

ROUNDTABLE: IRAQ TWENTY YEARS AFTER THE US INVASION

The Form of Remembrance: Prison Writing and the Memory of the Ba'th in *Dreaming of Baghdad* and *I'jaam*

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In his 2019 critical study, Husayn Sarmak Hassan complained that not enough attention has been given to the production of Iraqi prison writing even after the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime and its censorship apparatus. He notes, for example, that during the 2017 Cairo book fair, he found thirty (presumably new) prison novels, none of which were written by Iraqis.¹ The relative scarcity of prison novels from Iraq is most certainly not due to lack of content; since the collapse of the old regime, there has been a proliferation of personal accounts, both oral and written, detailing the horrors of Saddam's Ba'th and the extent of the human toll of its wars and oppression. The ensuing documentation projects that emerged out of this mass catharsis aimed to amplify voices that had hitherto been marginalized and silenced, including the experiences of political prisoners.² Hassan's study on prison writing, published by the Iraqi Ministry of Culture, can be seen in this light: as part of a national effort to process the literary and psychological aspects of the Ba'th's legacy. However, the author's interest in prison writing also stems from his professional background as a medical doctor and psychiatrist directly involved in the study and treatment of PTSD in military veterans of the Iran–Iraq War. His personal interest in the experiences of Iraqi political prisoners is also made clear by certain paratextual elements in his study; in the acknowledgements, for example, Hassan dedicates his text to a friend who spent twenty years in incarceration as a political prisoner, and to his brother, who he found unrecognizable due to starvation and torture on a visit to a Najaf prison in 1994.

Likewise, personal investment is clear in the dedications of another piece of literary criticism on prison writing in Iraq; its author Adnan Husayn Ahmad had been imprisoned himself and dedicates the work to his former colleagues in the solitary confinement section of the Diyala Security Center.³ Like Hassan, Ahmad's choice of what to include in his survey of prison writing precedes Saddam's Ba'th and includes a combination of fictionalized accounts based on true stories, autobiographies proper, as well as pure fiction. What is notable in both critical works, despite a sort of scientific interest and desire to document the experiences of political prisoners, is that factual and fictional works are placed alongside one another on an equal footing, where life writing is not necessarily privileged for its veracity or realism over imagined texts.

Since its inception, Arab prison writing has been intimately linked to the literary experimentalism of the 1960s, and therefore debates on whether experimental styles and fantasy

¹ Husayn Sarmak Hassan, *Min Adab al-Sujun al-'Iraq* (Baghdad: Dar al-Shu'un al-Thaqafiyya al-'Amma, 2019), 6.

² The Republic of Iraq's Political Prisoners Foundation was established in 2005 to provide monetary, psychological, and other kinds of support to pre-2003 political prisoners.

³ Adnan Husayn Ahmad, *Adab al-Sujun Khilal Sanawat al-Hukm al-Diktaturi fi al-'Irāq* (London: Dar al-Hikma, 2004).

are more (or less) effective than “authentic” (and often simply written) testimonies, have largely been absent in the Arab cultural domain. In fact, according to Nazih Abu Nidal, direct witness literature and more experimental works are “generically intertwined” as part of a collective corpus of Arab resistance against dictatorship and oppression.⁴ Moreover, theories of the ideology of genre have viewed it as a process of interpretation and as a socio-symbolic message, meaning that literary texts of varying quality remain of value as sociohistorical documents.⁵ What is more, in the case of prison literature, the form in which texts are written is itself a form of political expression. Abu Nidal states that experimentality in prison writing “attempts at escaping captivity of classical aesthetic forms, and their chains are, consciously or unconsciously, an attempt to arrive at the equivalent of the freedom of content by possessing the freedom of form.”⁶

