

Contemporary Iraqi Novel: Abundant Production and New Trends

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on discussing the Iraqi contemporary novelistic production. The study handled the development of the Iraqi novel genre during three different periods; during Saddam's regime, during exile after the fall of the regime, and during the post-2003 war and U.S. Invasion to Iraq. The study explored the historical development of the Iraqi novels through discussing the main subjects and themes of these novels during the three different periods. In addition to that, some names of the best writers in each period, were given. The study concluded that Iraqi contemporary novelistic production has passed through three different periods; during Saddam regime in which the literature was directed by the government and used to glorify the authority and sing of heroism of the leaders. The second period was during the exile when thousands of Iraqis were migrated forcefully abroad leaving their homeland, families and everything they own. The exile literature has involved new experiences generated new trends and different themes reflected the exile sufferings, culture differentiation, and identity crisis. The third period in the Iraqi contemporary narration was the post-2003 war and U.S. invasion. The novel genre in Iraq is flourished and produced hundreds of novels within a short period due to the variety of subjects emerged talk about invasion, sectarianism, election, new government, openness on the world through the internet and social media which was forbidden previously. The post-2003 war period produced a type of narration qualified to compete with the Arab and global literature. Some novels got the chance to win Arabic and International prizes which brought the international attention to the Iraqi literature such as *Frankenstein in Baghdad* by Ahmed Saadawi which was short listed as one of the best novels in International Booker 2018 and translated into more than 30 languages.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Iraqi novel does not take enough area of interest as the other literary forms such as poetry for many reasons. One of them is the political restrictions and ideologies which tie up the Iraqi novelists in the past. But the drastic change after 2003 U.S-led war and what resulted of changes in the local cultural scene led to more openness on the global experiences. This reason in turn led to the production of a generation of narrators have boldness and courage in dealing with the Iraqi reality and its complexities through abundant of professional works. Some of their productions compete with the Arabic novelistic production and won Arabic and global prizes such as

the Arabic Poker Prize which is considered as one of the most valuable prize in the field of literature.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq was at the forefront problems faced by the Iraqi novelists. The invasion caused social, political and sectarian schisms in the country which represents a fertile material from which the novelists draw their stories. From those novelists were Ahmed Saadawi, Fawzi Al Hindawi, Ali Bader, Inaam Kachachi, Saad Mohammed Raheem and others. Some critics argue that still insufficient attention has been paid to the Iraq situation, despite many important works are produced. Those critics attribute the reason for the non-spread of the Iraqi novels compared to their Arabic counterparts to the foggy and unclear local reality which made the Iraqi writers became in a state of confusion in front of the anarchy. How to describe a face has no clear features? In addition, the Iraqi

intellectual was loaded with a legacy of silence stretched for decades, he could not be able to write about it. But now he stood up to express himself in a narrative way.

The novel in Iraq and in Arab countries (as a result of the Arabic Spring) after 2003 has taken new turn different to what was known in the previous period. While much has been written about the political motives behind the ongoing violence and the reasons behind the spread of armed groups and terrorism in Iraq, the majority of Iraqis still find it difficult to interpret all this violence through conventional methods. The Iraqis before the invasion were one unity and none of them was thinking of anybody else's sect, religion, ethnicity, or region. All are Iraqis and all are part of the country's components. They have rights and duties regardless of the gender, colour or religious affiliation.

People almost surrendered to their fear because "absence of logical answers ...questions led many Iraqis to despair, and perhaps to accept violence as part of their daily routines. Instead of focusing on confronting violence and its political, social and cultural causes, a lot of Iraqis prefer to live with it and accept that violence has become part of their lives." (Al-Qarawee, 2014).

2- Contemporary Iraqi Novel: Abundant Production and New Trends

The Iraqi novelistic production witnessed a revolution of narration after the toppling of the Saddam regime. The new narrators were encouraged to publish more than 600 novels during the period from 2003- 2016. This massive literary production of the narrations documented the history, difficulties, miseries, and burdens of the Iraqis during the contemporary time under Saddam regime, in exile and under the invasion of the U.S. led troops. All the published novels are talking about what is happening in Iraq under the invasion of the U.S troops to Iraq represented by the bloodshed situation and the concepts and values are confused. The writers were in need to invent new methods of writing different than what they used to in order to express this new situation.

It is difficult to chart out all of the new literary currents and circles that are developing or scarcely forming inside and outside Iraq in the post-2003 period. The invasion of the U.S. troops in Iraq created lots of changes cast its shadow over the Iraq scene.

3- PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Iraqi contemporary novelistic production was abundant, use new themes and trends but still not appreciated critically.

