



War in Iraqi Feminist Writings

Amal Boumaaza

**Faculty Advisor: Professor Abdul Sattar Jawad
Duke Asian and Middle Eastern Studies**

Submitted Date: April 2016

This project was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Graduate Liberal Studies Program in the Graduate School of Duke University.

Copyright by
Amal Boumaaza
2016

Table of Contents

Acknowledgment.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
I. Iran –Iraq War 1980 – 1988: An Overview.....	6
II. The 1 st Gulf War 2 August 1990 – 18 February 1991	7
III. The Impact of the Sanctions	9
Chapter 2: Daisy Al-Amir.....	12
I. Introduction:	12
II. Her Writings	13
III. The Depiction of War in Daisy Al-Amir Short Stories	16
Chapter 3: Lutfiya Al-Dulaimi	23
I. Introduction:	23
II. <i>Hayat’s Garden</i> (novel).....	24
III. War and its impact in <i>Hayat’s Garden</i>	26
Chapter 4: Dunya Mikhail	34
I. Introduction	34
II. Her Writings	36
III. The Depiction of War in Mikhail’s Poems	39
Conclusion:.....	48
References:.....	50

Acknowledgment

My interest in Iraqi culture started after meeting many Iraqi refugees in the last five years. Most of them were women who were granted with their children a visa to the U.S. while their husbands were left either in Jordan or in Iraq. My curiosity took me into their houses where we had long conversation, over a cup of tea, about their personal experiences back in Iraq and how they ended up leaving their home country to become refugees here in Durham. I felt that the majority of them did not feel stable here and, indeed, most of them moved to another state after a couple of months. The same interest has been fueled more when I attended Professor Abdul Sattar Jawad's course *Intro to Modern Arabic Literature*. I discovered the richness and the diversity of the Iraqi writers as well as their strong attachment to their homeland compared to other Arab writers living in exile.

My sincere gratitude goes to Professor Donna Zapf and Professor Kent Wicker for their constant encouragement since I enrolled in the Graduate Liberal Studies program. I would also to thank Professor Abdul Sattar Jawad for his unconditional support and advice while working on this research project.

I am very grateful to Dink Suddaby for her continuous patience and hard work, as she was always available answering the many, random, questions I had. Finally, I am deeply thankful for all the professors of the GLS program who inspired me and encouraged throughout the past three years.

Abstract

This study focuses on a selection of writings of three prominent Iraqi women about the war in Iraq and its aftermath using an analytical and descriptive method. The writers studied in this thesis are well known in the Arab world and won worldwide recognition and literary awards. The selection of novels and short stories came as a result of sifting the works that reflect the feminist mood and sentiment during a harsh period of violence and conflict that left Iraqi women struggling with huge and difficult responsibilities to fill the gap and vacuum created by the war with Iran (1980-1988) and the first Gulf War 1990, then the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Chapter One will be a general introduction of the impact of the war on Iraqi women and their reaction to the consequences of the violence and the turmoil during the last three decades in Iraq. Although the fallout of war was widely treated by male writers, women fiction writings hold a significant position in war literature, hence the focus in this thesis on the three feminist writers who won merited acclaim. Chapter Two is devoted to Diasy Al-Amir's short stories that display a deep sentiment and vividly reflect a woman's feeling of the harshness and severe impact of first, the civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990), as well as the Iran – Iraq war when Daisy returned to her country to find it in a more vicious conflict that took a sectarian leaning. Daisy Al-Amir is regarded a genuine representative of Iraq's short story and deservedly won international acclaim. She excels in the genre of short story, immersed in difficult situations depicted in her collections of short fiction. Chapter Three examines the works of Lutfiya Al-Dulaimi, a writer and journalist, who occupies a unique position in Iraq's literary map. She, more than the other feminists, led a campaign to portray the situation of Iraqi and Arab women with focus on the war. Al-Dulaimi's writings reflect the impact of the war on herself and on her society. Chapter Four focuses on Dunya Mikhail's war poetry written while she was inside Iraq as well as her poems published in exile. The choice of Dunya stems from her achievement as a poet and how, through her poetry, shares the agony and suffering of her people. The vehicle of poetry is the most effective means of expression to embody an agonizing experience especially of women who were burdened with tremendous amount of pressure, fear, hopelessness, and loss of the beloved ones. Her prose poems will be discussed with reference to her sources of influence, namely the Bible and Iraq's classical literature.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Fiction writing in Iraq hasn't received its due notice and appreciation as compared with the literature of Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria, although Iraqi works such as the *Arabian Nights* and Hamadhani and Hariri's *maqamat* (assemblies) were among the first fiction writing in the Arab world. There were also some folklore tales in this tradition. The Arabic short story, however, is relatively new and its beginnings were imitations of Maupassant, Chekov, Edgar Allen Poe, and other world writers whose works were translated into Arabic in the late 19th century. In the beginning of the 20th century, the Iraqi short story started with modest endeavors in the hand of Dhannoun Ayyub (1908-1988), Mahmoud Ahmad Al-Syed*, then Abdul Malik Noori (1927-), and Gha'aib T'uma Farman (1927-1990)

This was a formative stage that witnessed some mature stories in the hand of the Pioneer Generation of the 1950s who paved the way and tamed the genre for the generations of 1960s that produced such merited writers like Daisy Al-Amir (1935-), Samira Al-Mana (1935-) Muhammad Khodayyir (1940-) Al-Rubaie (1939-), Lutfiya Al-Dulaimi (1942-), names that gave the Iraqi fiction a strong presence among Arab fiction writers.

It was generally understood that men dominate this arena as women writers were not given their due attention and literary recognition in a male-dominated society. Looking into the 1960-2003 period of the Iraqi fiction, it is not a balanced and fair treatment that male writers have usually been dealing with feminist issues. The literary map of Iraq, from the 1970s to the end of the 20th century, must include the achievements of Daisy Al-Amir, Sohaila Salman, Samira Al-Mana (1935-), Al-Dulaimi, Maysaloon Hadi*, Salima Salih, Ibtisam Abdulla*, Alia

Talib¹, and some other female names. Their works showed a mature knowledge and awareness of the role of literature as a social production depicting the daily life of their society and the challenges women have to deal with. Feminist writings especially in the 1970s form a very significant contribution in the literary output of the period.

However, women's writing started garnering strong interest and appreciation during the Iran-Iraq war 1980-1988 when women assumed new positions and roles: while men were sent to the battlefield, women filled the vacancies and embarked on difficult roles that created uneasy changes in society, familial life, and day-to-day businesses. The pointless war with Iran was a challenge to Iraqi women and men alike, as it needed tremendous effort and adaptation to accommodate the new situation with all its dangers and hardships.

It's worth mentioning in this respect that the Ba'ath Party recognized the importance of women in building a modern secular society where women play new roles and assume new responsibilities beyond the household or traditional work in managing daily domestic life. Miriam Cooke in her distinguished study of *Women and the War Story* explains this point:

"...in 1968 the Ba'ath Party founded the General Federation of Iraqi Women (GFIW) as a 'female arm of the party'. By 1980 the GFIW had 256 centers and 177, 000 members, and women's literacy rates went up 300 percent. Literacy centers appeared everywhere and Iraqis who did not go or barred others from attending were penalized. Childcare centers were built everywhere and women were given the right to vote and to run for public office." (Cooke, p.220-1)

This state support led, of course, to strong loyalty of the women and their families to Saddam and his government.

¹ Dates not available

To recruit women in these fields, the Women's Federation was generously provided with the necessary tools to do the job, and soon it became an institution of significance in Iraqi society under the rule of the Ba'ath Party and its secular and gender-inclusive policies. To this end, *Literacy Centers* were established and were effective in eradicating illiteracy, supported by laws enforcing compulsory education. Thus when the war broke out in 1980, women were immediately requested to fill the vacuum, whether by the government or by the nature of the conflict during which men were sent to the front to combat the Iranians and stop the spread of their *revolution* and sectarian call.

This difficult period tested the ability of Iraqi women to rise up to the new crucial situation and support their loved ones through their work on the *second front*: the domestic front that posed great challenge on all levels. Iraqi women were required to fill the jobs of men and sometimes earn the family bread and butter in the absence of men who were fighting Iran, a bitter enemy armed with revolutionary, religious ideology. The problems facing women during the war were greater and much harder when Iraqi soldiers were captured, killed or missing. Some stories will throw some light on this issue that destabilized Iraqi society with shocking consequences that left a lasting impact on many families.

From 1980 -1988, the Iraqi peoples, endured great sufferings during the prolonged war with Iran. This pointless and vicious conflict lasted for eight years. The impact was tremendous in terms of human loss, resources, infrastructure, and family life. This dreadful situation was reflected in women and men's writing alike, though it is more calamitous in women's fiction as we shall see in the coming pages.