Instrumentality or use value is usually defined in political terms as “resistance literature” or is associated with didactic and explicitly ideological texts. At best, instrumentality is seen as a secondary consideration to aesthetics and artistic ingenuity; at worst, it is seen to taint a work of art or relegate it to the margins of propaganda. I believe that “purpose,” although perhaps a dated term, is an essential consideration for prison literature, whether “aesthetic” or not. This is because in the first instance testimonial prison fiction centers on memory, and memory-keeping is key for transitional justice. On the other hand, the use value of fiction and creative nonfiction is significant due to its far-reaching cultural imprint and wider readership; and because great fictional works of prison literature speak to some kind of truth about the human condition, which allows for transnational solidarity and guards against exceptionalism and the overpoliticization of literature. Although in a sense less “true” than their nonfictional counterparts, fictional and creative nonfiction texts are arguably of more use value than niche works of testimonial prison writing, especially if they are able to capture the essence of the prison writing experience in a universalist sense without bleeding out the local color and uniqueness of individual experiences.⁷ I have used “writing” in the title of this essay, rather than “prison literature,” to give an indication of how broad the range of written materials on prisons in Iraq is, including marginalized texts that might not necessarily be considered “literary.” I have, however, chosen to analyze established works in the genre, both in Iraq and the Arab world; the first is a work of dystopian fiction and the other a piece of creative nonfiction. I would argue that the presence of creative nonfiction and other forms of life writing such as autofiction, autobiography, biography, and memoirs in the corpus of Iraqi prison writing necessitates a wider positioning of these texts in the Arab cultural sphere, rather than an exclusively literary one.

This essay examines the (de)construction of personal and national memory in two examples of Iraqi prison writing published after 2003. I argue that although documentation is an act of remembrance against the forgetting of victim, a written record honoring the

⁴ Nidal Abu Nazih quoted in R. Shareah Taleghani, *Readings in Syrian Prison Literature: The Poetics of Human Rights* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2021), 36. In the introduction to the English translation of Sinan Antoon’s debut novel, Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury refers to the dual function of Arab prison literature, as both a space to document reality and “a laboratory for new literary styles”; Sinan Antoon, *I’jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2007).

⁵ Thomas O’Beebee, *The Ideology of Genre: A Comparative Study of Generic Instability* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 250; Taleghani, *Readings*, 36.

⁶ O’Beebee, *The Ideology of Genre*, 35.

⁷ Books detailing the horrors of Ba’thist prisons were often self-published and anonymous, for fear of reprisals against family members still residing inside Iraq, and had niche audiences. For example, ‘Ali and Fatima al-‘Iraqi’s (not their real names, as the book was published before the fall of Saddam) *Mudhakarāt Sajīna: Safāhat Hamra’ min Tarīkh Mansi* (Memoirs of a Female Prisoner: Red Pages from a Forgotten Past), which details the sufferings and executions of ten religious Shi’a women at the hands of Saddam’s security services from the late 1960s up until the early 2000s. The text falls under the scope of religious or Islamic literature and did not circulate beyond the pockets of Shi’a religious communities in exile. ‘Ali and Fatima al-‘Iraqi, *Mudhakarāt Sajīna: Safāhat Hamra’ min Tarīkh Mansi* (n.p.: Dar al-Fiqh, 2002).

nameless, the legacy of the Ba'th Party can also be challenged by casting doubt on the grand narratives of history and memory, be they national or personal. *Dreaming of Baghdad* and *Ijaam*, by Hafa Zangana and Sinan Antoon respectively, were published at a crucial historical juncture in Iraq; however, the potential for catharsis following the toppling of Saddam Hussein is overshadowed by the looming threat of the American occupation and a repeat of history. The two authors see artistry and experimentation as effective means of resistance, with Zangana even problematizing the memory of her own experience behind bars to the extent that she does not make an autobiographical pact with the reader. Placed in the wider context of literary production under the Ba'th regime, the use of a dignified brevity characterized by lapses in memory, fragmented vignettes, and other experimental stylistic techniques and innovative use of structures forms a marked contrast to the lengthy and omniscient narratives of state-sponsored literature. The monologic voice of the tyrant and his official account of history is challenged and resisted by asserting the unknowability of the past and the unreliability of memory, even by those who experienced the deep trauma of state violence. The ambiguity of personal recollections extends to the collective, to how oppositional political parties remember their struggles against oppression and how various communities in Iraq assess and narrate their relations to power and to each other.

