

**The poetics the Iraqi War:  
Between Discursive Conflicts and Diasporic Discourse**

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**Abstract**

This study attempts to explore the contemporary poetic scene in Iraq during the last two decades that witnessed two prolonged wars, and to investigate its prospects and challenges. What prompted and motivated this study is the discursive tension going on across the poetic community in which the only commonplace seems to be the continuous complaint of both the poets and the critics about the shortage of support and of marginalization. The internal conflict across the poetic community focuses on two issues: the authentic portrayal of the situation in Iraq, and the poetic excellence.

Drawing on many approaches taken from socio-cultural studies, textual studies and comparative poetics, the paper follows an interdisciplinary theoretical approach to defining and constructing the contemporary Iraqi cultural scene as a field meriting study by contextualizing a set of representative poetic texts. By studying and analyzing the literary and extra-literary relations of the text, this study aspires to define and classify the main trends and tendencies of the contemporary Iraqi poetry. Reading these texts within their socio-cultural and institutional contexts will cast a light on the contemporary

Iraqi poetic reading and writing culture which involves not only readers and writers, but also censors, publishing houses, official and unofficial authorities, newspapers, scholars, cultural administrations, and a host of other individuals and institutions besides.

The critical reading of the poems aspires to manifest that in view of the general atmosphere of confusion and frustration during this period that witnessed the collapse of the cultural institution among other institutions, the contemporary Iraqi poetic discourse in Iraq hold some keys to the reading of the socio-cultural wartime experience, and more importantly it holds insights into what will follow in the post-war period.

Keywords: Iraq War, Iraqi and international war poetry, Iraqi poets and literary critics, Iraqi media, discursive conflicts, home and diaspora, exilic literature, women writing.

The last two wars on Iraq (1991–2003) were a shock to all generations that witnessed them across the Arab World. Unlike the preceding period that witnessed many wars and upheavals, the last twenty years subjected Iraq and the Iraqi people to a continuous state of war and thus is often referred to by Arab and International media as “the War on Iraq or the Iraq War.” Furthermore, these two wars were characteristically marked by the heavy casualties, brutal new weaponry and most importantly the mass collapse of the cultural institutions that were standing as a symbolic representation of the rich cultural history of both modern and ancient Iraq. One of the major casualties of the war was the literary institution that was once standing at the vanguard of the Arab cultural institutions.

The difficulty of getting a well defined and precise picture of the ongoing state of affairs in Iraq today have a crucial bearing on all research topics of the contemporary Iraqi cultural life. Therefore, the research topic of the contemporary Iraqi poetry is more demanding and has a greater complexity than researching any other contemporary Arabic poetry. This is partly due to the impossibility to survey and document the recent developments in the Iraqi poetic scene. Apart from the few anthologies, which were widely contested in the Iraqi media, the main sources on the topic are the Arab and Iraqi printed

and electronic media which require regular tracking and searching, and their analyses require more complex methodological strategy.

This paper is a part of a wider interdisciplinary study that I intend to undertake in order to explore the contemporary literary scene in Iraq and to examine how the institution of literature responded to, and interacted with the war, and how it was altered by this cultural mobilization. The present paper examines the Iraqi poetic discourse during the last twenty years that witnessed two prolonged wars, thus my argument will be referring to these two decades as “the contemporary period.” However, I will place the contemporary poetic experience within its historical context and I will investigate its prospects and challenges.

In its foundational stage, the movement of modern Arabic poetry followed closely the course of the free verse movement which was started by the two works published in Iraq in 1947 and written by the two Iraqi poets Nāzik al-Malā’ika (1923–2007) and Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb (1926–64). The Iraqi pioneership of the free verse movement placed the Iraqi poetry at the forefront of Arabic literature and gave the Iraqi poets the lead in the movement of modern Arabic poetry for decades.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the third quarter of the twentieth century, Arabic literary circles were under the influence of both the formal as well as the thematic models and prototypes that were produced by the Iraqi diligent experimentations. Some Iraqi poems such as al-Sayyab’s “The Song of Rain” were considered as a historical poetic landmark by the historiographers of modern Arabic literature. Characterized as being ground-breaking, experimental and highly politicized, the supremacy and popularity of the Iraqi poetry was based on both its formal innovations as well as thematic features. The leading Iraqi poets at that stage showed a new understanding of both the poetic techniques and the role of the poetic discourse in the cultural and the political life of their society. Their works were also highly acclaimed by critics for reflecting the aspirations of generations of Arab people, and for placing the national issues as central to the poetic discourse. Under the continuous strains and turmoil of the Iraq War, the current