4- LITERATURE REVIEW

The contemporary Iraqi novels passed through three different periods. Every one of them has its own characteristics and represents a totally different era of literature. These periods are: during Saddam's regime, in exile, and Post-2003 War and U.S. Invasion to Iraq.

4.1 The Novel during Saddam Regime

The Iraqi novel before 2003 did not have the presence to enable it to occupy a remarkable space of the interest of the Arabic and Iraqi literary readers. Two reasons may be the cause of this non-presence; the lack of this product or it has been not being subjected to the experience of modernity and transformations which are part of the characteristics of this creative form of literature. Therefore, what is performed, especially inside Iraq, remained confined to traditional narratives workout which is full of ambiguity due to the pressure of the censorship by the authority. So, this little novelistic product remained out of circulation because of the lack of communication between the recipient and the text. The novelist production is an extension to what was previously known. It was under the control and authority of the government (Ba'ath Party which was the governing party). The subjects handled by the novels of the period of Ba'ath party ruling period where the political, social issues, military coups and revolutions of the 1950s and 1960s of the past century. Also, it discussed the Iraq-Iran war but in using symbolic works of history and mythology. This period was represented by Fouad Al Takarli, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Abdul Sattar Nasir, and others.

Narration under the dictatorship, which was featured by: Texts resort to Symbol and legend in the history of ancient Iraq in a narrative construction added new artistic forms to the Arabic narration but it avoided discussing the Iraqi dilemma in its time. Texts justified the war culture in a narrative construction glorified killing and violence values. Texts addressed most of the life aspects of the citizen but avoided the essence of its sufferings. It also avoided discussing the three forbidden: Politics, Sex, and religion.

"This process followed the long hiatus of the 1980s and 1990s during which Iraqi writers were either silenced, exiled, or enlisted by the state in the production of war glorification literature that is generally deemed stylistically poor and duplicitous in content." (Hanoosh, 2013).

4.2 The Novel under Freedom in Exile

As numerous waves of intellectuals have been politically or otherwise compelled to leave Iraq over the course of more than half a century, contemporary Iraqi literature currently assumes a binary shape as a product of "inside" and "outside" sensibilities and cultures. (Hanoosh, 2013). Most of the Iraqis who belonged to anti-regime parties such as Iraqi Communist party, Da'awa Islamic party, Supreme Iraqi Council, etc. were, if discovered, to be imprisoned or executed and the lucky ones of them cross the borders through Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia or Kuwait to be in exile. Kashou (2013) stated that:

Many Iraqis were forced into exile, including many writers; hence, very few actually write from the center of the war. The Iraqis that wrote from exile were mainly political dissidents to the Saddam regime... These writers were exiled early on in Saddam's regime. As such, they mainly focused on themes of exile and nostalgia." (Kashou, 2013: P.27).

Being in exile during the wartime, the Iraqis find new themes and subjects to deal with in their writings. They narrate their tragedies and memories that hunt them of the past. Also, another worrying concern is the dark unknown future of their country and the safety of their relatives in a turbulent state. During Saddam regime the close relatives will not be safe of being investigated, imprisoned or convicted until the family member to surrender himself to the authority. This was considered as a nightmare for everyone has the chance to leave the country. Therefore, the family denies any knowledge of the destiny of that person from one side and the fugitive could not declare his existence. So, the suffering was double. "They feel helpless and handicapped, passive and not proactive, which results into guilty consciousness with consequences that land them into therapy and depression in a cold, lonely land". (Kashou, 2013: P. 134)

Texts are written under freedom in exile, which was featured by: Drawn the dimensions of the Iraqi man under the dictatorship in depth and clarity depicting his sufferings, fears, resistance, intolerance, disappointment, and collapse. New narrative construction has appeared for writers really involved in the wars and taste the bitterness of being homeless which reflected reliability in their writings. This new experience generates new trends and different themes of the history of Iraqi narration as the exile

sufferings, culture differentiation, identity crisis, sufferings of the soldier in the military establishments and the fight fronts, the sufferings of the fighters in the Iraqi mountains which is a unique Iraqi experience. It is unique because the fight was against a dictator and not against an invasion. In exile, Iraqis show their nostalgic feelings for their homeland. "They all write about nostalgia for Iraq while in exile, but when they write about it they convey their memories of their past suffering in a nation they left in ruins."(Kashou, 2013: P.18). But still the exile novelists, despite the wide space of freedom which might be strong impulse, could not be able to dig deep to reach the real problems because their works were connected to the memory which is accomplice due to the inner desire of the writers to keep an image of the place they were in out of all the psychological, economic and cultural changes. They did not want to distort, forgetting the changes that have taken place on it.