Following the devastation of the Iran-Iraq war from 1980 to 1988, Saddam's suicidal invasion of Kuwait in 1990 brought Iraq and its people to a more destructive situation. This reckless adventure invited the cruelest sanctions from the U.S. and other western powers since World War II. The embargo and punishments enforced by the UN and United States created inhuman suffering, including the death of about 1.5 million children of malnutrition and lack of basic human needs. The sanctions, in fact, created a very dire situation that severely affected all segments of society. The brain drain had to leave. Writers, artists, journalists, and the academics found themselves in a very difficult situation, caught by the blind and harsh censorship of the regime, with its embargoes and boycotts that stifled their freedom of expression and their participation in international symposia and conferences. They were banned from travel by the government through lack of resources or denial of visas. Women, of course, bore the brunt, and their suffering with the absence or death of their beloved ones was beyond description as some feminist writings reveal.

This study is an attempt to analyze and examine the narrative of war in contemporary Iraqi women's writings, represented by the three writers: Daisy Al-Amir (1935-), Lutfiyya Dulaimi (1942-) and Dunya Mikhail (1965-). Their personal experiences are revealed to the reader by providing details about the lives of Iraqi women who suffered from the war and its consequences. The sufferings imposed on their consciousness have turned into traumatic memories that are reflected in the narratives of women living in Iraq as well as those living in exile. These writers try to portray women's personal experiences in addition to the experiences of the whole Iraqi society. The lives of Iraqi women, while dealing with arduous circumstances, uncover the damage and the pain of a whole country at war. These diverse female writings

elucidate the communal cost of war and its consequences that has so badly affected Iraq and its people in its recent history.

The daily life of any Iraqi was widely affected socially, economically, and culturally through this turmoil. Many Iraqi men lost their lives on the frontline and this had a tremendous impact on their women. The majority of these men were the breadwinners of their families, so their women were forced to fight on their own social frontline to survive the consequences of war. Among these women were some writers who tried to depict their reality during the time of war and turbulence through the use of fiction. However, it was almost impossible to portray the full reality under a totalitarian regime due to the fear of prosecution and censorship, which were very effective in limiting intellectual life in Iraq. Accordingly, writers were pushed to use symbolic techniques and play with words to speak out and express their disagreement without being sanctioned by the regime. They trusted their readers' ability to read behind the lines to decipher hidden meaning that could be understood only by people belonging to the same society.

Among Iraqi women writers, I will focus on three major ones whose contributions to war literature in modern Iraq are significant. Daisy Al-Amir, a prolific Iraqi writer who lived in Beirut and wrote about the civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990) from a perspective of an Iraqi woman in exile. After the bombing of the Iraqi embassy in Beirut in 1982 where she served as a Cultural Attaché, she returned to Baghdad to find it at war with Iran. I will study stories by prominent writer and journalist, Lutfiyya Dulaimi, who published novels and short stories as well as essays and translations. Lutfiyya's writings reflect the impact of the war on herself and on her society. Finally, there will be a discussion of selected poems written by Iraqi poet and journalist Dunya Mikhail who is currently living in the United States. She published anti-war

poems while living in Iraq and continues to demonstrate the horror of war and violence as an Iraqi American.

I. Iran –Iraq War 1980 – 1988: An Overview

In order to portray an accumulated picture of Iraqi women's experiences during war and political conflict, one has to throw light on the circumstances that led to the outbreak of the armed conflict between Iraq under the rule of Ba'ath Party, and the Islamic Republic of Iran under Khomeini who led a bloody revolution to topple the pro-West Shah in 1979. Khomeini, who spent more than a decade exiled in Iraq, was forced to leave Iraq for France because of his sectarian and political activities that were considered subversive by Saddam Hussein and his government. The Hussein government didn't want to provoke the Shah of Iran who was supporting the Kurdish rebellion in northern Iraq.

After a long history of border dispute, and provocative policies and propaganda launched by Iran under Khomeini, the Iraqi army invaded Iran by air and land in September 1980, starting a war that would last for almost a decade. The Iraqi regime feared a Shi'a rebellion among its citizens, and due to the success of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, this fear increased. Ikram Massmoudi, author of *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction*, said that Saddam Hussein had many reasons behind "entering what he expected to be a short, minor war" (Massmoudi, 2015, p. 30).

The main reason of his military intervention was to accomplish the territorial acquisitions that the Shah of Iran promised to hand over to Iraq according to the Algiers treaty of 1975 between the two countries. Secondly, Saddam was backed by his neighboring Arab Gulf countries, who feared the spread of the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution in their countries. This was also an Iraqi fear due to the presence of a Shi'a majority in the southern part of the country.

Another reason was also Saddam's hope of becoming a dominant power in the region once he defeats the Iranians, since their new isolated regime was seen as weak and vulnerable.

Unlike Saddam's expectations, the war was neither short nor minor. It lasted for eight years and Egle Murauskaite considers it as "one of the bloodiest exchanges in modern history, with the collective loss of around a million lives" (Murauskaite, 2016, p.47). A UN cease-fire was signed in August 1988 leaving Iraq heavily indebted and almost bankrupt, a false victory. The question here is how a country that had just endured one of the longest wars of the 20th century with all its financial and human losses could even get implicated in another military action right away. Sadly, the Iraqi regime, out of miscalculation, invaded Kuwait in 1990 leading the country to another chapter of turmoil in what was to be called the 1st Gulf War.

II. The 1st Gulf War 2 August 1990 – 18 February 1991

The 1st Gulf War, known also as the Persian Gulf War, plays a structural and strategic role in the modern history of Iraq. Unlike the war with Iran, it did not last for a long time but left Iraq toothless and devastated. The Iraqi army could not prevail against an international coalition led by the U.S. This war was triggered by an uncalculated move of Saddam Hussein when he ordered his troops to invade Kuwait on August 2nd, 1990 and ended with expelling Iraq from Kuwait in January/ February 1991(Killgore, 1998).

Seeking to expand his power in the region, Saddam's aim was to settle his disputes with Kuwait for its slant drilling² from Iraqi oil fields during the war with Iran, even if it required the use of force. Kuwait refused to cancel its millions of dollars that it channeled to Iran during the

Slant drilling means that Kuwait secretly drilling Iraqi oil through tunnel pipes extending from Kuwait's land into Iraq's oil field.²

war (Killgore, 1998). Despite the U.N. Security Council's calls to withdraw from Kuwait, the Iraqi troops remained there and it was formally announced as an Iraqi province.

An anti-Iraq coalition, led by the U.S. and its NATO allies, was formed and other Arab nations joined in. The first air strikes were launched in mid-January 1991 right after the withdrawal deadline that was given by the UN Security Council to the Iraqi government. The air campaign was massive and without interruption throughout the war. It was effective in destroying Iraq's crucial military and infrastructure.

In a New York Times article titled "WAR IN THE GULF: Strategy; Iraq's Kuwait Defense: 3-Tier Plan That Collapsed," Michael R. Gordon reported on the effective strategies held by US and its allies to defeat the Iraqi army that caused the defeat of Iraq in a short time. "They have quickly punched through the Iraqi defense, moving swiftly into the interior of Kuwait and frustrating Iraqi plans to snare the allied troops in border fighting" (Gordon, 1991). These allied forces benefited from the weakened Iraqi army after the long war against Iran. They also had, according to the article, the force "that Iranians lacked" such as punishing air power and skilled combat engineers in addition to other ground attacks targeting unprotected Iraqi territories to proceed into Iraqi territory and disturb Iraq's plan.

Six weeks were enough to defeat the Iraqi army and a cease-fire was declared by the end of February 1991. The suffering of the Iraqi people was not over yet as the country was about to face another chapter of suffering through the embargo that was imposed by the U.N. Security Council. Under its supervision, Iraq had to destroy its weapons of mass destruction so that economic sanctions could be lifted. During the next decade, the terms of the peace agreement were repeatedly defied by the Iraqi regime, leading to allied air strikes and continuing U.N. sanctions.

III. The Impact of the Sanctions

Immediately after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the U.N. Security Council imposed unprecedented economic sanctions against Iraq on August 6, 1990 to pressure Saddam Hussein to leave Kuwait. These sanctions were not lifted even after the defeat of the Iraqi army and they were maintained to eliminate Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and to trigger an internal uprising against Saddam. Agreeing that Hussein was a brutal dictator, Horam and Wilkinson, two activists from the Cambridge group Mobilization for Survival, state that sanctions had actually strengthened his position because he could blame the United States for his country's economic problems (Johnson, 1999). The impact on innocent Iraqi civilians was punitive, leading to a humanitarian crisis that lasted for more than a decade.

This humanitarian crisis was mainly caused by bad medical conditions in Iraq after Kuwait war and children were first affected. Nearly 1.7 million people died and for every 1,000 births, 131 were dead, as reported by an article in The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs in 1999. It was stated that 30 percent of the one million children under five years old were "malnourished". These numbers are shocking if we know that activists were comparing them to the human loss during 2nd Gulf War. They noted that sanctions "have killed 10 time as many Iraqis as did the first Gulf War" (Johnson, 1999).

In 1995, the Security Council adopted the Oil for Food program after extensive criticism of the humanitarian crisis in Iraq under the sanctions. Humanitarian supplies started to arrive only after two years due to a complex process. The aim behind the program was to reduce the crisis and not to end it. According to the program, Iraq's oil sales and all revenues were under UN control. Legitimate humanitarian contracts were blocked because of claims of dual-use as military elements. For instance, pencils were among the materials banned from entering Iraq

because they contain graphite (Johnson, 1999). The US and the UK played a major role in imposing such political blockages making it hard for the Iraqis to benefit from this program. As its name suggests, it would allow Iraq to sell its oil and use some of its revenues to buy humanitarian goods, but since it was hard to get spare parts for Iraq's oil industry, the program's funds were reduced.