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<sup>1</sup> See ‘Abdulla al-‘Udhari, *Modern poetry of Arab World*, Introduction, and Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements*, vol. 2, pp. 534–560.

poetic scene in Iraq, such as the other Iraqi cultural scenes, relates a completely different story.

Going through long phases of complete silence, or shattered between feelings of guilt and confusion, a big number of the renowned Iraqi poets both at home and in Diaspora, are struggling to keep alive the legacy of the Iraqi pioneers and their lineage to it. Some of them recognize and admit their insufficient interaction and response, and their statements are overwhelmed with a pronounced sense of the tragic. Others complain of the inadequacy of language to speak about the shocking experience of the mass death and the prolonged wars. Nonetheless as they state in their articles and interviews, they are striving to turn their works into a discursive engagement in the socio-cultural and political life of their society.<sup>2</sup> To have a better view, the following part will analyze the ongoing feverish debates in and on the poetic community in order to reconstruct the contemporary Iraqi poetic scene.

Throughout the last few decades, the Iraqi cultural life was shattered between two groups: those who are living in Iraq and those who settled abroad. They are referred to in the Iraqi media as *kuttab al-dakhil* and *kuttab al-kharij*, the writers of the inside and the writers of the outside. Referring to these two groups respectively, my study will use the two terms of Home-poets and the Diasporic poets. The antagonistic relation between the two groups revolves around the continuous disapproval of this division by the Home-poets in particular, who view it as representative of two different “Iraqs” and as “an ideological attempt to destabilize.” “For them, Home is the heart of the whole issue, and the Diasporic poets are writing about this Home.”<sup>3</sup>

By the help of the new media, it is possible to identify the two major clusters of the Home-poets and the Diasporic poets. Whereas the second group “the Diasporic poets” appears more crystallized, stable, definable and more accessible, the Home-poets group is difficult to mark out and define distinctly. Nonetheless, with the help

<sup>2</sup> See “Umsiya Li-Qasa’Id ‘Iraqiyya fi MadrId, Shu’ara’ fi SiyAq al-HaDArAt, (Evening for Poetry Reading of Iraqi Poems)”, by Malak MusTafA, *Al-zamAn Newspaper*, London, Issue 1496, (5/5/2).

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.iraqiwritersunion.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=10750>

of other sources of this study such as reviews, interviews, critical articles and manifestoes, The Home-poets can be classified into two different blocs: on the one hand those who feel that Iraq and the Iraqis are living through a historical critical moment in which the literary culture and institutions have a vital role to play in this moment. Accordingly, these poets worked within the existent official and semi official networks, and struggled throughout the successive different periods and under different political systems to maintain their independent voices. On the other hand, the second bloc includes those poets who distanced themselves against what they consider to be an organized attempt to appropriate their works and activities by the cultural institutions throughout the different phases and by different authorities into an ideology glorifying the political period.<sup>4</sup> However, it is almost impossible to draw a precise line between these two sub-groups of the Home-poets due to the fast changing political life inside Iraq, the inaccessibility of the institutional files and the constant mobilization which destabilizes the cultural scene continuously.

Another characteristic feature of the Iraqi contemporary poetic culture is the discursive conflict going on across the poetic community, in which the only commonplace seems to be the continuous complaint of both the poets and the critics about marginalization and shortage of support by both “the social groups and the government”.<sup>5</sup> As for the critics, the majority of them pronounce transparently their disappointment by the inability of the contemporary Iraqi poetry to produce a wide scale phenomenal experience that match the glorious pioneering history of the Iraqi poetry as well as the critical historical situation today. Moreover, critics sometimes express their resentment about what they call “the inadequacy of the dominant poetic forms” and “the lack of the poetic innovation.”<sup>6</sup> What is more, several Iraqi critics in recent years asserted repeatedly that the works of hundreds of contemporary Iraqi

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<sup>4</sup> For example see the interview with Khaz'al al-Majidi by Kadhim Hassuni in the Journal Al-Sabah, 1-July-2003, on

<http://www.alsabaah.com/paper.php?source=akbar&mlf=interpage&sid=8052the>.