In his debut novel *Ijaam*, Sinan Antoon (1967–) simultaneously challenges authoritarian discourses and reveals how resistance is contained and deemed impossible. The main text consists of the sporadic memoirs of a young fictional poet named Furat secretly written while in prison during the 1980s, apparently without dots on the Arabic letters so that the text would be unintelligible if discovered.⁸ Once in the hands of the Ministry of Interior, however, the prison warden who (illegally) gave Furat papers for writing is commissioned to add dots to the manuscript to make it intelligible for censorship and surveillance. Notably, a Christian Ba'thist “comrade” is also put in charge of deciphering Furat’s otherwise “unintelligible” Christian dialect. In this way, Antoon ensures that no community in Iraq victimizes itself or is completely absolved from blame, as all sectors of society are implicated and ensnared in the web of violence and bigotry. Antoon’s use of metafiction falls within an Arab/Iraqi literary tradition that destabilizes narrative closure and represents a rendering of visibility of political prisoners that is more powerful despite being fictitious or fragmented.⁹

According to Eric Davis, historical memory is difficult to demarcate clearly because “memory can be very fluid, an individual or group may perceive a particular historical event in a disjointed rather than structured and temporally sequential manner.”¹⁰ Fragmentation and fluidity are indeed hallmarks of all collective memories; however, those in power have often attempted to construct coherent and authoritative narratives rooted in history to legitimate their rule. To do so, a new kind of language is created, replete with symbols and myths. Antoon’s protagonist’s blasphemous parodies of the Ba'th regime’s propagandistic language is probably why he was imprisoned in the first place, and his prison memoirs center on wordplay as a form of resistance. Thus, *al-ba'th* (resurrection) becomes *al-'abath* (foolery and meaninglessness); *al-qā'id* (leader) becomes *al-qa'id* (lazy or indolent); and *wizārat al-thaqāfa wa-l-i'lām* (the Ministry of Culture

⁸ Sinan Antoon describes the nonlinearity of the novel as “a political and philosophical choice. It is an attempt to disrupt what I take to be the hegemonic discourse and the truth of the regime and of Big Brother”; Dina Omar, “Sinan Antoon: ‘I Think of Myself As a Global Citizen,’” *The Electronic Intifada*, 7 April 2010, <http://electronicintifada.net/content/sinan-antoon-i-think-myself-global-citizen/8760>.

⁹ Adnan Husayn Ahmad considers Fadhil al-‘Azzawi’s *The Fifth Castle* (1972) the first Iraqi prison novel, and an outstanding example of metafiction. Personal experiences informed al-‘Azzawi’s fiction, as he was in and out of prison several times over three years until his final release in 1965. Adnan Hussein Ahmed, *al-Riwaya al-Iraqiyya al-Mughhtarbiya* (London: Dar al-Hikma, 2014), 13, 30–31. Also, R. Shareah Taleghani, “Writing Against the Regime: Metafiction in the Arabic Prison Novel,” in *Prison Writing and the Literary World: Imprisonment, Institutionalality and Questions of Literary Practice*, ed. Michelle Kelly and Claire Westall (New York: Routledge, 2021), 175.

¹⁰ Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

and Media) becomes *wizārat al-sakhāfa wa al-ihām* (the Ministry of Silliness and Deception).¹¹ These and other instances of wordplay are listed in a glossary compiled by the Ba'hist "comrade" in the metafictional framework of the text, neutralizing some of its subversive quality and questioning the possibility of resistance.

