival in the year 2000.



17

Sherko Bekas

# Reality Precedes Poetic Vision

*Interview with the Kurdish Poet Sherko Bekas by Safaa Dhiab, Editorial Assistant at Iraqi "Masarat" magazine\*.*

*\*the interview was held in two episodes, late 2005 and early 2007*

*Translation by Ghenwa Hayek*

In any discussion of Kurdish literature, particularly modern poetry, the first name that comes to mind is Abdallah Goran, considered as important to Kurdish literature as al-Sayyab is to Arabic literature. However, the expansion of poetry and poetic modernity in Kurdish literature has also resulted to a great extent from the work of **Sherko Bekas**, whose rise to fame followed that of Abdallah Goran, leading him to become one of the patriarchs of Kurdish modernist poetry. Born in Suleimaniya in the Kurdistan region in 1940, Bekas began his education there and then moved to Baghdad in 1959. His first work was published in the mid-1950s in "Zayn/al-Hayat" newspaper, which at the time was headed by Abdallah Goran. He also published work in "Hah Tao" magazine. In 1970 he founded, in collaboration with other members of the Kurdish literary elite, the first contemporary Kurdish literary criticism movement which became famous for their progressive literary manifesto, later known as al-Marsad/Al-Ruwange. After the fall of the Kurdish movement in March 1975, he left for Suleimaniya, and from there to Ramadi where he was placed under house arrest for three years. In the late 1970s, he was allowed to return to Suleimaniya where he worked for the water authorities until 1984. A few years later, he settled in Sweden, becoming a member of the Swedish Writers' Union and the Swedish Pen Club. He returned to Iraqi Kurdistan in 1991, after many years in exile. There, he was elected to be the first Kurdish culture minister in the region's history, but resigned the job a year later. Currently, he is running the Sardam Cultural Center in Suleimaniya. He has published approximately twenty-five books of poetry in Kurdish, which have been translated into many other languages: Swedish, English, French, German, Italian, Danish, Norwegian, Hungarian, Persian, Turkish and Arabic.

**Safaa Dhiab** *There have been three phases in the poetic life of Sherko Bekas ... The first of these, with you being the son of the well-respected Kurdish poet Fayege Bekas, might best be referred to as "Sherko's poetic infancy." The second phase was then during your exile in Europe, where the environment is different. The third phase started after your having resettled in Suleimaniya...*

**Sherko Bekas** My father was a poet who died at the age of forty-three, when I was eight. He left behind memories, but these have always seemed more like dreams to me; I never had the chance to discuss issues with him or learn from his knowledge, because I was so young. However, his name remained a psychological motivation for me, inciting me to write and excel, especially because I was welcomed into society as a poet's son. This influenced me to the extent that I often wondered whether I would ever become as good a poet as my father was. My childhood was not very happy, especially after my father died. His death led to my mother becoming the main figure of my childhood and most present in my poems. When I moved to Baghdad, however, this all changed. The bookstores, book clubs, and plays really expanded my horizons. Life there was bustling with literary circles, plays and troupes. Poetry manifestos were being published daily by various literary groups throughout Iraq and across the Arab world.

After the fall of the armed Kurdish movement, I was first banned to al-Ramadi, then to Hayt, and then finally to somewhere near al-Baghdati.

In 1970, a group of Kurdish writers that I belonged to, together with the orator Hussein 'Arif, and the poets Jalal Mirza Karim and Kake Mam Botani, issued a poetry manifesto called "al-

Ruwange," which is a Kurdish word meaning *observatory*. The Manifesto aimed at changing the structure of literary discourse in general, in both form and content, and finding new ways of expression while rejecting the language of dictionaries in order to avoid turning our inherited culture into a prison. It expounded upon our desires to be free to discover what has not yet been discovered, to mix local and global languages in new and creative writings, and to support freedom all over the world.

The manifesto was published and set off a ripple effect, as with a heavy stone thrown into a placid lake. It was a scream for renewing everything, and it was very influential because, for the first time, there arose something of a critical debate within Kurdish literature. We encouraged young people to change their styles!

**S** *You left Iraq in the 1980s. How did you escape to Sweden?*

**SB** I was in the mountains, so I escaped from there to Iran, where I spent a month before going to Syria, where I stayed for four months. Due to the efforts of a human rights organization, I was granted a visa to Italy and travelled to Florence in 1988. While I was there, I was awarded the Kurt Tucholsky prize in Sweden, where I went to receive the award and ended up staying for five years, finally becoming a Swedish citizen. During that time, I wrote my first epic poem, "Madiq al-Farashat." I returned to Kurdistan briefly after the intifada in 1991 and finally settled in Suleimaniya in 1998. I discussed the idea of founding a cultural institute concerned with thought and literature in Suleimaniya with an elite group of authors and intellectuals, and we got support for the idea from the govern-

ment. That is how the Sardam Cultural Center was founded.