The sanctions were finally lifted in May 2003 not because of the urging humanitarian crisis, but because the decision to remove Saddam Hussein has been made.

Here is a quote from Denis J. Halliday, the United Nations humanitarian coordinator in Iraq for part of the sanctions era, to show the tremendous and devastating impact of the sanctions: "we are in the process of destroying an entire society. It is as simple and terrifying as that" (Rieff, 2003).

These hardships and sanctions created a dire situation for men and women, but women were left with only tough choices: fear, hopelessness, blind censorship, lack of resources, a brain drain, the rise of divorce, and a crime surge.

The dominant themes of Iraqi fiction at this phase of history reflected the psychological mood and desperation that left women so vulnerable and burdened with huge new responsibilities. The three Iraqi writers I am studying didn't write to glorify the war as the generals during wars might have wished, but they spelled out the mood of the Iraqi people and tried hard to evade censorship by adopting fiction and fictitious characters, sometimes in alienated social and cultural milieus, a narrative technique that was used by other world writers living under totalitarian regimes and wars. The choice of two Christian writer; Daisy al-Amir and

Dunya Mikhail, and the Muslim feminist Lutfiyya Al-Dulaimi will serve to illustrate the mosaic texture of Iraqi society and how religion gave way to national identity and interests.

In this respect, a historicist analytical approach seems the appropriate method for a critical reading of the texts that I will discuss in this study.

Chapter 2: Daisy Al-Amir

I. Introduction:

Daisy Al-Amir (1935-) is a pioneer figure in women's fiction in the Arab world. She was born to an Iraqi father and a Lebanese mother. Despite her father's strict conservatism, he encouraged her to dive into their home library, where she developed a taste for literature helping her to shape her own philosophy about life:

“ As a young person I read every book that fell into my hand, and yet reading didn't inspire me to write. I wrote my first story in Lebanon in 1962, and published it in the Lebanese magazine al-Adab”. (*The Waiting List*, p.ix) from an early age, Al-Amir started writing her memories in a diary, but she stopped this habit and resolved to forget about the past and to focus on the present. That was a realistic approach that would later on inspire her writings. Through her love for modern Arab writers, she took the decision to pursue higher education in literature at the Teachers' Training College of Baghdad where she graduated with a BA degree (Al-Raida, 1981, p.2).

Traveling to England to study English for more than a year, and to the U.S. made her more independent and autonomous:

“At that time, I was past my youth and at a mature age, able to balance between mind and emotions. This balance applied to all the heroines of my stories. Personal affairs no longer took first place in my concerns” (Al-Amir, 1988; Translator Parmenter, 1994, p.xi). In 1962, she went to Lebanon and worked at the Iraqi Embassy in Beirut. Her stay in Lebanon turned out to be a long one, almost a quarter of a century as she adopted this country, but she never considered it her own. Lebanon was a center of literary magazines and an oasis of freedom. Her work at the

embassy made her feel that she was “on Iraqi territory, a piece of her homeland inside Lebanon” (p. x). With the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, on which she published two collections of short stories, Al-Amir was appointed as a Director of the Iraqi Cultural Center. She returned to Iraq in 1985 when the Iran-Iraq war was still going on:

“When *I returned to Iraq in 1985, the war with Iran was still going on, and our victories continued*” (p.xii).

In 1991, she moved back to Beirut after she spent a year and half in the U.S. and visited Duke University.

Her literary output was stimulated through the multi-cultural ambience in Beirut, and her first short story titled “The Little Rug”, somewhat biographical, was published in the same year of her arrival to Lebanon. It was met with success and it marked the beginning of a writing journey that brought to existence six collections of short stories: *The Distant Country that You Love*, 1964, *Then the Wave Returns*, 1969, *The Happy Arab House*, 1975, *In the Vortex of Love and Hate*, 1979, *Promises for Sale*, 1981 and *The Waiting List: An Iraqi Woman’s Tales of Alienation*, 1994.

II. Her Writings

In an interview in 1985 with *Al-Raida*, a feminist Lebanese journal, Daisy Al-Amir explains the reason behind opting for short story writing as a literary form, stating that it suits her personality the most. Having a quick temperament, she considers herself “a person who cannot wait – who has no patience” whereas “ a novel needs long term planning, patience and time” (Al-Raida, 1985, p.11).

In general, the stories of Al-Amir are brief depictions of reality from the society she lives in, letting the reader guess the idea behind each story whether it is clear or not. Her short stories are characterized by accurate records of real experiences through the use of evocative details, while she represents the life of a character focusing on one single idea or experience. It is worth mentioning that she is concerned about the social difficulties that women were facing in the Arab world: the way they dealt with others and how they were viewed. According to Daisy Al-Amir, “Middle Eastern women are bound very strongly by social customs. They fear gossip and want to safeguard their reputations. All these factors constrain a woman's freedom and do not allow her to be liberated” (Al-Raida, 1985, p.11).

“The Eyes in The Mirror” is a short story that illustrates how Al-Amir is able to understand the feelings of women, as they are an open book for her. Being a woman herself, she can easily depict their inner thoughts and experiences. In her interview with Al-Raida journal, she refers to everything she reads in men’s writings about women as wrong because “men see women through their own desires” (Al-Raida, 1985, p.10). Lutfiya Al-Dulaimi echoes this attitude towards men in her famous story “Scheherazade”, arguing that men are driven by their sexual desires and she used the world super-heroine as a mask to launch her attack on males, in her efforts to defend Arab women.

“The Eyes in The Mirror” is about a woman who is in the restaurant of her hotel for dinner, while she was on a professional trip to participate in a conference. Being embarrassed, she chooses a distant table in the corner of the dinning-room. Horrified, she notices that she is the only in a restaurant full of men. This was during the civil war in Beirut. To intensify her shock, she realizes that the dining room is walled with mirrors and hundreds of eyes are staring

at her. She ends up going to her room without getting any dinner, filling her empty enraged stomach with cups of water (Badran and Cooke, 2004, pp. 116 -118).

Existential themes are also present in the stories of Al-Amir, as she tries to balance between what appears to be inevitably destined and the arbitrary events surrounding her unsettled world. Dealing with time and space is performed in a simple and surreal style while she examines the displeasures of life through her personal lens of memory. In the preface of her short stories collection *The Waiting List*, she mentions that her “ memories are a storehouse of the past for which no key is needed – it opens automatically whenever [she] begins to write. The present ignites the need to write, while the future offers a goal” (Al-Amir, 1988; Translated by Parmenter, 1994, p.xi). Restless, Al-Amir tries, with constant efforts, to preserve her memories and the never-ending present experiences urging her to write about her experiences and those of others as well, even if they are exhausting.

Even during her depiction of the Lebanese civil war, Daisy Al-Amir is not concerned with the chronicle of war in itself. According to Lamia Rustum Shehadeh, associate professor of culture studies at the American University of Beirut, it is clear that Al-Amir’s aim, as specified in the introduction of her collection of short stories *In the Vortex of Love and Hate (1979)*, is to examine the compassion of mankind. “In all that has happened, she wonders, in the midst of the political, military and international fighting, where is man, the loving noble, generous, social, tolerant, wise human being?”(Shehadeh, 1999, p.93). In her writings during the war, according to Shehadeh, Al-Amir is realistic exploring the situations lived by the Lebanese under the consequences of war such as the electricity breakdown, solitude, anxiety and agony, the loss of properties and beloved ones, the hesitation to stay or to leave without neglecting the solidarity shown while people help and protect each other. The coexistence of love and hatred, as indicated

in the title of her collection *In The Vortex of Love and Hatred*, exists and miraculously love has the power to compensate for a complete painful situation. This is what makes Al-Amir, notes Shehadah, “wonder about the amazing mixture of violence and generosity in mankind” (p.94).

According to Cohen-Mor, any country that endures civil war loses its social structure, sinking into disorder and anarchy, which lead to an excessive death toll of innocents and unlimited human torment (Cohen-Mor, 2005, p.16). The narrative of “The Future”, one of the short stories of Daisy Al-Amir about the Lebanese Civil War, portrays a daily struggle of a woman with the horrors of war. The protagonist, whose name remains unknown throughout the story, buys a spring dress and is on her way home to hide it. As the story proceeds, it is full of questions from the woman. She is not certain that she will manage to live through this apparently endless war to get to the point to wear her dress. This latter is a symbol of the future and her hope, mixed with fear, for a peaceful normal life away from the brutality of this war (pp. 248 - 253).

III. The Depiction of War in Daisy Al-Amir Short Stories

Daisy Al-Amir stories reflect women’s experiences during turbulent times in the Middle East. She is a very careful observer and gives special attention to details of the events and characters being observed. Nonetheless, the reader may not notice an explicit narrative of wars in Iraq as a theme adopted in her writings. “Papers From An Ancient Archive” and “Fires of The Past” two short stories from her collection *The Waiting List* published in 1988, are reflections on Al-Amir’s experiences in Lebanon and Iraq tackling implicitly the implications of war in both countries.