<sup>5</sup> For more, see “Malamih wa Ittijahat al-Adab al-'Iraqi fi 'Ahd al-Ihtilal, (Features and Trends of the Iraqi Poetry under the Occupation),” by Wadi' al-'Ubaidi 31, August 2006, in <http://www.diwanalarab.com/spip.php?article5782>.

<sup>6</sup> For an example, see “Interview with Iraqi poet ShAkir Lu'aybl”, by RayyA AHmad and Sawsan al-BarghUlthl, in <http://www.perso.ch/slaibi/avec%20rayya.htm>.

poets have little merit both as poetry in the general sense and as a poetic representative of the wartime experience in particular. As for the poets, they repeatedly admit that the Iraqi poetry crucially needs the help of the literary criticism in order to progress.<sup>7</sup> Some of them blame the critics and accuse them of neglecting their traditionally assigned duties and in particular the continuous evaluation of the poetic production. Other poets complain that the literary criticism is falling short from following the significant advances in the contemporary literary history of Iraq. As for the poets' community itself, the internal conflict which is manifested on poetic inter-discourse focuses on two goals: an authentic portrayal of the situation in Iraq, and a new criterion of poetic excellence. Hence, all the arguments seem to be revolving around one major question: "How to write today a master text about Iraq?"

Throughout its history, the Iraqi modern poetry progressed along two different major courses: the first aspires for literary excellence, aesthetic accomplishment and acquiring universal recognition by concentrating on experimentation and by constantly interfering in the process of standardization and canonization. The second tendency perceived the poetic process as merely a writerly engagement with politics and social issues. To a large extent, the two tendencies had their distinct representative poets and poetries. The first group established and developed their experimentation basing it on the prose poem. The second one continued with the classical-form *qasida* and the metrical free verse poetry. The tension between these two tendencies was and still, in control of the poetic scene, and sometimes of the individual careers and works of the Iraqi poets. Nonetheless, the diligent and persistent ongoing attempts by the Iraqi poets seem to be attaining more balance on this issue. The most recent theoretical writings mention an undergoing development of a new poetic form of poetry at the hands of Arab poets in general, in which the Iraqi poets are contributing actively. The new form combines the prose poem with elements taken from the metrical free verse.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See the debate between Poets and critics during a seminar in the Iraqi poetry Society in Baghdad in 30-December-2010:

<http://www.alsabaah.com/paper.php?source=akbar&mlf=interpage&sid=95609>.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.perso.ch/slaibi/avec%20rayya.htm>.

The second part of this paper will attempt to complete the constructed picture of the contemporary Iraqi poetic scene as a field meriting study by reading and contextualizing a set of representative poetic texts that I especially translated for this paper. Since it will be difficult to select a set that can represent all shades, the illustrative texts are chosen according to the findings of my textual and extra-textual analyses and to the definitions and classification of the main trends and tendencies of the contemporary Iraqi poetry that I tried to establish in my study. The similarities and the differences according to which I will categorize the poems and the poets are not only formal and thematic but are indicative of the contextual and associative attributes that I have underlined in my paper.

Reading these texts within their socio-cultural and institutional contexts will cast a light on the contemporary Iraqi poetic reading and writing culture which involves not only readers and writers, but also censors, publishing houses, official and unofficial authorities, newspapers, cultural administrations, and a host of other individuals and institutions besides.

This reading of the representative texts is an attempt to find a point of entry to the most recent developments in the movement of modern Iraqi poetry. Furthermore, the critical reading of the poems aspires to manifest that in the light of the general atmosphere of confusion and frustration, during this period which witnessed the collapse of the cultural institution among other institutions, the contemporary Iraqi poetic discourse hold some keys to the reading of the socio-cultural wartime experience, and more importantly it holds insights into what will follow in the post-war period.