The title of the novel exemplifies Antoon's project to revel in the multiple meanings of words. *I'jām/I'jaam* is an ambiguous term and carries antithetical meanings. If *i'rāb* is to make better (clearer) Arabic, *i'jām* can mean to "foreignize," make ambiguous and unclear, as a means of resisting the imposition of one meaning.¹² Antoon also blurs the line between clarity and ambiguity and between subservience and resistance, as he highlights another layer of meaning in a note preceding the text, which is the dotting of letters for the purpose of clarifying and elucidating.¹³ The idea of uncovering for the purpose of surveillance harks back to Foucault's study *Folie et Déraison: Histoire de la Folie à l'âge Classique*, in which he details the use of the panopticon in prisons and mental asylums so that inmates could be watched constantly. Writing and language can indeed constitute forms of potential resistance, but also control; the text also juxtaposes scenes of physical rape alongside the language of violence and bigotry, each equally violating individual selfhood.¹⁴ Furthermore, it highlights the psychological trauma associated with propaganda and self-censorship when the protagonist asks himself "*aktub am la aktub*" (should I or shouldn't I write?), activating his inner censor and internalizing the words of Saddam: "*uktūbū bi la khawf wa la taraddud aw taqayyud li-iḥtimālāt an takūn al-dawla raḍīya 'amma taktūbūn*" (write without any concern or hesitation that the government may or may not be satisfied with what you write).¹⁵ He adds: "Maybe they really did win with everything they forcefully wrote on the wall of memory and the unconscious."¹⁶ Memories should necessarily be fragmented, dreamlike, perhaps even hallucinatory so as not to bear the imprint of state violence and control; and as memory is expressed primarily through language and cannot exist without it, so it too must be fluid.

The poetic lyricism of the novel combined with parodies of regime propaganda attempts to liberate language from the imposition of a single meaning by the state. But the novel's dystopian genre and its cyclical view of history neutralize the subversive quality of irony and wordplay in *I'jaam*. Antoon himself recognizes this potential dilemma:

I also wanted to present two apparently contradictory ideas: firstly, that we can oppose the despotic discourse by co-opting it and distorting it by means of parody, and secondly that the voice of the marginalised and the oppressed doesn't even make it to the public in the first place, or when it does, then in commented or fragmented form – a tragic reality.¹⁷

The novel emphasizes the circularity of history; it equates *thawra* (revolution) with *fawra* (an angry or emotional outburst) to refer to the mindless military coups that have plagued Iraq's modern history.¹⁸ Furat's lover Areej later notes: "Now the time of the British has passed. It's

¹¹ These are my transcriptions from the original Arabic text, as the metafictional glossary used by the government official to spell out instances of subversive word play by the prisoner does not appear in the English translation.

¹² In one of the protagonist's hallucinations while in prison, all the dictionaries and glossaries in the countries are burnt in a great ceremonial book burning. Sinan Antoon, *I'jām: Riwaya* (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 2004), 109. Henceforth, quotations from the Arabic text will use the title *I'jām*, whereas references from the English translation will refer to the title *I'jaam*.

¹³ Antoon, *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody*, n.p.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39–40.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, n.p. These quotations are used as epigraphs in both texts.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁷ See Ibtisam Azem, "Interview with Sinan Antoon: Using Irony to Tackle Trauma," trans. Katy Derbyshire, *Qantara.de*, 2009, <http://en.qantara.de/Using-Irony-to-Tackle-Trauma/9125c92251p501>.

¹⁸ There is a persistent sense of history repeating itself and no progress being made in Iraqi society, just wave upon wave of oppression and constant revolutions. Antoon, *I'jaam*, 23–24.

the age of America, and it's not like they'll occupy us."¹⁹ The irony of this statement is not lost on the reader, and although written outside Iraq in 2004, after the fall of Saddam, there is no sense of euphoria as Furat escapes prison into the eerie silence of a new world (or madness!); a world where another "picture will replace Saddam's" and where Hala's son, Saddam's grandchild from his youngest daughter, now rules Iraq.²⁰ Raffaella Baccolini contends that "the conditions of dystopian citizens are not so different from those of a prisoner, who, having no control over space nor over the present and the future, can reside only in the past."²¹ Memory is what remains of history and that is the fear of its repetition; this underlies the dystopian quality of Antoon's text.