Also, there was an obvious role for the women in this revolution enabled her to participate in political parties or movements. For the first time, there was no objection to discuss the three forbidden concepts: Sex, politics, and religion. Kashou (2013) argues that "When Iraqi women write on their personal and collective Iraqi experience, they write in a manner that presents the personal lives of Iraqi women within the context of their troubled nation."(Kashou, 2013: P. 6) The narratives of the Iraqi women do not only reflect the daily life issues of women but the lives of Iraqis as a whole that are all affected by the war and exile. Their subjects were about their feelings of loneliness, the absence of the man who lost in the successive wars with Iran, Kuwait, Coalition Forces, and/or in the sea during the migration to Europe through Turkey and Greece. There were common subjects handled in the women narratives especially after the war of 2003. These subjects are kidnaps, rapes, assaults, and trafficking in women.

4.3 Post-2003 War and U.S. Invasion to Iraq

The post-2003 war period is a distinguish to the Iraqi literature field especially the novel genre. It was flourished and hundreds of novels were produced dealt different subjects and interests. These novels handled the change in the Iraqi society after the toppling of the regime and the U.S. invasion. One of the most dangerous changes was *sectarianism*. "The disastrous U.S. occupation of Iraq was the chief catalyst for sectarianism's spread across the region, part of a larger diabolical plot by Washington to pit the Arab world against itself." (Wehrey, 2014: P. X). Other causes of sectarianism came through different channels such as media, domestic extremists (both

Sunni and Shiite), and political marginalization. In more recent decades, the political and economic dominance of Iraq's minority Sunni Arabs and their persecution of the country's Shiite majority have only served to stoke sectarian tensions." (Gritten, 2006). Also, "a smaller fringe sees sectarianism as a largely instrumental tool in the hands of authoritarian rulers, who mobilize religious leader to spread a sectarian discourse with the aim of bolstering their control over society." (Wehrey, 2014: P. X)

The literature was affected by these changes and scholars show an obvious reaction against the newly imposed situation after the occupation. This leads to the appearance of writers could manage to criticise the situation under invasion or what we can call it post colonialism. Roger Allen (2007) stated that "the Arabic novel metamorphosed in a similar developmental approach as its Western counterpart, as it originated from a political backdrop, analogous to the political events that took place in the region." It developed a nationalist identity as a reaction to colonialism or occupation by foreign countries. It also served as a reaction to society as a whole. This can denote that crisis creates new trends of literature not known before. The emergence of many writes in the literature circle produced some valuable works were able to compete with other Arabic works in the international occasions. Some of these works won prizes.

The novelist production which tries to keep pace with the contemporary time. This can be divided into two trends:

A- Starting from 2003, novelists tried to unmask the crimes of the ex-regime which run the country for about 40 years of tyranny and injustice. This trend extends to 2006. The themes and subjects of the novels written in this period were the violent changes the Iraqi society went through after the U.S. invasion and what impacts it caused to the Iraqi society. It created thorny issues represented by the spread of sectarianism, violence, terrorism, migration, and exile. The best representatives' writers of this period are Ahmed Saadawi, Ali Bader, Inaam Kachachi, Saad Mohammed Raheem, and others.

B- After 2006 a new trend appears as a result of sectarian war and new challenges of hidden civil war in absence of power whether from the US, the invaders, and/or the authority which in one way or another ignited the sectarian and fed it using the possibilities and capacities of the state by funding it with money and machineries. The writers of this period were restricted by strict censorship from the ruling parties and its related militia, and the preference not to tackle themes that can harm the

political authority in order not to be lost amid sectarian, ethnic or parties issues. The novelists preferred to write in a symbolic way. This period witnessed the appearance of Muhsin Al Ramli, Sinan Antwan, Lutfiyah Al Dulaimy, and others. The Iraqi novelists produced more than 500 novels between 2010 and 2016. This is considered as an explosive number when looking to the first start of the Iraqi novel in 1928. The theme of war was the common denominator among all the novels produced in this period.

Frederic M. Wehrey (2014) gave a description to the year of 2006 saying: "During this momentous year, the civil war in Iraq had risen to a steady crescendo of violence, and it seemed, at least from the outside, that the warring protagonists were lining up neatly along Shi'a and Sunni lines." (V). Whereas Saadawi in his novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* stated as the American "created this monster and released it in Baghdad. The American behind this monster". (Saadawi 335). Another observer to the Iraqi scene after 2003 said that "Since its inception in the spring of 2003, the nature of the fighting in Iraq has evolved from a struggle between Coalition forces and former regime loyalists to a much more diffuse conflict, involving a number of Sunni groups, Shiite militias, and foreign jihadists, and which has spread to become a widespread civil conflict." (Cordesman, 2007: P 2)

The subjects which were discussed in the contemporary Iraqi novel were totally new because it handled new situations under the invasion and post-war of 2003 in which there were issues of the postcolonial era. The bloodshed was the dominant subject in which concepts and values were in confusion. (Ibrahim, 2010)

The researcher Sabah Muhsin Kadhim believes that what is written of the narration after the absurd wars became in general as representation to public ambitions and hopes and reflect real picture of Iraq reality in all its components. The Iraqi novel set off from the locality to the Arabic market and gain different prizes. (Hassan, 2017: P. 15).