### **The Home-poets**

“Chants, Suggesting Homeland” by Khalid al-Sa‘di. He was named the Young Poet of Iraq 2002, the president of the Young Iraqi Writers Association, and UN goodwill ambassador. He returned to Iraq in May 2009 after two years in the Gulf and was killed when his car was bombed on 29 May 2009. He received many Iraqi and pan-Arab

awards including the first award in the Arab Youth festival on 2008 for this poem:<sup>9</sup>

وجه الحنين شراعٌ تائهٌ أفلا/ وقلبيَ الطفلُ في أكمامه ذبلا / وجه الحنين..بلادي..دمع قافيتي/  
وصوت نهرٍ يتيم خلفي اشتعلا/ كنت البلاد التي غنت منمقةً بالأمنيات..وكنت العاشق  
البطلا/ والآن لا عيد في دربي ولا فرح/ تحالف الموت ضد الورد واحتقلا.

The face of nostalgia is a lost sail fading/ And my child-like heart has  
withered in buds/ The face of nostalgia is my homeland, the tears of  
my rhyme/ And the sound of an orphan river blazing behind me/ You  
were a country, singing, ornamented with wishes/ And I was the  
heroic lover/ And now there are no feast on my road, and no joy/  
Death had allied against the roses and celebrated.

سلم على بغداد كرخاً والرصافة/ سلم على (الجسر) الذي يشكو ارتجافه/ سلم على  
النهر الحزين/ وعلى النساء نرفن دمعا فوق خد الياسمين/ سلم على شمس الصباح /  
فالشمس في (بعقوبي) أحلى من الشمس الغربية/ سلم على أمي التي جفت مآقيها  
السكبية/ سلم على العشاق والفقراء والأدباء والذكرى الحبيبة/ سلم على صوت الأذان  
بجامع (الفروق) يحتضن السماء.

Greet Baghdad's Karkh district and the Rasafa District/ Greet the  
shaky bridge/ Greet the sad river/ And women who bled tears on  
jasmine-like cheeks/ Greet the morning sun/ As the sun in my  
Ba'quba is prettier than the stranger sun/ Greet my mum whose  
pouring eye-corners had dried up/ Greet lovers, poor people, literati,  
and the lovely memory/ Greet the sound of the call for prayer in al-  
Farouq's mosque embracing the sky.

سلم على كل البساتين السجينة خلف أسلاك الذهول/ وعلى المساجد والكنائس  
والمدارس والحدائق والحقول/ سلم على السوق القديم... على (السراي)<sup>10</sup>

Greet all the fields imprisoned behind the fences of bewilderment/ the  
mosques, churches, schools, parks and fields/ Greet the Old Souk and  
the Saray.

“Acquiring a profession” by Ibrahim al-Khayyat: He held the post of  
the director of media department in the Ministry of Culture which he  
resigned from in 2005. He is now a president of the Writers' Union.

<sup>9</sup> For more about al-Sa'di and his poetry see, and his poem see:  
<http://www.beider.se/print.php?id=1977>, <http://www.alnoor.se/article.asp?id=54406>.

<sup>10</sup> Saray: is a historical building turned into the provincial centre for the writers union.



The poem is published in his last collection “*The Orange Republic*” (2007).<sup>11</sup>

هل يصمتُ في حوار النبيين ؟ هل - تراه - يخلع سترة المعارف الأنيقة ؟/ هل يدفع  
غيمةً خوفه إلى فسيفساء المنافي؟/ وبعد ذلك/ - أو قبل ذلك -/ هل لا يقتلونه.

Should he be silent in the dialogues of the prophets?/ Will he take of  
the neat jacket of knowledge?/ Should he push the cloud of his fear  
towards the mosaic of exiles?/ and after that/ or before that/ Do they  
not kill him?

“To Christopher Marlow’s Dream” by Ahmad Ali Yunis: A self-educated poet, he wrote his first collection by hand and distributed it by hand in his early twenty, forcing the literary establishment to acknowledge his work, he published his first collection in print on 1993. In this poem, he follows on the steps of “The Iraqi Poets of Rebellion,” who established their poetics in the middle of the twentieth century.