In her dissertation titled *War and Exile in Contemporary Iraqi Women's Novels*, Hanan Hussam Kashou argues that Iraqi women's writings in exile about war were centered around the fear these women felt toward their "shattered nation" and the safety of their beloved ones from a perspective of outsiders in "a safe haven" (Kashou, 2013, p.132). However, I consider Daisy Al-Amir as an exception since both her country of adoption and her country of origin were devastated by war. The location of her fictional events can be related sometimes to Lebanon as well as to Iraq. What matters is the depiction of the consequences of war rather than the location of war itself.

The short story "Papers From An Ancient Archive" is narrated in the third person about an anonymous woman who is about to realize the dream of her life by moving to a new house in the neighborhood she loves. In her process of packing her belongings, she goes through many old suitcases to decide what to be kept and what to be given away. Many old memories start to pop up while she opens different suitcases. In one of them, she finds piles of papers that she has saved for many years. Among them were letters from throughout a period of twenty years. The woman is surprised that she kept many of them and she notices how many times her home address kept changing. She puts on her glasses and begins to read. There were memories from different time periods of her life such as her university graduation, her time in England, and her correspondence with a friend. After going through many memories, she pushes the papers away and goes to the TV room trying to neglect the tiring past.

Al-Amir's style is simple and vivid and she wants the reader to be active as a reader. In this story, the narrator implicitly implies that the protagonist has been moving constantly from one place to the other without any stability.

“The address changes many times, as did the name of cities and places of work and even “temporary” addresses. But when had her address ever been permanent? And during which period was it “temporary”?” (Al-Amir, 1988; Translator Parmenter, 1994, p.38).

Is this an indication of a forced displacement due to war? Nothing is revealed in the story concerning this issue of dislocation. The writer does not even mention where the story is taking place. Al-Amir wants the audience to read behind the lines and imagine plausible scenarios.

In another passage, while the woman is reading one of her old letters, there is a hint about the chaos in Lebanon and that there might be an armed conflict taking place.

“The letter was ten years old. True, Beirut was a strange city. A jungle of stone, the writer called it. What would he call it now that it had become a jungle of guns?” (p.40).

Even if this passage is referring to Beirut, it does not necessarily mean that the woman is living there during that moment. Later on at the end of the story, there will be another hint about war. “The Beirut newscast was talking about a violation of the new cease-fire.” This is an indication that the violation occurred earlier implying that the conflict is not over yet. In addition, it is not clear where this war is taking place in this story, but the writer draws our attention that its implications might be the cause behind the displacement and instability of her protagonist.

Hiding the true context behind the surface narrative is a technique that Al-Amir use to force the reader to guess. She was working at the Iraqi embassy and it was not easy for her to disclose anything that could affect her position, especially if we consider the totalitarian regime governing Iraq at that time.

“A letter said: “Why don’t you improve your handwriting? Deciphering these scribbles exhausts me. When I write I purposely make my words clear so they’re easy to read.” If her handwriting wasn’t clear then, fifteen years ago, what would they say if they saw it now? It had become even more inscrutable as her haste in writing increased.” (p. 40)

Al-Amir does not mention afterwards what is the reason behind the increase in haste. Is it because of the constant fear of the unknown related to the struggle to survive under the war atmosphere? It is not clear and the reader is left to surmise the meaning.

The other story, “Fires of The Past,” is thematically related to the first one. Although they are not immediately sequenced within the collection, one seems to continue the other. “Fires of The Past” starts when workers come to move the furniture of an anonymous woman to her new house, where she will truly settle after twenty-seven years away from “home”. This event brings memories of how she has been living in this one city as an “ independent, not subservient to anyone. A woman who made her own decisions” (Al-Amir, 1988; Translator Parmenter, 1994, p.53).

During this moving process, the protagonist decides to leave some valuable books and fragile furniture that would not bear the move. Items such as glasses and chinaware were her “lifetime” souvenirs and the books were her “lifetime of study and friendship.” She describes how hard it is to take her belongings and leave the house empty as if she commits an “abuse” to its rooms. After a long delay, she arrives in Baghdad’s airport warmly welcomed by her sister and a close friend. She starts her new work and meets her new director and colleagues who welcome her with warmth. Away from her immediate family, close friends and colleagues at work, life seems difficult to adjust to. The new house feels lonely and people of her home

country, to whom she refers to as family, seem unfriendly. Meanwhile, she receives news that her former country is under war but her belongings that remained there are safe. However, she keeps thinking about them and how can she be assured that she won't lose them.

This story is also narrated in the third person about an unknown woman who shares the same instability as does the protagonist of the first story, perhaps as a result of war. Both stories seem to share the same setting, a house to be left and a packing process. The structure of the two stories is clear with a beginning and an end. Similar to the first one, "Papers From An Ancient Archive," there is a wide use of symbolism in the narrative.

While the woman is trying to decide whether to take her books to her new home "there" in Iraq or just leave them "here" in what is probably Lebanon, she makes an allusion to the censorship and war in Iraq. She implies that these valuable books might be prevented from reaching their destination, but nothing is mentioned about the topics of these books.

"If she did take them, how could she get them into her new country? It would require permission, and they might be confiscated in customs before being allowed in, if they were allowed to enter at all...Keeping them here is better than exposing them to fire, damage and negligence" (p 54).

Al-Amir decided in 1985 to return to Iraq when the Iraqi embassy in Beirut was destroyed by a truck loaded with explosives carried out by Iran-backed Hezbollah. Al-Amir returned to Baghdad after spending more than two decades in Lebanon. The war with Iran was still going on and this fear of censorship and confiscation was present in her mind. We assume that the woman in this story represents the fear among intellectuals under the dictatorship of

Saddam Hussein. This explains the implicit hints that Al-Amir leaves to the reader to avoid falling into the trap of censorship.

Alienation is another theme that prevails in “Fires of The Past”. As an implicit outcome of war, it winds its way through the life of the protagonist once she moved to Baghdad. She did not expect the unfriendliness of the people of her home country. Since the writer does not give details about the reasons of such unfriendliness, the reader has to rely on interpretation to fill in the gaps and get the concealed message.

“In the elevator she tried to be friendly. She greeted a woman but the response was cool. A man turned his face without saying anything at all.

Loneliness is real and enduring. Yet she would get used to it.” (p.56)

In an interview with Addustour newspaper, Al-Amir refers to the decline of social values due to the war as something that had a tremendous effect as people are no longer the same (Addustour Newspaper, 2002).

It is worth mentioning at the end that Daisy Al-Amir is torn between the two countries that she loves. She witnessed war and its aftermath in both countries, but her depiction of the Lebanese Civil War was more straightforward compared to the war in Iraq. For instance, her short story “The Future” portrays about the psychological turmoil and confusion that civilians endured during the civil war in Lebanon.

The use of the short story as a genre of fictional writing is in itself an indication of the complexity of the world that the writer is trying to illustrate (Jayyusi, 2005, p.54). Al-Amir is a distinguished woman writer who succeeded in representing the complex situations of women in

the Arab world. In addition, she managed to stimulate the imagination of her audience through the anonymity of her female protagonists and the settings where the events take place in her stories.

Chapter 3: Lutfiya Al-Dulaimi

I. Introduction:

Lutfiya Al-Dulaimi is an experienced Iraqi writer and journalist born in 1942. She is a prolific writer of novels, short stories, essays, and translations. Her fiction writings were translated into several languages including Chinese. Al-Dulaimi witnessed the tribulations and turmoil that her country faced in the past several decades, and she presently lives in Jordan after receiving threats on her life from the sectarian militias roaming the streets of Baghdad. Choosing neighboring Arab country as a place of exile came after a short stay in France in 2008. In an interview with the Arabic magazine *AL Rowaee* (The Novelist), she refers to the fact of leaving Iraq as a human act that is dictated by a survival instinct from wars and occupation. She compares the violence and despair that emerge from chaos to a toxic repellent enhancing death and chasing the peaceful elements yearning for life and beauty (*Al Rowaee Magazine*, April 6, 2011).

She is considered as an icon of literary creativity and a feminist not only in Iraq, but also in the whole Arab world. “Her work is original and precise and reflects a preoccupation with the inner life of women and their tribulations, while at the same time preserving the element of pleasure for the reader” (Jayyusi, 2005, p. 261). Her sensitive and detailed depiction of the plight of women remained in Iraq even after she left her country as her nostalgia and wistfulness for the alleys and streets of Baghdad never ceased. Since war has forced its way inevitably through the lives of Iraqis in the last three decades, its theme has been predominantly present in the work of Lutfiya Al-Dulaimi, taking priority over other themes in her narratives.

