

“Literary Representations of the Aesthetics of Exile: Inaam Kachachi”

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Abstract:

Irrespective of some possible enthusiastic comments on the benefits of the new life in diaspora, the term “exile” continues to describe the gap that separates people from the safety of the family, language, and the culture of his/her native land. Looking closely at two of the novels of Inaam Kachachi – The American Granddaughter and Tashari – this essay examines the role of fictional works by diaspora writers in shaping an aesthetic

approach to the literature of exile, exposing the tensions between the writer’s personal experience of exile and her objective view on the existing situation in Iraq, as expressed by the plight of her two female characters, Zeina and Wardiyya.

Keywords: aesthetics, diaspora, displacement, exile, Iraq, Kachachi, migration, Tashari, The American Granddaughter.

الجمالي لادب المنفى، كاشفين النقاب عن التوترات بين تجربة الكاتبة الشخصية في المنفى ووجهة نظرها الموضوعية حول الوضع الراهن في العراق، والتي تظهر من خلال محنة شخصيتها في الروائيتين، زينة ووردية.
الكلمات المفتاحية: الجماليات، الشتات، التهجير، المنفى، العراق، كجهجي، الهجرة، طشاري، الحفيدة الامريكية.

المخلص :
بعيدا عن بعض التعليقات الحماسية الواردة حول فؤد حياة الجاليات الجديدة في الشتات، الا ان مصطلح "المنفى" يبقى ساريا في وصف الفجوة التي تفصل الناس عن سلامة الاسرة، اللغة، وثقافة الموطن الاصلي. وبامعان النظر في روايتي انعام كجه جي – "الحفيدة الامريكية" و"طشاري"- يلقي هذا البحث الضوء على دور الاعمال الروائية لكتاب الشتات في تشكيل النهج

1. Introduction: The writer’s artistic and thematic concerns

In recent years, the activities of ISIS and the sectarian wars have turned many Arab homelands and especially Iraq into a nightmare of crimes and violence. All these events have encouraged the writer to construct a variety of literary works dealing with themes such as home love, tolerance, exile, diaspora, disappointment, and dreams. In her works, Inaam Kachachi also tries to convey the plight of Iraqi women and present it as a global issue. Through the depictions of some of the events and crises previously mentioned Kachachi’s literary narratives convey in a warm voice the actual suffering of the Iraqis.

According to Makovic, aesthetic experience is an important but vague concept. He defines it as “an experience qualitatively different from everyday experience.” Makovic identifies three characteristics: (1) the “fascination with an aesthetic object,” (2) the “appraisal of the symbolic reality of an object” and (3) “a strong feeling of unity with the object.” Makovic refers to Cupchik and Winston (1996) who define aesthetic experience as “a psychological process in which the attention focuses on the object while all other objects, events, and everyday

concerns are suppressed.” He also refers to Ognjenović (1997) who defined aesthetic experience as “a special kind of subject-object relationship in which a particular object strongly engages the subject’s mind, shadowing all other surrounding objects and events” (*ibid*). These scholars agree that aesthetic experience is fundamentally different from everyday situations. These components of aesthetic experience are most significant factors of incentive which in encourage the writer to transform the realities of Iraqi society and the suffering of the Iraqi people into literary works (Makovic, S. 2012).

In general, the form and content in Inaam Kachachi novels are equally important. Her literary works aptly combine form and content in a way that conveys and reinforces her message. Stream-of-consciousness, multiple perspectives, fragmentation, to name but a few, are literary means she has skillfully used to include underlying messages in her novels. Kachachi’s literary texts have as their historical background the social transformations that have taken place in the Iraqi society after the USA invasion and the Coalition War against Iraq in 1991 and after the American occupation in 2003. Thematically they deal with the Iraqi

society that was and still suffering from injustice and plagued by the corruption of Successive Governments. They also examine the consequences of war, the suffering of the Iraqi detainees, the pain and fear of the people and the tragic results of the American invasion which fueled terrorism, sectarianism and degradation. Kachachi is interested in writing about the persecution of Iraqi people in general and about the plight the Iraqi women in particular, whether under a patriarchal rule or under the American occupying forces, and about the deterioration of freedom. Her literary works tackle social and political issues.