من يقف إلى جوارك الآن/ في ظلمة القبر/ النوافذ التي أغلقت منذ زمن سحيق/  
فتحت./ في داخلها كان شبحك/ يقلم عتمة أبدية./ رجل مثلك يخرب حياته/ بهذه  
الطرق التي تخب الألباب/ يمنح الأمل لسماوات توفه./ في نهاية يدك حزن/ وفي يد  
الحزن حزن/ يزن مواهبك الثقيلة./ لأن الجنائز تمر على كتف العالم/ ولأن العالم  
يطلق صفيراً/ باتجاه وجنتك الشاحبة./ ثقوب صدرك تجرح الآن رجلاً يسير باتجاه  
الفرات/ يحمل قلنسوة فارسية.

Who is standing next to you/ In the dark of the grave/ The windows  
that were closed long time ago/ Are opened/ Inside them, your ghost  
trimmed an eternal dark/ A man like you, destroying his life/ In heart-  
capturing ways/ Gives hope to the features of his desire/ There is a  
grief at the end of your hand/ And a grief at the hand of the grief/  
Weighing your heavy talents/ Because funerals cross over the  
shoulder of the world/ And because the world is sending a whistle/  
Towards your pale cheek/ The holes in your chest are now wounding  
a man walking towards the Euphrates/ Carrying a Persian hood.

Al-Sa’di’s poem reconstructs the picture of Iraq and the collective memory of Iraqi people. It interacts with different poetic forms and rhythms and it has rich intertextual links with the intellectual and

<sup>11</sup> Ibrahim al-Khayyat, *Jumhuriyyat al-Burtuqal*, (The Orange Republic), (the Union of Writer and Ministry of Culture, Bagdad 2007).

cultural history of Iraq. It also resonates with echoes of the pioneers' tunes and themes, and the well established thematics of war and Diaspora in Arabic poetry in general, such as the waiting and crying mother. It relies on an extensive cultural and literary tradition and is intensified by evoking the powerful scenes of a long line of the waiting mothers of the master Arab poets including the most famous ones such as the mothers Mahmud Darwish, and Muhammad al-Maghut, etc.. Tim Kendall in *The Oxford handbook of British and Irish war poetry*, examines the scene of the wives waiting for their husbands to return in a poem of Thomas Hardy's "the Going of the Battery," as typical to war poetry.<sup>12</sup> The poem also includes references to Gaza bringing together the Iraqi and the Palestinian tragedies, an association that is deep-rooted in the public discourse and in the cultural discourse across the Arab World.

Al-Khayyat's poem intertextualizes with a classical model of the intellectual struggle with the official patronage. It also experiments with combining lyrical and narrative unites, and prose and metrical rhythms. It is a remarkable poetic experiment with form, which is partly eclipsed by the graphic depiction of the harsh reality and the thematic total indulgence. The poem portrays the home-politics and speaks out the confusion and anxieties of the cultural producers in Iraq today and the difficulties they have in keeping track with the fast-changing events, rules, guidelines, redlines, sensors and sponsors.

Yunis' poem about the British author who died in a duel has strong autobiographical echoes from the life of the poet who lived most of his life marginalized and in poverty, unable to establish connections neither with the official nor with the oppositional networks that can help him at least to publish his work. The poem interacts with a wide humanistic view and the scene of the overlooked funerals alludes to Iraq. The poem flirts with death and self-destruction by relating to one of the fascinating stories of death, well-known among educated Arabs as it exists in the educational curricula. In a celebrative mode, the poem laments the life of the intellectual that is wasted in a coincidental occasion, and ends worthless, meaningless with no big cause and no glory. By combining all these formal and

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<sup>12</sup> See Tim Kendall in *The Oxford handbook of British and Irish war poetry*, p. 49.

thematic elements, Yunis establishes a solid ground on which he builds his own version of the war poetics.