The trope of the autobiographical pact persists in modern Iraqi narratives, and writers wearily tread the line between artistic freedom and ingenuity on the one hand, and the imperative to tell the whole truth on the other. In some of the latest examples of Iraqi prison writing, supplementary documents are added to texts to support the idea of bearing witness to historical truths. In one recent example, Iraqi writer Karim Katafa states that he was commissioned by six former detainees to write *Dhakirat Yad: Hikaya min Tabut al-Amn* (Memory of a Hand: Inside the Coffin of the Security Services), detailing how they had been dismembered by the Ba'th Party for illegally trading dollars during the sanctions period. The text includes photographs of the men after their arms had been amputated, and other miscellaneous articles and photographs. Katafa comments: "I recorded almost forty hours of oral accounts over the course of over three months . . . what still worries me though, and what I am unsure about, is have I kept my promise to myself of not projecting my world onto theirs?" He ultimately reflects on the novel, however, as "a textile with interwoven threads on the bones of reality . . . it recounts and imagines as much as it researches and documents."²²

If the autobiographical pact has been made between author and reader, the veracity of facts included in the text can be questioned and challenged. For example, Iraqi writer Khudayr Mirri wrote several accounts about how he escaped death as a political prisoner by pretending to be insane, and his subsequent transfer to a mental hospital. In his latest account of events, *al-Thubaba 'ala al-Warda* (The Fly on the Flower), Mirri uses a paratext in the form of a written testimony by the doctor who declared him clinically insane to save him from being charged with political crimes.²³ Mirri had already written several times about his experiences and the veracity of his accounts have previously been challenged, with some claiming that he actually did suffer from mental illnesses prior to his imprisonment.²⁴ In any case, the inclusion of the doctor's account in the preface of this retelling represents a rebuttal to those who accused him of not being truthful. The act of rewriting an existing narrative underlines a preoccupation with artistry rather than with documentation on the part of the author. Like Khudayr Mirri, Iraqi writer and activist Haifa Zangana rewrote her prison memoirs, *Fi Arwiqat al-Dhakira* (1990, translated into English as *Through the Vast Halls of Memory*, 1991) and republished them in English in 2009 under the new title, *Dreaming of Baghdad*. Rewriting the same events is a testament to the unreliability of memory, as it implies that there is no authoritative account even by the same author; events are the same, but their chronology and how they are narrativized changes.

Haifa Zangana (1950–) spent eight years writing an account of her imprisonment and torture by the Ba'th regime due to her political activities with the then outlawed Iraqi Communist Party. First imprisoned in Qasr al-Nihaya, reserved for political opponents,

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 127.

²¹ Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, eds., *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 125.

²² Karim Katafa, *Dhakirat Yad: Hikaya min Tabut al-Amn* (Baghdad: Dar Suttur, 2022), 16–18.

²³ Bahir Sami al-Batti's preface in Khudayr Mirri, *al-Thubaba 'ala al-Warda* (Baghdad: Dar Suttur, 2022), 5–9.

²⁴ Khudayr Mirri, *Ayyam al-Junun wa-l-'Asal: al-Harb 'ala Mustashfa al-Majanin* (Baghdad: Dar al-Shu'un al-Thaqafiyya al-'Amma, 2000); and *Tasrih bi-l-Junun: Rihlati min al-Ta'thib ila al-Massaha al-'Aqliyya* (Baghdad: Manshurat al-Janna, 2005). Both are more autobiographical in style than his latest book.

Zangana was eventually moved to Za'faraniya women's prison, the inmates being primarily prostitutes or those with long or life sentences. To escape execution, Zangana signed a document "confessing" that she was sexually involved with her comrades and was not political.

Episodic, nonlinear, and expansive in terms of time and space, *Dreaming of Baghdad* utilizes a variety of literary styles and genres, such as diary entries and letters. She challenges the conventions of autobiography by alternating between the use of first and third person to avoid the "illusion of the self as the centre of events or history."²⁵ The pain and humiliation that the protagonist endures reduces her into "an entity closed upon itself" healed through writing in solidarity and not through revenge.²⁶ In fact, there is no meaningful sense of justice or relief from the fact that the head of Iraqi secret intelligence, Nazim Kazar, whom she names in the text, was executed only four years after her arrest. The narrativization of nonfiction in this way contributes to the construction of collective memory beyond aesthetics or individual catharsis and serves as an antidote to the polemics of retribution and revenge. The tragic cycle of violence, which implicates even the author and her comrades themselves, allows for a quasi-philosophical reflection on injustice that goes beyond personal grievances. Zangana is uncertain of the incorruptibility of humans: "Is there any guarantee that we too, will not wear the faces of the torturers in the future?"²⁷