2. The theme of exile

The theme of exile is present throughout the history of literature and of the entire world artistic production. It could even be said that Western culture is largely the result of the work of exiles and expatriates, especially after the dramatic events that characterized the 20th century, from world wars to the advent of dictatorships. It is as if a privileged relationship existed between exiled intellectual and cultural production: for immigrants or expatriates, exile is the escape from an enemy regime or a hostile environment and active literature is witnessed through literature. The condition of exile

therefore contains different possibilities of manifestation and expression. In all cases, the exile is an outsider, which means that not only can anyone included in a marginal condition be included in this category, but it can even be the representation of an existential condition of the individual who, in a continuous process of participation and detachment, it manages to take a critical look at the world around it.

Removal from the homeland, but also loneliness and abandonment: this is the meaning of exile, from the Latin *exilium* (ex + solum, “outside the territory”). It is appropriate to distinguish between an exile literature that refers to works that may or may not relate to the topic, written by a certain group of exiles in a given historical period, and a literature on exile, real or metaphorical, which may imply or minus an autobiographical context (Nash 2007: 138) .

The best example of contemporary exile literature is the literary creation of the Anglophone Arab women writers of the diaspora – both in Great Britain and the USA – who have underlined the complexity of migration and the difficulties of the exiles’ integration into the new environment, while keeping their intimate connections with the land of their birth. The works of many Arab (and Muslim) women writers have

triggered the interest of the academia and the reading public at large. One reason is that some of these writers are academics working and writing in the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States. Other women writers are second-generation citizens of the adoptive Western countries rather than naturalized citizens. A list of prominent writers would include Suheir Hammad, Mona Simpson, Diana Abu-Jaber, Mohja Kahf, Leila Halaby (United States), Leila Aboulela, Fadia Faqir, Zeina Ghandour, Monica Ali, Samia Serageldin (United Kingdom), and Randa Abdel-Fattah (Australia). Their novels mirror the hardships the protagonists – caught between the old and the new locations, and experiencing fractured identities – are facing during the painful process of relocation, be it for financial or political reasons. The protagonists of these novels experience a hyphenated identity, being torn between places; their identities are ‘fractured’ in the sense that they seek for a new sense of self in an entirely secular society, part of their assimilation into an equally secular Western life. The words of Geoffrey Nash regarding the protagonist of Leila Aboulela’s novel *Minaret* may easily be applied to the whole category of women writers, whose works may be placed “within the feminized space which may be said

to operate between the continuing pressures of Western cultural imperialism and conservative, antimodernist cultural Islamism” (ibid). These novels are neither ideological nor propagandistic, and their protagonists are concerned with the way they negotiate their identity with the Western settings they encounter. Their fictional projects accomplish an articulation in British and American fiction of the immigrant Arab woman’s world outlook.

Though not an Anglophobe Arab writer – Inaam Kachachi chose France as her new land, and French as the language of communication with the Western culture – Inaam Kachachi shares the same preoccupations with the plight of the Arab woman forced by social, economic, or political reasons to choose the fate of the exile.

3. The aesthetic experience

How has the aesthetic experience become progressively a key concept for addressing art? Why has this not always been the case? Why has this notion been challenged in many ways and for a variety of reasons, and why is it still relevant today to think about art in general and contemporary art in particular? Answering all these questions already presupposes a long work on the history of ideas and aesthetics in