From an overview of her writings, it is apparent that Al-Dulaimi carefully chooses here characters to portray real social life, engaging the reader to confront the social, political and economical discourse of the country. Al-Dulaimi was among the few Iraqi women who wrote about the situation of Arab women in male-dominated societies during the Iran-Iraq war; this is the dominant theme that her recent writings center around. For instance, her novel *Seeds of Fire*, which was published in the last year of the Iran-Iraq War (1988), “appears to be a conventional home-front novel about two couples on the margins of the war”(Cooke, 1996, p.246). Similarly, *Lighter than Angels*, published in 1997, came as a result of the long embargo and its vicious impacts that were imposed on Iraq for more than a decade. It illustrates the efforts of many female characters struggling hard to enjoy their lives beyond the horrible experiences of the embargo. In addition, the bombing of a civilians’ shelter [Al-Amiriyya] in the 1991 war triggered the creativity of Al-Dulaimi to become the topic of her novel called *The Uranium Laugh* in 2000. Finally, her latest novel *Ladies of Saturn*, published in 2010, is about the journey of a group of Iraqi women during their escape from Baghdad to Jordan fleeing horror and violence.

II. *Hayat’s Garden* (novel)

Hayat’s Garden is a novel that centers persistently on an independent woman. Her story, that intersects with other female stories in the novel, offers a feminine perspective on love and war. It is an effort to represent diversity in an Iraqi society that experiences a collective struggle in time of war. The plot of the narrative evolves around her interaction with other females around her.

Hayat is an Arabic high school teacher who lives with her only daughter in Baghdad. Throughout the novel, Hayat waits for the return of her missing husband, Ghalib. She is not sure about his death in the war and she lives on the dream of his return. Despite her deep sorrow, she

takes care of her garden, which used to be charming with its beauty during her husband's presence. In a conversation with her wealthy friend Suzanne, she describes her garden although Suzanne has a bigger one. "Look at this modest garden that can not be compared to yours and its weird exotic trees...it appeases the burden of my sadness... and its scents remind me of times of happiness in this house" (Al-Dulaimi, 2003, translation of mine, p.61). The only thing that remains unchanged in Hayat's garden is her love towards Ghalib in spite of his absence.

Among the prominent female characters in the novel, there is Ruwayda, the mother of Ziyad, and Suzanne, Hayat's colleague at school. Through their stories, many things are revealed to the reader about the daily life of Iraqi women during the war turmoil and the sanctions. We discover also many details about Hayat's life and her personal mental and moral qualities.

The protagonist spends her time either at school, at home, or helping the community with her voluntary work. She feels that she has an obligation to teach her entire class of female students how to overcome difficulties and remain hopeful. "The girls ask her about the secrets of speech and she addresses the power of words and their ability to change the appearance of life" (Al-Dulaimi, 2003, translation of mine, p.26). Each evening, Hayat joins other women in the neighborhood for two hours to sew clothes for newborn babies in an attempt to change the hard reality surrounding her to the better. Her role as a strong mother is reflected in her efforts to help her daughter Maysaa heal from her trauma. In addition to missing her father, Maysaa is missing her beloved fiancé, Ziyad, who exiled himself to Europe. His hopelessness and his fear pushed him to escape from the war after a bomb targeted their house and killed his entire family.

The motif of love is the connection between the past and the present in the imagination of Hayat. She refused to believe the reality of her husband's absence. She loves her daughter and

dedicates her time and efforts to support Maysaa in her archeological and musical studies. Finally, she refuses to sell the garden and turns it into an art exhibition, as it represents a bridge between the glorified past and a hopeful future. The novel is a work that depicts war and its tough consequences. The choice of title *Hayat's Garden (Life's Garden in Arabic)* is an allegory, signifying the stable thriving life in Baghdad before the war. Giving the protagonist the name Hayat (Life) is meaningful. Garden (Hadiqa in Arabic) is a symbol of organized and stable life. On the other hand, it is a call for the promotion of art, beauty and love no matter what the circumstances might be.

III. War and its impact in *Hayat's Garden*

In any state at war, women are supposed to fill in the gap left by the men who went to the front. Nothing was revealed officially about women's situations in Iraq during and after the war. But according to Cooke, the voices of a few of them were "fictionalized" revealing, "what we may assume were their experiences" (Cooke, 1996, p.221). The following conversation between Hayat and her neighbor Umm Ziyad in *Hayat's Garden* illustrates how war can affect the lives of a whole society in general and the lives of women in particular.

"Good morning, Umm Ziyad. I thought I was the only one who woke up before dawn."

"The raids. We couldn't sleep all these nights. The two girls are traumatized, and Hisham and Ziyad spend the night following the news and playing chess. There's nothing we can do. We get some sleep during the day."

"Well, the past two days the raids stopped. Perhaps..."

"Hisham says news analysts predict they're preparing for a bigger assault."

“Perhaps the bombardment will stop.”

“Who knows! You and we are the only people now left on the street. I suppose we’re to guard the neighbors’ houses.”

“More people left?”

“All of them left. Left Baghdad altogether. They left at night. Amal and her three children and her husband went north, and Basma’s family went to Najaf. They left the house keys with us. You’re staying, Sitt Hayat, right?”

“We’re staying no matter what happens. Where would we go to and why?”

“Suaad told me we must be crazy. She wondered what kept us from running away to save ourselves.”

“We all are crazy and staying is our brand of craziness.” (Al-Dulaimi, 2003; Translator Mustafa, 2008, p. 24-25)

During the war in Iraq, normal life shifted. The conversation above shows how people no longer sleep at night since the raids become active and their tranquility is disturbed. They can sleep during the day and become more active at night. The fact that Ziyad and his father Hisham are playing chess at night is also very striking. It indicates how some people got used to the sound of raids and bombshells to the extent of playing a board game. On the other hand, the girls in this family are traumatized. Is it because of sleep disorder or because of their constant fear to be targeted by the raids? The conversation predicts the fate of the family of Ziyad. Later on in the timeline of events, a Toma Hawke bombed their house and the entire family was killed

except Ziyad, who survived simply because he was not there at the moment of the explosion. This latter could not stay any longer and left the country leaving Hayat and Maysaa with no man in their lives.

According to this passage, people had to choose between two options. The first one, to remain, was considered odd and only a few took it, as we noticed that these two families were the only ones still living in that “street”. That was the decision not to uproot themselves and stay at home while waiting with hope for things to improve. The majority chose to exile themselves to escape death and to look for a better alternative away from home. It can be sensed that the writer was against such exodus, and it is through her protagonist Hayat that she affirms that the exiles will never integrate in their new settings despite all their sacrifices. “They went to unknown villages, unfamiliar houses, and they had to change their habits and language and the way they wore their clothes, perhaps even their names to fit in these places. Labyrinths of place that they would have to keep changing because their souls would keep denying them.” (Mustafa, 2008, p. 25)

The writer acknowledges the diversity within the Iraqi society. The same attachment to the land of ancestors is manifested by another character who “witnessed the slow erosion of both the family and the house, and the dispersal of its descendants into grave and exile” (Al-Dulaimi, 2003; Translator Mustafa, 2008, p. 28). Al-Dulaimi actually used flashback technique to connect her readers and characters to Iraq’s ancient civilization and culture. Sumerian themes come up often in her writings. It awakens in the reader an emotional response toward the story and this is what T.S.Eliot called objective correlative. The generation of Iraqi pioneers felt alienated from their society and tended, in an emotional move, to flee to the past ancient civilizations, cities and myth.

Umm Tomas, who is Christian, refuses to join her only son to live in America. Here is a conversation with Suzanne clarifying her refusal.

“They want me to leave home and go there.”

“All your relatives left years ago,” Suzanne would tell her. “You don’t have anyone left here.”

“Listen, Suzanne. My people are here in Baghdad and Telkief. My father and my mother, and my uncle priest Behnam, and my aunt Josephine and my aunt Victoria, and my cousin Joseph, and my cousin Matti. And Tomas’s father. They are all here.”

“But they’re all dead.”

“No, Suzanne, they’re not. They are more alive to me than those who left me. Those who went away. I mean alive, you know, they come to me every night in dreams. Every night, during the Virgin Mary’s feast, I see them going up to the mountain.” (Al-Dulaimi; 2003, Translator Mustafa, 2008, p. 28)

This question of whether to stay at “home” or find a new one abroad exceeds the fictional border and becomes a reality to Lutfiy Al-Dulaimi once she was forced to experience the journey of exile in 2006 after her life was threatened in Iraq. In an interview in 2008 with Swissinfo.ch, the international service of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SBC), Lutfiya compares herself in exile to an anxious person who is riding a restless wind moving sometimes to the north and sometimes to the south. She feels that her stay in exile is temporary but at the same time she cannot go back to her country, severely afflicted by violence, lawlessness and lack of stability. After the fall of Saddam’s government, Iraq was ruled by a sectarian government and staged flawed and unfair elections. Al-Dulaimi, in an interview with *Al-Awan* (Modern Time) *Magazine*

attacked the women who joined the sectarian parliament within tickets that need to include numbers of women regardless of their roles as representatives. They turned against basic women rights in their country. She lashed out her harsh criticism against such women who joined the sectarian parties and betrayed their fellow women. (*Al-Awan Magazine*, May 18, 2008).