**S** *Exile outside Iraq seems usually to cause either a complete withdrawal into the self or an outburst of creativity. Which of the two did you experience?*

**SB** I could not integrate with nature in Sweden, and although my body was physically there, I was living here. My poetic connections with Kurdistan were maintained.

The poetic artifacts that I wrote in Sweden were attempts at remembering past experiences and at reviving the pains of living through the dire political circumstances that Kurdistan had gone through. My exile poems were extensions of what I had written in the homeland and in the mountains, whether they took on the form of anthems of resistance, or recounted the travails of the long journey and exile that determined my vision for the years to follow. I cannot write without experience; reality precedes poetic vision.

My best work came out of periods of pain, whether it was the pain of internal exile or external exile. My feelings of being in exile increased in Stockholm, and, with them, so did my desire to create poetry, and to create a continuum with my previous experience through doing so. I never dreamt of Stockholm, but was always dreaming of Kurdistan... of my hope, my pain, and my memories, particularly since I had been banished during the peak of my poetic consciousness, and because it was difficult for me to lay down roots in another land. That is why I wrote, inspired by those who were still here in Kurdistan, returning to my memories here, to the dream, and to the future that we dreamt of and the culture and traditions that were alive in us. My life, knowledge, and history had

been accumulated here, and it has been impossible to erase or replace them.

**S** *The year 1991 is considered to be one of great transformation for the Kurdish part of Iraq, since the relationship between it and Arab Iraq changed drastically, and a new freedom of expression and of communication started to emerge. The year 2003 was another point of transformation, and ushered in a new step in the direction of secession from Arab Iraq. How have these two watersheds been processed in Kurdish literature?*

**SB** I believe that the major cultural and political transformational point began in the third month of 1991, when the popular uprising began in the Ranya area of the Suleimaniyya province, and then spread to all other towns and cities in Kurdistan. By the end of March, all of Kurdistan had been liberated, except for Kirkuk. The roads to the latter were kept open to Iraqi units by aerial reinforcement provided by the Allied troops, which is what prevented it from falling to us. Such was US policy at the time.

The uprising had succeeded, and the regime retreated and pulled out all its administrative units from Kurdistan, leaving power in the hands of the Kurdish front that included all nationalist Kurdish groups. A new era of history began within the 52,000 square kilometers which make up Iraqi Kurdistan, an area as large as Holland, free of the tyrannical and bloody influence of the regime. A short while later, in order to fill up the administrative, political and economic vacuum, the first democratic elections were held. After the first Kurdish government was formed in 1992, political and cultural freedom bloomed, and there was no longer any political censorship or ideological hegemony in

Kurdistan. Dozens of magazines, newspapers, and periodicals were published in Kurdish, and Kurdish cities from Zakho to Khaneqin hosted conferences and poetry-evenings or cultural-nights; the theater and visual arts began to flourish, and there was constant movement everywhere.

This was a boost for Kurdish cultural production, and I want to point out that the amount of newspapers and magazines that have been published in the Kurdish language over the past ten years, irrespective of their political leanings, are equal in number to all the cultural products of the fifty years preceding them.

**S** *How did relations with the Iraqi Arabs develop after 1991?*

**SB** Kurds had traditionally been viewed, from the inception of modern Iraq up until 1991, as second-class citizens. A chauvinist and racist attitude towards Kurds was prominent, particularly following the demise of Abdel-Karim Qassem's rule. This discrimination dominated the educational, cultural, and other fields, including the job market and the government. This all peaked during Saddam Hussein's reign, when his regime used chemical weapons against us in Halabja, resulting in the deaths of over 5,000 Kurds within a few minutes time, and when over 182,000 Kurds were exterminated during the infamous Anfal incidents in 1987 and 1988. I would like to talk about the disgraceful silence of the majority of Arab authors and intellectuals, whether in Iraq or elsewhere, with regards to these awful crimes against our innocent and peaceful people. Apart from a handful of honorable authors and intellectuals, major poets, novelists and critics at the time did not say a single word - some

were not even afraid to publicly express their sympathy with the atrocious actions taken by the dictatorial regime.