### The Diasporic poets

“Nashid Uruk” by ‘Adnan Sai’igh: the Poet left Iraq in 1993 to Amman then Sweden, He received Hillman Hamit award 1996 and Rotterdam award for international poetry in 1997.<sup>13</sup>

كانتُ تضيقُ بنا كوة الأفق، نوسعها بالأغاني/ تضيق الأغاني، فنوسعها  
بالأمانى.../فمن يوسع الآن كوة منفاك..

When the horizon skylight narrowed upon us, we expanded them by  
songs/ When songs narrowed, we expanded them by wishes/ But who  
is going to expand now the skylight of your exile.

لا شيء، غير السماء المعرأة تسحب قطعانها البيض / فوق مدارج جفنيك / نحلم في  
شجر وارف/ سيظل بيتا رسمناه منذ الطفولة / خلف سياج دفاترنا / والرمال المنداة  
بالبحر.../ يا أيها البحر ما أبقت السنوات المريرة منك سوى نصف نافذة / تتلأ لأ فوق  
السفوح الغربية / أرقب منها زفير المدينة في آخر الليل تقطعه المركبات وناي  
الحبيب/ ويا خبز أمي اشتهيتك/ في برد منفاي، الشاي، الشاي أبرد مما تظنين، / أبرد  
من مقل العابرين سنشربه في المقاهي على عجل / ونذوب بموج الزحام / فمن سيعيد  
العشاء لابنك/ حين ستنفد منه النقود/ وليس أذل من الجوع في مدن الغرباء

Nothing but the heaven, denuded, drawing its white flocks/over the  
routes of your eyelids/we dream about blooming trees/that will spread  
their shadow over a house we have drawn since childhood/beyond the  
fence of our notebooks/and the sea-dewed sands/O Sea the bitter years  
left nothing of you but a half window/glittering over the strange  
slops/from which I watch the exhalation of the city-during the end of  
the night-interrupted by vehicles and the flute of the loved one/O my  
mother’s bread, I desire you/in the cold of my exile, tea! And tea is  
colder than you think, colder than the eyes of the passersby, we will  
drink it in cafés in a hurry/and melt in the waves of the crowd/ so who  
is going to prepare dinner for your son/when he runs out of  
money/and nothing is more humiliating than hunger in the city of the  
strangers.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.adabfan.com/interview/1695.html>.

أقضي على وحشتي بالكتابة؟ / لكن إلى م؟ / أقول لكلكامش: لو رأيت الذي قد رأينا  
 / ليلت على رأس هذي الحياة/ وأسأل: هل عمرنا سجننا؟ / هل كتابي ضريحي؟ /  
 هل أرى الباب حلماً أنام لأدخله؟ / هل أجرب موتي لعلني أرى عالماً / لم يصوره  
 ملتون / أخرج رأسي بين السطور لأبصر: أطفالنا يلعبون بميراثنا من حقول القنابل /  
 والفتيات على نهر دجلة / يغسلن أوجهن / فتمضي المياه مفرقة بالجمال ليكرعها  
 البحر / كم كرع البحر أحلامنا / جالسون على حجر الحكمة البابلية/ تمضي بنا  
 عربات الطغاة/ إلى غرف النوم والمقصلات ولا أصل... / البحر عات بأمواجه  
 والجرادين تأكل من سفني / وأنا أتصارع والموج ربا- / لا وطن في السفينة"

Should I eliminate my desolation by writing/but to whom?/ I say to  
 Gilgamesh: if only you had seen what we had seen/you would have  
 pissed over the head of this life/and I ask: is our life our prison?/is my  
 book my grave?/ should I see the door as a dream that I sleep to  
 enter?/should I try my death so that I might see a world not depicted  
 by Milton/I bring my head out of line to see: our children are playing  
 with our legacy of the bombs, fields/girls on the Tigris river washing  
 their faces/so waters run flowing with beauty and the sea gulp  
 them/How often! the sea gulped our dreams!/we are sitting on the  
 Babylonian- wisdom stone, the tyrants chariots take us on/to  
 bedrooms and guillotine, and I don't arrive../rats are eating up my  
 boats, and I am wrestling with the waves, -O my lord-/ there is no  
 homeland in the boat.