particular, and which also means taking into account what we can no longer designate as aesthetics, but as philosophy of art, theory of images, anthropology of art. However, this questioning is specified if one seeks to understand how the notion of aesthetic experience can become the matrix to define what the title of this seminar calls “aesthetic territories”, whether they are places of creation art, places where works, fields, grounds, soils, places are gathered which, by the way we have to cross them and give them special attention, give rise to an approach distinguished by certain characteristics of its own, from the ordinary daily approach of the familiar environment. Any thematization of the aesthetic experience does not necessarily open, or not at all on the understanding, the definition, the seizure of aesthetic territories. Then, what does the aesthetic experience mean? This seems an easy question to ask, but not so easy to answer. It requires some theorizing before any attempt to give a comprehensive answer. According to Jaus, aesthetic experience is less clearly presented in historical sources than in other forms of writing such as religious or theoretical ones. In an effort to present the greatest number of facts of this problematic topic, the

following examples are taken from widely scattered sources, chosen from a variety of periods, and not presented in chronological order. Hence, it should be noted that “aesthetics is considered a branch of philosophy. Its significant function discovers the nature of art and beauty depending on the interaction with Man” (Jaus, 1982: 38). This arouses in us the question about what aesthetics is concerned with. That is, how do artists visualize, create, and implement works of art?; how do people use, enjoy and criticize art and what happens in their minds when they look at paintings, listen to music, read poetry, and understand what they see and hear? It also highlights how they feel about art – why they love some works in it and not others, and how art can affect their mood, beliefs, and attitude towards life. On a wider scale, researchers in the field of aesthetics are engaged in “critical meditation in art, culture and nature” (*idem*).

When we look back deep in time, we see that the walls of caves were decorated with animal images such as buffalo and reindeer and by other imaginary creatures, composed of different animal species. The early ancient researchers had been divided into two groups, one team of them believed that this art had been done purely for aesthetic artistic purposes.

Another group, overwhelmed by anthropological studies, saw those pictures as magical tools used in rituals aimed at controlling and trapping the game.

However, though diverse researchers disagree about the purposes behind these drawings, they do not disagree about their beauty. These beautiful shapes and decorations had been, apparently, made with craft and skill to represent the various activities of life at that time. This way, the cave man could perpetuate the way he used to live through the beauty and colours of those shapes, and thus, succeeded in consolidating his presence throughout time. Here lies the essence of beauty and art, an automatic expression of the human soul and its immortality, driven by a stable instinct in its human nature, which tends to express itself aesthetically. This aesthetic art deposits emotion in the tangible material that remains after a man's death.

Although humankind has been interested in art since ancient times, in the West the first to contemplate the essence of art (especially that of drama) philosophically is the Greek philosopher Aristotle in *Poetics*. Art – as human production – is a practical activity, and critical meditation always comes after the activity when the latter has already

excited us and filled us with astonishment.

The philosophy of beauty has long been associated with the theories of the universe and the divinity, but historically it has come close to the theories of knowledge and ethics. There are a number of examples of art in the prehistoric era, but they are rare and unclear in the context of their production and use. Ancient art and its aesthetic repertoire have spread in great ancient civilizations such as Egyptian civilization, Mesopotamia, Persia, Greece. These civilizations have developed unique methods relevant to their unique art. In contrast, the art of the Middle Ages is religious and depends heavily on the treasury of the state. Such art is clearly visible in the Roman Catholic Church and in the Eastern Orthodox Churches, where it is represented by the sacramental chalices and the ornate architecture of the Church buildings. The aesthetics of this period were based mainly on pure classical thought (Read, 1931; Al-Hiyari, 2017).

Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, in his work *Aesthetica* (1750,) changed the meaning of the word aesthetics to mean the study of good and bad taste and linked good taste with beauty. The 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant in his work *Critique of Judgment* (1790) said that the “historical roots of

aesthetics are in the views proposed, that the pure aesthetic experience consists of a disinterested contemplation of an object that pleases for its own sake without reference to reality or the external ends of utility or morality” (Abrams & Harpham, 2009: 13).

The German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, on the other hand, presented an overview of the nature and evolution of art, its meaning and philosophical importance. He approached art in all its aspects: music, painting, comedy, poetry and architecture. He did that in the course of the development of his aesthetic theory, and talked about the place of aesthetics in relation to the development of art. Hegel claimed that art without beauty fails to give us the aesthetic experience of freedom.