Torture isolates the individual and pushes them to be preoccupied with their own immediate needs, to inform on others in the hope of salvation and reprieve; in short, to do anything to survive as an individual. By remembering those who have died or disappeared, the author resists the idea of detachment from the communal and contributes to the formation of a collective memory, despite the amnesias, deliberate or unintentional, that have plagued it. The therapeutic quality of writing functions as a form of rehabilitation, helping the traumatized detainee situate her experiences within a broader global context. The legacy of Zangana's book forms part of a continued effort to produce what she calls creative nonfiction about incarcerated women in the Arab world. Her 2017 text, *Party for Thaera: Palestinian Women Writing Life*, documents the experiences of incarcerated Palestinian women, and a similar project is underway with Tunisian former female detainees.²⁸ The transnational bonds expressed and cemented in these projects form part of a collective memory that is at once Iraqi, Arab, and female.

The cyclical nature of history, where "the past is the present is the future" ensures that the author's experience with torture is not depicted as exceptional, but rather as shared.²⁹ The foreword to *Dreaming of Baghdad* by Hamid Dabashi frames the text as a resistance narrative, not only against Saddam and the Ba'th regime, but also against the Americans. The mere mention of Abu Ghraib (where Zangana was also imprisoned before being moved elsewhere) is intended to strongly resonate with American readers of this edition of the book, as "only one, among many symbols" of the destruction caused by American imperialism in Iraq.³⁰ One cannot help but think of the similarities between American torturers in Abu Ghraib and Zangana's nefarious tormentors. As a valuable sociohistorical document, a text often tells us as much about the moment of production as it does about the past that it seeks to reconstruct. As such, both *Dreaming of Baghdad* and *I'jaam* represent a written record

²⁵ Haifa Zangana, *Dreaming of Baghdad* (New York: Feminist Press, 2009), 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 53. The twist in the novel's epilogue about Haider, a fellow comrade released from prison after only three days (which immediately makes him a suspected collaborator with the government) is a case in point. Haider may have been executed by his comrades for fear that he was now an infiltrator, or maybe he was not; the author does not really remember. In fact, it is only when she sees his name on the list of missing persons in back issues of *al-Thawra*, the Ba'th's official newspaper in 1999, that she remembers him at all.

²⁸ "In/For Translation: 7 Arab Women Writing Prison," *ArabLit & ArabLit Quarterly*, 20 August 2019, <https://arablit.org/2019/08/20/in-for-translation-7-arab-women-writing-prison>.

²⁹ Zangana, *Dreaming of Baghdad*, 43.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

of the immediate aftermath of the invasion of Iraq and not just Iraq's republican history under the Ba'th Party, using the memory of the past to comment on the present. Zangana republished her memoirs to affirm personal memory (however tenuous) on the one hand, but also to locate her experiences within a series of chapters in the history of violence in Iraq, including the latest American invasion of the country.

Ultimately, Sinan Antoon and Haifa Zangana's choice not to adopt documentary styles of prison writing can be considered a political statement on their part, rather than a purely aesthetic choice. These stylistic preferences point to multiple and often contesting truths about Iraq's past, instead of privileging the self as the center of experience and knowledge. Rather than recounting events from her traumatic experiences in an exhaustive manner, Zangana attempts to affect modes of thoughts using form as a filter for perceiving reality, providing a nuanced view of history without losing the sense of outrage at injustice. With no direct experience of imprisonment, Antoon's choice of fiction allows for artistic freedom in terms of structure, as his adoption of nonlinearity is used to challenge the grand narratives of war, nationalism, and minority identities in Iraq. Taken together, the two texts represent a quest for freedom of form from the constraints of totalitarianism, the imposition of one meaning, and the co-optation of history and language in the name of ideology. However, although language forms both the individual and collective memory and memory can only be accessed through language, it remains inadequate in the face of unspeakable cruelty and violence.

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