The masks had fallen, and the Kurdish people and intellectuals were shocked and began to revise their positions and doubt the sincerity of Iraqi "fraternity" and other merely superficial slogans. The Kurdish people have always been victimized, but they are peaceful by nature. To give you a specific example: after the successful uprising in 1991, tens of thousands of Iraqi army infantrymen and officers were captured in Kurdistan. Our people gave them shelter and took care of them, offering them food and clothing despite the knowledge that this army had only given us coffins during its period of control!

I listen to or read Iraqi intellectuals and authors talk about the creative excellence of Iraqi poetry or prose. They are only talking of themselves, and others who write in Arabic. If any one of them happens to mention something about us, or refer to a few Kurdish authors, it is usually insincere, and merely for the sake of show. Iraqi literary history means the history of literature written in Arabic; theatrical history means the same thing, and so do the histories of journalism and art. To this day, Arab readers in Iraq probably know more about Spanish literature than about Kurdish Iraqi literature.

**S** *How were these changes reflected in the works of writers, novelists and poets?*

**SB** We liberated ourselves from the dictator's reign thirteen years before the rest of Iraq was able to, which is no insignificant period of time. In the end, in spite of various problems, and the disastrous infighting within Kurdistan itself, we have benefited from this experiment and are on track toward establishing

Kurdish national unity by widening democratic areas and continuing to enrich the Kurdish cultural canon. During the first few years after the uprising and the resulting tremendous changes, Kurdish literature experienced a new upsurge, and a new generation of Kurdish writers and poets emerged who were different from us in their methods and styles. They were calmer than we were, more introspective, and less inclined to speak with a haughty voice. Some brilliant women's voices also emerged for the first time, in short stories, poems, and other forms of writing. I have already spoken of the disappointment among us at the silence of the majority of Arab intellectuals and artists with respect to the Kurdish issue and our right to self-determination, particularly after Halabja and the Anfal incidents, which led to a firm break with Arabic Iraq. In addition, circumstances have led to a lack of interest in the Arabic language, particularly among the post-revolution generation. It is hard to imagine that the entire generation of young people to be born in the 1980s, now in their twenties, do not know a single word of Arabic, and that the majority of them have probably never seen Baghdad and are completely ignorant of the realities of Arab Iraq, unlike those from our generation and the generations before that. This is a point that deserves serious, in-depth political and social research.

**S** *It seems that the Kurdish region is the only one to have benefited from the American occupation. Erbil and Suleimaniya are booming economically. How do these positive changes reflect upon Kurdish literature, which, traditionally, is mostly concerned with the sufferings of an oppressed people? Are there new subjects being broached?*

**SB** Despite my critique of the Kurdish political leadership for its corruption and for the vast discrepancies which are to be found between the flamboyant lifestyles enjoyed by its members and the living standards of the poor, despite all their deficiencies and stumbling, the Kurdish leadership has recognized how to learn from previous experience, and has taken a fairly balanced position free of extremism, whether in regional or international politics or struggles. Their agenda has been a realistic one, as far as they have been able to manage. This has led to Kurdistan becoming more secure than the rest of Iraq. Now, we are experiencing an economic awakening and positive political developments. Both of these foreshadow cultural and literary progress. As long as democracy and freedom are accessible, the writer can develop and pass on his or her ideas to the community. Literature and creativity cannot be separated from liberty. Humanistic literature cannot emerge from a closed or racist mind; the ideology of hatred and discrimination cannot produce universal love.

We can now detect an actual creative development among Kurdish literary pieces, including short stories, poems, and modern novels. The labor pains of history are giving birth to literary and artistic marvels, and the tragedies and problems of the past are now being explored in literature. It is well known that literature dealing with traumatic events or tragedies does not emerge contemporaneously with the impacting occurrences, but needs time in order to develop and to reappear as creative work. For example, the most moving poetry about the martyrdom of Halabja and the Anfal operations has only recently come out. I also have to mention that a paradigm shift in Kurdish literary history

is the emergence of the contemporary Kurdish novel over the course of the 1990s and the current decade.

**S** *What about the freedom of expression in the Kurdish region of Iraq these days? Are Kurdish writers and intellectuals politically active? How is political criticism practiced: through which mechanisms - where are the taboos these days?*

**SB** To start with, I must point out that what has been achieved politically and socially in Kurdistan is incomplete, and still has many shortcomings and downsides. These are subject to criticism. Not only did the previous regime destroy the material infrastructure, the dictatorship also destroyed the human structure at its core, which means that we need time, great effort, and a long process of rational thinking to be able to stand up on our own feet and repair what was systematically destroyed within us. Democratic practice is something new in our society, characterized as it is by rote thinking and social, religious, and sectarian backwardness. A mentality of effacement dominates the vast majority of the minds of those in our country and in the region.