The new novel trend is an attempt to establish the features of an Iraqi novel posses the determination to deeply unpack the unexplained, such as the texts tacked the sectarian image and dig deep into its roots more than any previous attempt in the literature and the attempt to highlight the marginalized segment of the people and explain its sufferings. The abundance of novel production is considered as a turning point in the art of narration. The linguistic use of the Iraqi narrative is still trying to use verbal diversity in

narration; and there are changes on the level of using ironic and sarcastic and textualization with history, international cinema and theatre texts. (Thiyab, 2014).

5-METHODOLOGY

5.1 Introduction

The war of 2003 has a great impact on all fields of the Iraqis life; socially, culturally, politically and economically. Literature has also a share of change in most of its genres, especially novel. When investigating the aftermath of the U.S. invasion to Iraq, we can find that the narrative production has experienced so many changes in style, themes, and discourse language. It resulted to abundant of production of novels which have new literary trends. But, still few studies were presented in the field of novel to discuss and analyze these changes.

This is a qualitative study in which the author discusses the research approach and design used in the study, the theories used in formulation of the study and some critical comments and publications emerged during three different periods in the Iraq's history; during Saddam Regime, during the freedom in exile and during the post-2003 war and the postcolonial Iraqi literature.

The methodology presented in this study draws upon several sources. First, a comprehensive history of Iraq before and after the fall of Saddam Hussein. The resources were taken from the literary archive, government documents, newspaper periodicals, archival records.

The contemporary Iraqi novels were handled according to the postcolonial theory. Critical readings of postcolonial texts have been analyzed in which the authors reflected the concerns and daily problems of the Iraqis under the US-led invasion after 2003. The postcolonial period after 2003 highlighted the array of emotions of terror and vengeance that characterizes the frayed fabric of life and justice in the country. It was a good cause for the new narrators to publish more than 600 novels during the period from 2003- 2016. This massive literary production of the narrations documented the history, difficulties, miseries, and burdens of the Iraqis during the contemporary time under the invasion of the U.S. led troops.

5.2 -Data Collection

The data collection procedures used to compile the information, studies, and criticisms about the novels chosen in this study were mentioned and discussed. Also, a variety of methods of data collection,

including observations, textual or visual analysis (eg from books or videos) and interviews (individual or group), observations, textual analysis, descriptive method in addition to interpretations of interviews and case studies was adopted to analyze the research materials used in systematic way.

5.3 Data Analysis

In this study, various concepts, approaches and theoretical frameworks were used to analyze and interpret data according to the theory it belongs to and trying to find the historical development of the Iraqi contemporary novelistic production.

The theory used for the data collection is the grounded theory which is "a systematic methodology in the social sciences involving the construction of theory through methodic gathering and analysis of data." (Wikipedia). The extracted data were analyzed textually to show the main themes and the changes of the style and techniques of the new Iraqi contemporary novels. The focus was on the savior concept as the main theme.

6. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that Iraqi contemporary novelistic production has passed through three different periods; during Saddam regime in which the novels written in careful way and totally controlled by the governing authorities. It means a directed literature in which in glorified the authority and sing of heroism of the leaders. The second period was during the exile after thousands of Iraqis were migrated forcefully abroad leaving their homeland, families and everything they own. This literature in which narrative construction has involved new experiences generated new trends and different themes reflected the exile sufferings, culture differentiation, and identity crisis. The third period in the Iraqi contemporary narration was the post-2003 war and U.S. invasion. This period was a very important period in which the novel genre in Iraq is flourished and produced hundreds of novels within a short period due to the variety of subjects emerged talk about invasion, sectarianism, election, new government, openness on the world through the internet and social media which was forbidden previously. This period results some discrepancies and produced new situations not familiar to the Iraqis before. It led to new exile, migration and loss of security.

From other side the post-2003 war period produced a well-respected type of narration was qualified to compete with the Arab and global literature. Some novels got the chance to win an Arabic and International prizes which brought the international

attention to the Iraqi literature. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* by Ahmed Saadawi was short listed as one of the best novels in International Booker 2018 and translated into more than 30 languages. It is a good example of the development of the Iraqi narrative as a result of freedom the writers got after they have been liberated from the chains of the authority.

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