Hashim Shafiq, lived in Poland then UK: He gave a reading in the  
 Poetry Café in Covent Garden London, organized by Pen the  
 international Association of Writers, Winter 2009, in which he read  
 this poem:

ما كنت أعرف أني سأنزل من علياء الحياة/ موعدي مع المتنبي/ أزاحه المنفى/  
 وأربكه حرس السماء/ موعدي بالسهل والجبل/ بالريشة التائهة/ بالألة المحترقة/  
 بتفاصيل لأبي نواس ومقهى البلدية بقلعة كركوك/ سنبلتي المطرقة قبالة الأهوار/  
 بحبي المؤجل في الغيوم/ حطمه حذاء جندي أرى من سقفه سماء بلادي.

I did not know that I am going to descend from the heights of life/ My  
 date with al-Mutanabbi/ Was driven away by the exile/ And was  
 confused by the guards of the sky/ My date with the plain and the  
 mountain/ With the straying quill/ With the burnt instrument/ With  
 details of Abu Nuwas and the city council café in the castle of Kirkuk/  
 My spike bowing its head in front of (the marshes of) al-Ahwar/ With  
 my love pending in clouds/ Which as destroyed by a soldier shoe,  
 from which ceiling I see the sky of my homeland.

“Andalusian Poems for the Wound of Iraq” by Bushra al-Bustani, USA.<sup>14</sup>

في أرجاء المتحف والمنعطفات/ كانت قيثارات.. /سومر تعزف لحن الحزن  
In all sides of the museum/ The lyres.../Of Sumer played the tunes of  
sadness.

جنائن بابل ظمأى يرتعش الصمت على شفثيها/ وعلى كتفيها يذوي الورد.  
Babel's Gardens are thirsty, and silence is trembling on their lips and  
on their shoulders, the roses are withering.

الجندي الأميركي/ يطلق ناراً فوق جبين صبي/ منتفخ الصدر/ سقط الطفل ببركة دم/  
إذ فكوا صدره/ كانت أرغفة الخبز/ تنزف تحت قميصه

The American soldier/fires on the forehead of a boy/ Who has a  
bloated chest/The child falls in a pool of blood/ And when they  
unbutton his chest/ The bread loafs/ Were bleeding under his shirt.

The three poems are characterized by their wide panoramic view extending both formally and thematically in all directions. In all of them, the lyrical intersects with the narrative. The three poems attempt to drag the reader into the imagination of the suffering of the Iraqi people both at home and in Diaspora. The two different places corresponding to two different times are organically connected by using different devices. The first poem links them through one of the most powerful representatives of this dichotomy: the image of the waiting mother that I discussed earlier, attending with its traditional associative images and vocabulary, bread, food, tea and coffee, etc, that would always without pretension or heroism, ease the sufferings.

This second poem established intensely and densely the Diasporic images of Iraq, historical references to the castle of Kirkuk, literary references: al-Mutanabbi and abu Nuwas, landscape, al-Ahwar, the mountain and the plain. It combines different forms that ranges between metrical verse and the prose poem and employs narrative and lyrical techniques.

The third poem depicts the tragedies of the Iraqi war and the suffering it inflicts upon individuals, particularly innocent civilians

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.asharqalarabi.org.uk/ruiah/qutuf-65.htm>.

and it attempts to bring them to the world's attention. In addition to presenting the poet's personal experience, the work makes use of many unconventional sources such as the media reports about the daily tragic events on streets and in institutions. The rich intertextual links draw on the classical and modern history of Iraq and landscape imagery.