When she interviewed with the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation, she was staying in France, and she mentioned how hard it was for a woman like her, in her seventies, to start learning a foreign language and adapt to a new culture. That would lead her later on to move to Jordan, a neighboring country of Iraq, where she would feel a cultural belonging. (Swissinfo, April 27, 2008)

The same lack of stability as a result of war was a common denominator among many Iraqi refugees who arrived to the United States according to an Iraqi Refugee Health Profile published in late 2014. This profile states that “the International Rescue Committee (IRC) has documented a high prevalence of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among recently arrived” Iraqi refugees compared to other refugee groups (Iraqi Refugee Health Profile, December 16, 2014). In addition, the IRC describes “the resettlement situation as a crisis” in another profile, published in 2011, since “Iraqis are having a significantly more difficult time establishing their lives in the U.S.” (Iraqi Refugee Health Cultural Profile, March 1, 2011)

This fact of mental health issues is represented in *Hayat's Garden* as to the trauma that is inflicted on its characters as a direct impact of war and sanctions. For instance, Maysaa is traumatized because of the loss of her father and her fiancé. The first loss is caused by war and the second one is a consequence of it. She is torn between a broken childhood affected by the

absence of her father since she was ten years old, and a perturbed femininity due to the loss of her exiled beloved man.

“How come I don’t get shocked and have a relapse afterwards and childhood nightmares are haunting me back...when Ziyad left us on his sudden journey?”

“I remain silent, I take deep moments of meditation... I treat my nightmares... I take my medication trying to forget... I remain silent when things get worse and the tone of anger escalates in my conversation with her [Hayat]...” (Al-Dualaimi, 2003, translation of mine, p.51)

Everything inside her changes and everything surrounding her has lost its brightness under the pressure of sanctions except for the light of hope that is still burning deep inside. She is like her mother Hayat, both of them share the same sorrows, the same loss and the same hope as well. It would have been hard for a young girl like Maysaa to overcome her psychological tribulations without the help and support of her mother.

Another female character seeks the psychological support from Hayat. Despite her wealth, which enables her to take full care of her body from false nails and colored contact lenses to plastic surgery, Suzanne suffers from loneliness and depression. Her “body was becoming perfect while the soul eroded in a life of fear. One nightmare gave birth to another” (Al-Dulaimi, 2003; Translator Mustafa, 2008, p.30). Hayat advises her to search for her inner beauty and find a bigger goal in her life.

Hayat’s Garden is a feminist novel par excellence; however, the presence of men is valued and the life of Iraqis is discussed as a whole. It is not just a narrative about women’s

experiences. War had its impact on them and they became hopeless. The writer questions implicitly how many men reacted by leaving the country. Ziyad is among those who lost any sense of beauty and just followed the implications and absurdity of war by isolating themselves and canceling any bond that could connect them with their appreciation of humanity.

“The men of the city are no longer seeing the flowers, nor can they sway with the wind or the rhythm of music. They are no longer able to utter a sweet word that may infiltrate its musicality into their dry tones...

He [Ziyad] is like them. He is a boy made of hopelessness, silence, sand, smoke and from his pores comes the smell of wars and death...

The disaster has wiped away the face of the earth along with their memories and it has thrown ashes on meadows and underbrush. And no one of them has tried to retrieve the great glory...” (Al-Dulaimi, 2003, translation of mine, p.8).

War erased men’s memories and gave birth to a new generations remembering only war and death. This had its consequence on the desire of women to have any progeny. Suzanne in *Hayat’s Garden* fears even thinking about motherhood. She refuses the idea of having children, as they might be victims of the coming wars. By refusing motherhood, she is assured that future children will not endure the same sufferings of the current situation under the sanctions. (Al-Dulaimi, 2003, p.74)

Lutfiya Al-Dulaimi tries in this novel to give hope through the possibility of finding Ghalib. Hayat has been expecting his return throughout the whole novel and she remains optimistic till the end. During the inauguration of the art exhibition in her garden, she sees the

photograph of a vagabond lost man. She almost faints when she realizes that it is her husband. That is an indication that Ghalib is back to Baghdad and is roaming its streets after many years of imprisonment in Iran. The writer insinuates that war and oppression change people's thinking and their interaction with others, but it is only through hope, love and art that humans can survive the difficulties of war and heal its scars. This novel reflects the suffering Iraqis endured during and after the war. Many people died, were traumatized or left their country and their past. A lot of changes happened to Baghdad and its inhabitants in the novel represent Iraq as a whole. In her interview with Swissinfo, Al-Dulaimi expects an end to the chaos that Iraq is still living now as a consequence of U.S. invasion in 2003 that extended outside the territory to effect a broader population in the region. She does not give us a clear idea of how this will happen, but she insists that something must happen and bring the peace back to her "home".

Chapter 4: Dunya Mikhail

I. Introduction

Dunya Mikhail (1965 -) is an outstanding Iraqi voice of poetry with powerful context of war, loss and exile from a woman perspective. She was born in Baghdad and after graduating from the University of Baghdad with a BA in English Literature, she worked as a journalist with the *Baghdad Observer*. She started writing poems at a very young age and she witnessed the start and the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980-1988, as well as the first Gulf War 1990 and the sanctions that followed. In the mid-1990s, Mikhail migrated to the United States, where she earned an MA in Near Eastern Studies at Wayne State University. Currently, she is an Arabic special lecturer at Oakland University in Michigan.

Mikhail was forced to leave her country due to the harassment of the Iraqi authorities because of her poetry. Even if she was using metaphors and images to dissimulate her political thoughts to circumvent censorship, it was not enough to avoid getting in trouble. In 1995, she published a book titled *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea*, which was humanitarian and anti-war. The book was unacceptable by the totalitarian regime of Saddam Hussein because it did not take their side and it raised many question marks. In an interview with Meg Fowler for The Eagle Online newspaper, Mikhail mentioned, “they expect from you to praise their side. Even if you don’t take sides, that’s a bad thing. You should take sides – their side” (Fowler, 2010). A negative report was written after she published her book, and under the oppression of the regime, such report could lead to arrest or even death. She was advised to leave the country as soon as possible. The irony is that she “had to leave because of [her] poetry, but it was like poetry paid [her] back”. A friend of hers used his influence at the passport office to change her profession from journalist to poet on her passport. It would have taken her a long time to obtain a leave of

absence as a journalist, but as a poet that document was not required to travel abroad. “Poetry saved [her] life”. She escaped to Jordan in the summer of 1995 and after nine months she went to the United States, where she is still living as an exile and she never returned back to Iraq.

Dunya Mikhail has published since the mid-1980s six poetry collections in Arabic; three of them were translated to English and one to Italian. Her most recent work, titled *The Iraqi Nights*, was published in 2014:

“ In The Iraqi Nights, the Iraqi acclaimed poet Dunya Mikhail personifies the role of Scheherazade in the Thousand and One Nights, who saves herself through the telling of , the tales. Unlike Scheherazade, Mikhail isn’t writing to escape death but to confront it through grief and love while summoning the strength to endure. Though the Nights are dark in this haunting collection, seemingly as endless as war, the poet cannot stop dreaming of a future beyond the violence, of a country where ‘ every moment/something ordinary/ will happen under the sun.’ (Mikhail, 2014, blurb)

This critique of the blurb strike a chord with the sentiment of her poems in *The Iraqi Nights* where she flies back to Iraq’s ancient civilization, a recurrent motif in Dunya’s poetry:

In Iraq,

After a thousand and one nights,

Someone will talk to someone else.

Markets will open

For regular customers.

Small feet will tickle

The giant feet of the Tigris.

Gulls will spread their wings

And no one will fire on them.

Women will walk the streets

Without looking back in fear.

(Mikhail, 2014, p. 12)

In all her works, “war and fascism are crucial themes that inform her poetic vision”, says Saadi Simawe in his introduction to her volume *The War Works Hard* (Mikhail, 2005, pp.6-7). This latter was a contender for the Griffin Prize and it was named one of the twenty-five best books of 2005 by the New York Public Library. *Diary of A Wave Outside the Sea* (2009) was the winner of the 2010 Arab American Book Award. In addition, Mikhail was awarded the United Nations Human Rights Award for Freedom of Writing in 2001 and the Kresge Fellowship for literary arts in 2013. During this year, she also edited a pamphlet of Iraqi poetry titled *Fifteen Iraqi Poets*.

II. Her Writings

The Arabs developed a taste for poetry that reached its finest level even before Islam. It was considered as a register of events recording their tribal pride, bravery, wisdom and emotion for many centuries. By the second half of the twentieth century, there was a huge technical revolution in the history of Arabic literature as a movement of talented poets started using the Arabic free verse form, breaking the rules of classical poetry. This movement of free verse,

which started in Iraq and spread to other Arab countries, needed a realist free poetry: “realist, so that it could face the many problems; free, so that it could deal with them in a new creative way” (Boullata, 1970, p.251).

Dunya Mikhail was also concerned with the classical style of poetry, which requires using specific rhymes and rhythms to follow strict patterns established by Al-Farahidi in the eighth century. Each meter is called *bahr* or “sea” and it does not give a rhythmic flexibility to the poet. She, like most of her fellow poets, worked hard to adopt a new poetic medium and form capable of accommodating the new life and spirit of the age. That was the reason why she adopted free verse, and particularly the prose poem form of modern poetry to best serve her realist messages, although she had to use metaphors and symbols to conceal her thoughts. She “believes that poetry cannot be limited to those rules or to any other rule” (Khan, 2015). That’s why the word “sea” in the title of her book *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* has two meanings: “it is outside “the meter” and also outside “home/ society/ environment” (Interview with Sobia Khan).