At present, there is a Kurdish parliament made up of political parties with varying ideological currents, whether left, right, center, secular, Islamist or independent. However, it is also noteworthy that most of the Kurdish political parties, including the Islamists, are fairly moderate and realistic, and do not believe in the use of violence to achieve their political aims. Furthermore, they are highly represented in the Kurdish National Congress. It is not merely boasting on my part to point out that the freedom of expression in Kurdish Iraq is far more widespread and secure than

it is in neighboring countries such as Turkey or Iran, for example; our press is more free than theirs - there is no censorship of the press in Kurdistan. Dozens of weekly newspapers and magazines are published without undergoing any censorship, going straight from the presses onto the Kurdish street.

The political activities of writers and intellectuals find a forum in critical journals, in which governmental institutions and the behavior of parliament and the executive powers are criticized. These also criticize narrow-minded political party platforms, governmental corruption, and any lack of transparency and accountability, among other issues. There is an elite of serious intellectuals who write courageously on these subjects, particularly about the reasons for and motivations behind the emigration of the Kurdish youth, and the lack of employment opportunities that makes it difficult for them to stay in their homeland. I must also confess that the Kurdish people and its youth have lost a great deal of trust in the parties that have been in power over the past years. This is mainly due to the wide economic gap which exists between most of the population, who are plagued by dire poverty, and the political leaders and the lifestyles which they enjoy. The bitter experience of infighting has also played a role in creating this mistrust. Certain problems have yet to be dealt with by the Kurdish administration, in particular that of providing well-functioning water and electricity systems.

**S** *You are one of the most important contemporary Kurdish poets. Can you elaborate on the state of modernism in Kurdish poetry? Has Arabic modernism influenced or affected Kurdish modernism?*



**SB** Similar environments produce similar evolutions. Kurdish and Arabic poetry are connected, as are Turkish and Persian poetry. Influence plays a clear role in the trajectory of artistic success in related languages. European modernism in poetry had a tangible influence on contemporary poets all over the region, arriving via the modernizing currents from Turkey into Iraq, and then into Kurdistan. The founders of Arab modernism (particularly Iraqi modernism) and of Kurdish modernism were the products of the same phase and period. For example, the Kurdish poet Goran was a contemporary of Al-Sayyab's, and just as Al-Sayyab was fluent in English, and highly informed about English culture, so was Goran, who founded modern Romantic poetry, greatly influenced by Byron, Shelley and the French Lake poets, as well as Lamartine.

This influence was reflected in their poetry, which returned to embracing the nature of Kurdistan. Their new vision of life brought about a new poetic vision. Innovation happens through vision, not through form; if Al-Sayyab had not had a new vision of life, he would not have produced a new form. Mental transcendence precedes formal transcendence.

The modernization of Kurdish poetry has passed through different phases. In the fifties and sixties, there was a clear and definite period of restriction, due mainly to the political circumstances. The seventies were characterized by a new wave, and attitudes toward life began to change. There was a return to Kurdish tradition, not through allusion but through the manifestation of this tradition via a new vision. We can say that the '70s generation really shook up Kurdish poetry, in terms of content and form; the poetic vision gained depth, and various voices began to spring from it, in contrast to the single voice that had

previously dominated the Kurdish poetic map. The real renaissance of Kurdish poetry began in the 1980s, however, with an increasing number of new voices. Today, the map of Kurdish poetry is vast and illuminated.

**S** *All your poems have been translated into Arabic, despite your proficiency in Arabic. What do you think of these poems, and why do you refrain from writing in Arabic or translating your own work?*

**SB** I consider translation to be like a kiss given through a glass window. The translated text cannot remain faithful to the original, regardless of how well it may have been translated. In most cases, I am somewhat alienated from my translated poems. Despite my proficiency in Arabic, I lack the confidence to translate my poems and do not write poetry in Arabic because I think in Kurdish, and cannot translate these poetic thoughts into Arabic.

## Love Song

It was the first time that a sugar-cane  
rebelled against her field.  
This slender and pale maiden  
had given her heart to the wind.  
But the field did not consent to their  
marriage.

Consumed with love she said,  
“He is to me beyond compare.  
This is where my heart lies.”  
To punish the maiden,  
whose eyes were already wet with dew,  
the indignant field called the woodpecker,  
who drilled a few holes  
into the heart and the body of the plant.

From this day on  
she was a flute,  
and the hand of the wind  
endowed her wounds with melodies.  
She has been singing ever since for the  
world.

*Sherko Bekas*