The Diasporic images of Iraq imply a departure from an approach that considers Diaspora to be melancholic and passive reaction to misplacement, stressing the potentials of the Diasporic poetry to energize the collective memory of the uprooted people living far from home on the one hand, and of those who live inside their homeland. However, The challenge that will face the Diasporic poet is to be aware of the fact that his representation of the wartime experience, unbeatable as it would seem, cannot be communicated to the Iraqi generations who lived through the daily ordeal of the three-decade war. As observed by the readers of Women War Poetry in English, some of the most provocative, and consequently problematic, poems are produced by the women war poets. Sensing their second-hand experience in the masculine context of War politics, women poems can at times result in poems which are sentimental in their account of the happenings of war and they can be more elegiac and visceral and physical in their account of loss.<sup>15</sup>

"The Phoenix" 'Abd al-Qadir al-Husni, a poem by a Syrian poet delivered in al-Marbid Poetic Festival, Baghdad, 1998:<sup>16</sup>

"أطوي درج الليل واصعد/ أحمل بين يدي جذاذات من ألواح/ زقورات عالية،  
وجنائن علقها أهلي/ بين الأرض وبين الله/ جنات من اعناب ونخيل/ لن نظماً... وهي  
شفاه / تتصبى ما في الغيم من الأمواه..."

I rush up through the stairs of the night and ascend/ Carrying in my  
hands fragments of my tablets/ High ziggurats and gardens that were  
hanged up by my folks/ Between the earth and God/ Paradises of  
grapes and palms/ That will not thirst, as they are lips/ Enticing the  
waters in clouds

The poem employs the typical imagery and references about Iraq as represented historically by other Arab poets. The pastoral imagery

<sup>15</sup> See Tim Kendall, p. 109–110.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.nizwa.com/browse26.html>.

refers to the typical elements of the Iraqi landscape: the olive trees and the palm trees. The same references and symbols are consolidated in the works of the Iraqi poets. This indicates that the Iraqi poetry interacted actively, influenced by and influenced other Arab poems about Iraq.

### **Conclusion**

The Home-poets experience is more complicated and hindered by the confusion and the mutual accusations going between the different groups which indicate that the war and the conflict are still going on. Diasporic poets detached themselves from the direct indulgence in the discursive conflicts at home and aspired to write a self-directed “war narrative.” The Diasporic voice is evolving into a recognized coherent discourse and the Diasporic experience is producing highly praised poetic works that are independent yet are by no means uninvolved, nonaligned or unmediated artefacts. The challenge that will face the Diasporic poet is to be aware of the fact that his representation of the wartime experience, unbeatable as it would seem, cannot be communicated to the Iraqi generation who lived through the daily ordeal suffering traumas and strains of three decade-war.

The poems give an entry point to understand how the events in Iraq and the experience of the Iraqi people during this period would be written and read, and how the Iraqi poetry interacts with and represents this crucial period in the history of Iraq. In comparison to the representation of war in Arab poetry, the cruelty of the civil war undermined any possibility for romanticization and undercut any glorification. Nonetheless despite the impossibility to produce a grand epic war discourse like the discourse of the independent war, and despite the unfeasibility to unify and orchestrate a credible and impressive discourse like that of the Palestinian wars, the ongoing Iraqi poetic experience is endeavouring to establish its own definition of war poetry.

In addition to gaining more experience on interacting with all those institutional and socio-cultural forces that mediate the dissemination of poetry both at home and in Diaspora, the current Iraqi poets in general, and in Diaspora in particular, are getting more recognition than most of their regional peers and they seem to be

producing first-rate works that are published, translated, and are getting international and regional awards. The illustrative poems that I selected and translated are live testimony to the active and interactive project of the contemporary Iraqi poetic writing.

The discursive conflict that was unleashed since the outset of the second Gulf War exacerbated with the fast spread of internet as the main cultural medium in Iraq and among the Iraqi literary communities in Diaspora. Conducting a discourse-analysis of the ongoing debates and dialogues is the only way in which we can shed a light on the undercurrents of an ongoing literary and discursive war over the public discourse and representation of the war. This analysis also highlights the fact that what will follow this period will be a literary conflict and an institutional war inside Iraq over shaping and directing the public perception of the experience. This conflict will implicate the Arab as well as the international, and in particular the Western, cultural and the academic discourse over different interpretations and representations of the Iraq war and of the different political periods in contemporary Iraq. In the longer term, as the paper intends to emphasize, the most significant repercussion of this interdiscursive conflict will be an extended post-war conflict over the post-war national, Arab and international discourse. A conflict that will haunt not only the Iraqi, but also the Arab and the international cultural and political institutions, for a long time to come.

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