Mikhail was concerned also with the content of poetry in Iraq when she became a poet. In an interview with M. Lynx Qualey, a writer based in Cairo, Egypt, Mikhail mentioned that she was among the rare female Iraqi poets in the poetry scene due to the predominance of men. These men poets were also soldiers, as all men had to serve in the army during the war, and their poems frequently depicted the battlefield and its confrontations. This was separate from “trash literature” that prevailed in the 1980s to portray “the Iraqi soldier... as a hero with no fears”, using Mikhail’s words. In contrast, the content of her writing was different, and her “war poetry was more concerned with the impact of war on the home, on the street, and on the soul” (Lynx Qualey, 2013).

Dunya's poetry evolves around her experiences of the wars in Iraq as well as her experiences as an exile:

“My writing about the war, was not mere yelling or slapping the cheeks. It is a young girl's astonishment before the big guns' dangerous games, it is an innocent question that the politicians might have no convincing answers to...

Being quite, does not necessarily mean I have no objections, but internally I am a persistent protestor. You can see me alone in a silent demonstration.” (Al-Arab Daily, London, February 15, 1995)

She captures actions that happen around her making her “writings serve as documents of witness; they document what she saw”, according to a Legacy Project interview with Dunya Mikhail in 2015. She continues contrasting her writing in Iraq and in exile. Because of censorship in Iraq, the editors weren't concerned about the quality, but if the writing did not comply with the ideology of the regime, it could lead to trouble. Therefore, she always had to keep in mind two types of readers: the real one and the fake one, “the censor”. In contrast, she is free to write whatever comes to her mind in exile, but “no one cares”; and here lies the irony according to Mikhail. There is a noticeable change in her writing since she moved to the US, as the use of symbols to mystify censors is no longer needed. The example that Mikhail gives can be found in her poem “Bag of Bones”. The word “dictator” that she used would have been replaced with the word “Zeus” in Iraq. She is not sure though how her writings were affected since she stopped using symbols, but she “wanted to peel away some of those masks and shields that burdened [her]”.

The poems of Dunya Mikhail have a surprising, unique ability to stimulate the imagination and awareness of the reader. She succeeds through her poetry, according to Saadi Simawe, to liberate the “magical life of words...from their prosaic connotations” enabling them to send “shocks of guilt for what humans in war and oppression have done to each other, and pleasure and poignancy for the beauty of the universe” (Mikhail, 2005, p. viii). This aspect of revealing wounds is made clear as Mikhail compares poetry to “an X-ray”. It does not have the power to heal, but it shows you the wound to be understood.

In terms of the publishing of her writings, the same collection may contain poems from different periods of time. For example, “the poems in *The War Works Hard*, were written between 1985 and 2004” under three overlapping periods (Mikhail, 2005, p. ix). The most recent ones were written after the fall of Saddam Hussein. The second period started after Mikhail’s exile to the U.S. Finally, the last group of poems was written in Baghdad from 1985 until she left the country in 1995. This shows the variety of experiences lived by Mikhail influencing the themes in her poetry within the same collection. The same aspect characterizes her collection titled *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea*. It contains two parts that connect the past with the present in a poetic record that includes memories from her childhood, the death of her father, poetry discussions with friends, her job as a journalist, ending with the birth of her daughter Larsa.

III. The Depiction of War in Mikhail’s Poems

Growing up in Iraq, Dunya Mikhail opened her eyes to witnessing the war with Iran 1980-1988 when she was still a teenager. When she published her first book in 1987, it was mainly about war. While the literature of mobilization, funded by the Iraqi regime to praise its ideology, described the war in the front as heroic, Mikhail’s poems criticize war and shed light

on its consequences on Iraqi society. This can be seen, for example, in her collection *The War Works Hard*. Its first edition was published in 2000, criticizing with irony and satire the meaning of war and its aftermath. This collection takes its name from one of its poems. This poem is filled with irony and war images to depict the hard working aspect of war instead of the heroism of war. *The War Works Hard* is particular for using positive words to portray war. The poet does this on purpose to let the reader think deeply about the real effects and implications of war. Here is quotation from this satirical poem, which starts with an exclamation:

How magnificent the war is!

How eager

and efficient!

Early in the morning,

it wakes up the sirens

and dispatches ambulances

to various places,

swings corpses through the air,

rolls stretchers to the wounded,

summons rain

from the eyes of mothers...

It produces the most questions

in the minds of children...

urges families to emigrate...

The war continues working, day and night.

It inspires tyrants

*to deliver long speeches,
awards medals to generals
and themes to poets.
It contributes to the industry
of artificial limbs,
provides food for flies,
adds pages to the history books,
achieves equality
between killer and killed,
teaches lovers to write letters,
accustoms young women to waiting,
fills the newspapers
with articles and pictures,
builds new houses
for the orphans...
and paints a smile on the leader's face.
The war works with unparalleled diligence!
Yet no one gives it
a word of praise (Mikhail, 2005, pp.6-7)*

From the beginning of this poem, it is clear that the writer knows the brutality of war by experience. All the different images listed above reflect the various details that are generated by war. Even the negative consequences are turned into benefits such as the contribution to the industry of limbs and food for flies. In addition, we notice the contrasting theme of reward and

loss: generals are rewarded with medals while orphans and mothers lose their beloved ones. Finally, the quick pace of the lines shocks the reader while representing the quick destructive pace of war.

Exile is another theme that is reflected in the poems of Dunya Mikhail and which is another implication of war. As an illustration, here is a beautiful poem that drives the reader in a long, eventful journey. With each word, one stops and reads a complete story. This poem is also taken from the collection *The War Works Hard*. Mikhail uses short lines with few words to describe the difficulty of a refugee's journey, how they went through different experiences, each one harder than the other. Some had to sleep on the street and others at airports. In a one-sided conversation with "America" (i.e. United States), she explains that people's nationalities, languages, their wishes and whether they are literate or not is less important than their humanity. What matters to the poet is the promise that "America" does not keep: achieving a true democracy and freedom for the Iraqis. After a long history of war, devastation and sanctions in Iraq, the least that "America" should do is to alleviate the bureaucratic obstacles in the process of applications that Iraqis have to make to meet their relatives and beloved ones in the country of "Freedom":

"Stop your questions, America,"

"And offer your hand"

"to the tired"

" on the other shore."

"Offer it without questions"

“or waiting lists.”

“What good is it to gain the whole world”

“if you lose your soul, America?”

And she continues, “America, leave your questionnaires to the river”

“ and leave me to my lover.” (Mikhail, 2005, p.34)

Dunya Mikhail adds her voice of sorrow to other Iraqis, who are away from their loved ones outside their home country. However, she is not blaming “America” explicitly for what happened to Iraq and its people after 2003, nor is she inciting hatred against its foreign policy. Instead, she is trying to have a responsible conversation with it to convey what might seem beyond United States priorities. Her remembrance of her dead ancestors, her sadness and loneliness in exile end in the second part of the poem with a hopeful future when she will meet her lover. They will try to live their colorful lives despite the embedded sorrow and grief they encountered in the past.

This particular poem spoke to me as an immigrant who went through the process of waiting for a beloved one to obtain a visa to join me here in the U.S. My husband and I were living away from each other for more than a year before the embassy finished the paper work process and the background check. While the poet was waiting for her “sweetheart’s handwriting...shining each day in the mail...[salvaging] it from among ad fliers and a special offer” (Mikhail, 2005, p.36), I was impatiently waiting for the embassy’s approval of my petition whenever I opened my email box. It is clear that Dunya Mikhail is targeting a broader audience, including all the immigrants who are attempting to live the “American dream”.

Shakir Mustafa has argued that the increased migration, which was forced by wars and sanctions, had a positive impact on Iraqis who were confronted by direct contact with new “cultural traditions of their host countries” (Mustafa, p. xv). This direct contact with American culture is revealed in the work of Dunya Mikhail’s latest collection *The Iraqi Nights*, in which most of the poems are accompanied either by drawings or the Arabic version of the poems. In *Tablets* number 19, there are two lines in Arabic handwriting that look like a frame of a drawing that could be interpreted as a symbolic image of Iraq; Mikhail wrote:

“Far away from home-”

“ that’s all that changed in us.” (Mikhail, 2014, p. 31)

In *The Iraqi Nights*, most of the common themes of her previous works are present and particularly the theme of war and its consequences.

“Then the war grew up

And invented a new game for them:

The winner is the one

who returns from the journey alone,

full of stories of the dead

as the passing wings flutter

over broken trees;

and now the winner must tow the hills of dust.

The war grew old
And left the old letters,
The calendars and newspapers,
to turn yellow
with the news,
with the numbers,
and with the names
of the players. (The Iraqi Nights, p.6)

When reading Mikhail, Nathalie Handal states, “one often encounters pain, anguish and dead ends” (Handal, 2001, p. 23). However, her last work reveals inner feeling of hope and what she wishes for Iraq. With a unique poetic style that evokes Iraqis’ long traditional storytelling, she sheds light on the harsh reality of the present where Iraqis live now. In her persisting remembrance of the beautiful country that she longs for, Mikhail reflects the reality of her war-torn country in an optimistic way as she clearly writes:

“In Iraq,
after a thousand and one nights,
someone will talk to someone else.

Markets will open
for regular customers.

Small feet will tickle

the giant feet of the Tigris.

Gulls will spread their wings

and no one will fire at them.

Women will walk the streets

without looking back in fear.

Men will give their real names

Without putting their lives at risk.

(Mikhail, 2014, p. 12)

The reader sees in these lines the Iraq that Mikhail has in mind, the country where children run in open markets, where people go for daily shopping, men and women alike. At the same time, these are the things that Mikhail is missing the most and would like to see again in Iraq. Not a myth or something impossible to achieve, rather than “something ordinary/ will happen/ under the sun”(p.12). Mikhail is continuously searching for hope, for herself and for others (Iraqis). Her work goes back to the past without embarrassment, explores the present deeply, and yearns for the future.

Dunya Mikhail has never ceased to bring to the world of literature outstanding poems about her experiences in Iraq and abroad. Her love for poetry gave her the motive and strength to criticize the oppression of the Iraqi dictatorship. In addition, it was the same love that urged her to escape in order to keep writing more without any constraints. She managed in this way to keep

a steady intellectual production and make an active contribution to modern contemporary Iraqi literature.

Conclusion:

The aim of this research was to shed light on the impact of war and its consequences on the Iraqi society through some of the works of three contemporary Iraqi women writers. These women represent their generation: Daisy Al-Amir representing the short story, Lutfiya Al-Dulaimi representing the short story and novel, and Dunya Mikhail representing poetry. All of them, along with other female writers, share the same concern to show their presence and their ability as representatives of women, and to depict their personal experiences as well as the experiences of other Iraqis during time of war and violence.

The recurrent theme of war dominates their works since the modern Iraqi history has encountered many years of armed conflict. The Iran-Iraq war lasted for eight years taking the lives of thousands of Iraqis, in addition to the ones who were lost or imprisoned in Iran. Under the totalitarian regime of Saddam Hussein, Iraqis did not have enough time to heal their wounds after the Iran-Iraq war and soon their country was implicated in another conflict with another neighboring country. The Iraqi army invaded Kuwait in 1989 marking the beginning of a new chapter of sufferings and turmoil for Iraqi society. The Iraqi army was defeated and the international coalition led by the United States and UN imposed a severe embargo on Iraq that lasted for more than a decade. Another chapter of sufferings started with the fall of Saddam Hussein after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the country has witnessed an endless state of chaos and turmoil until now.

The lives of Iraqi women changed dramatically and they had to face daily struggles to survive the negative effects of war. Hayat, the protagonist of Lutfiya Al-Dulaimi, represents many women who suffered from the absence of their men. In addition, Iraqis were living under

the oppression of the regime. No one could oppose the Ba'ath party openly, and this led the writers to use layers of meanings to deflect any critics.

These women use their writing to show that “War” is not a domain restricted to men. Indeed, men were sent to the front line during the wars in Iraq but women also fought inside their homes and out. Their “War” at home was greater, in that they had to heal their pain and the suffering of others surrounding them. They had to find balance in an unbalanced society where a single mother must play the role of the father and relatives for her children. Through the protagonist, Hayyat in Al-Dulaimi's novel, we see that Iraqi women were capable, alone, of adjusting to the new and difficult climate under the war and sanctions. However, it is the unexpected loss that traumatized their lives, the loss of their relatives, neighbors and the loss of their country. These Iraqi writers all wrote about the tragedy and the complexity of their country through the eyes of female characters, giving these female characters more creditability.

The study focused on the period from 1980 to the first few years of the Invasion of Iraq in 2003, which led to more violence, lawlessness, sectarian conflict, and displacement. From 2005 till the present, it's very hard to find genuine female writing that echo the national sentiment of fear and violence during which women were the greatest victims. Free expression in Iraq is a rare commodity in a society ripped by sectarian war and displacement. Writers were subjected to harsh censorship, silence, or killing by the sectarian militias roaming the streets in the absence of fair and firm government. Thus, some of works discussed in this paper were written in exile though they generally appeal to the people inside Iraq.

References:

- *Addustour* Newspaper in Arabic. August 30, 2002. "An exclusive Interview with Daisy Al-Amir." Web.
- Al-Amir, Daisy, and Barbara M. Parmenter. *The Waiting List: An Iraqi Woman's Tales of Alienation*. Austin: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, The U of Texas at Austin, 1994. Print.
- Al-Awan Magazine in Arabic, May 18, 2008. Web.
<<http://alawan.org/article1805.html>>
- Al-Dulaimi, Lutfiya. *Hayat's Garden*, Novel. Ittihad Al-Kuttab Al-Arab, Damascus. 2003
- Al-Raida November 1st, 1985. Vol. VIII, NO.34. Web.
<<http://iwsawassets.lau.edu.lb/alraida/alraida-34.pdf>>
- Al Rowaee Magazine in Arabic. April 6, 2011. Web.
<<http://www.alrowaee.com/article.php?id=822>>
- Boullata, Issa J.. "Badr Shakir Al-sayyab and the Free Verse Movement". *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1.3 (1970): 248–258.
- Cohen-Mor, Dalya. *Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories*. Albany, NY: State U of New York, 2005. Print.
- Cooke, Miriam. *Women and the War Story*, University of California, 1996, pp. 220-21
- Fowler, Meg. "Q-and-A with Award-winning Iraqi Poet Dunya Mikhail." *The Eagle Online*. March 3, 2010. <<http://www.theeagleonline.com/article/2010/3/q-and-a-with-award-winning-iraqi-poet-dunya-mikhail>>
- Gordom, Michael. R. (1991, Feb 26). *WAR IN THE GULF: Strategy; iraq's kuwait defense: 3-tier plan that collapsed*. New York Times Retrieved from
<<http://search.proquest.com/docview/427987052?accountid=10598>>
- Handal, Nathalie. *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology*. New York: Interlink Books, 2001.
- Iraqi Refugee Health Profile. December 16, 2014. Web
<http://www.cdc.gov/immigrantrefugeehealth/pdf/iraqi-refugee-health-profile.pdf>
- Iraqi Refugee Health Cultural Profile. March 1, 2011. Web
<<https://ethnomed.org/culture/iraqi>>
- Jarryusi, Salma Khadra. *Modern Arabic Fiction: An Anthology*. New York: Columbia UP, 2005. Print.

- Johnson, David P., Jr. "Activists: Lift Iraqi Sanctions." *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* XVII.8 (1999): 68. ProQuest. Web. <<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/docview/218803876?pqorigsite=summon&http://www.nclive.org/cgi-bin/nclsm?src=314>>
- Kashou, Hanan. (2013) "War and Exile In Contemporary Iraqi Women's Novels." Electronic Thesis or Dissertation. Ohio State University, 2013. *OhioLINK Electronic Theses and Dissertations Center*.
- Killgore, Andrew I. (1998). "War in the Gulf (1990-1991): The Iraq-Kuwait Conflict and its Implications." *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* XVII.7 (1998): 123. ProQuest. Web. <<http://search.proquest.com/docview/218772026?accountid=10598>>
- Khan, Sobia. (2016) "'My poetry has two lives, like any exile': a conversation with Dunya Mikhail." *World Literature Today* 89.5 (2015): 10+. *Biography in Context*. Web. 29 Mar. 2016.
- Masmoudi, Ikram. (2015). *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction*. P. 30-31. Print.
- Mikhail, Dunya, Elizabeth Winslow. (2005) *The War Works Hard = Al-Ḥarb Ta'malu Bi-jid*. New York, NY: New Directions Corporation, 2005. Print.
- Mikhail, Dunya, and Kareem James Abu-Zeid. (2014) *The Iraqi Nights = Layālī Al-'Irāqīyah*. New York: New Directions, 2014. Print.
- Murauskaite, Egle. (2016)"Saddam's use of Violence Against Civilians during the Iran-Iraq War." *The Middle East Journal* 70.1 (2016): 47-68. ProQuest. Web.
- Mustafa, Shakir. *Contemporary Iraqi Fiction: An Anthology*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008.
- "Literary Sampler." *The Legacy Project*. 21 Apr. 2015. Web.
- Lynx Qualey, Marcia. "Dunya Mikhail: Writing Without Falling Into Narrow 'Political Poetry'." *Www.arablit.org*. 29 Aug. 2013. Web. <<http://arablit.org/2013/08/29/dunya-mikhail-writing-without-falling-into-political-poetry/>>
- "Re-Living The Past" An article based on an interview with Daisy Al-Amir made by Alidz Nakhoudian, from the Women's Studies Class, BUC. <<http://iwsawassets.lau.edu.lb/alraida/alraida-18.pdf>>
- Rieff, David. "Were Sanctions Right?" *The New York Times*. 27 July 2003. Web. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/27/magazine/27SANCTIONS.html?pagewanted=all>>.