Modern aesthetics came a long time after the advent of philosophical thought and the contemplation of art and beauty, and thus we can say that aesthetics has a long history from ancient to modern times. Modern artists had full knowledge of the Greek aesthetics of beauty, but developed theories of their own beyond Beauty and Truth.

4. *Tashari*: the exile between personal memory and collective history

Tashari (2013) told the story of Wardiyya Iskandar, an octogenarian female gynecologist, and, according to Ato Quayson, a victim of the Iraqi diaspora: “Strictly speaking it is only where people have been dispersed due to violent political events such as invasion, occupation, or the coming-to-dominance of forms of exclusionary politics that the label of *victim diasporas* is justified”. (Quayson 2013: 147).

Arriving at Charles De Gaulle Airport in a wheelchair with other Iraqi asylum seekers, Wardiyya had to leave her homeland “upset by revolutions, coups, uprisings, wars and threats of bombings, kidnappings, and church explosions” (*Tashari* 35, my translation), the fate of the Christian minority in Iraq – estimated at over 1 million by 2003, and the target of persecutions since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein (ibid).

Once in Paris, in the family of her brother, Wardiyya sinks into the experience of the life of the perpetual alien. The narrative follows the life of the protagonist from the moment her family “emigrates” from Mosul to Baghdad, when she was barely five years old – we are in the 50s – until she went to university and worked as a doctor in

al-Diwāniyya, the main city of al-Qādisiyya province, located between the capital and Basra.

This narrative of the past mingles with the stories of her three children who now live on three different continents. The eldest daughter, Hinda, is a doctor and works in Manitoba, in a remote part of Canada; the second, Yasmīn, lives in Dubai with her husband; while the third, her son, Barrāq, works in Haiti for the UNESCO. Time gives the measure of the distance between Wardiyya and: “When it is seven o’clock in Paris, it is nine o’clock in Baghdad, ten in Dubai, but still midnight in Manitoba and one hour in Haiti” (*Tashari* 17, my translation).

The narrative is complex, because of the presence of expressions in the Iraqi linguistic variant which underline the sense of displacement of the characters and their attempt to recover a national identity in exile, and especially by the many changes in time. In fact, diaspora victims feed on memory and the past is still under review (Powell 2015: 12). There are also many narrator changes: Wardiyya, her daughter, the niece and grandnephew all have stories to tell and their personal experiences of the displacement. Stories are the most important material in Inaam Kachachi’s novel. In an interview, the writer claims it

has taken her many years to collect the stories and documentation for her novel. Her journalistic activity is at the base of the work of Inaam Kachachi: “I think that the boundary between journalistic writing and fictional writing diminishes with the more that we experience. So today, when I’m my shaping journalistic reports, I place them in fictional frameworks very similar to those of literature” (*ibid.*). She transposes the experiences and characters that belong to the real world into the fictional dimension of her novels in a process that David Shields defines as “art underwritten by reality hunger” (Shields, 2010: 166). On the renewed need for reality in contemporary fiction David Shields says: “The most political thing I can do is to render people’s lives, including my own, in a way that makes other people interested, empathetic, questioning, or even antipathetic to what they’re seeing – but that somehow engages them to look at life as it’s really lived and react to it” (*ibid.* 51).

Moreover, the practice of digging into memory and collecting stories in order to transpose them into fiction is a very common narrative technique in recent displacement literature. Through this process, writers seem to first reestablish a kind of “story legitimization” that had experienced a decline in the

post-modern period. In this way “writers become chroniclers of the histories of the displaced whose stories will otherwise go unrecorded (Seyhan 2001: 12). Hence the importance of stories in a process that starts from reality and transforms it into fiction, but a fiction that becomes, in turn, “history” (White 1987: 26).

To return to Inaam Kachachi’s novel, this need to tell it is strictly related to the moving experiences of the different characters. According to Quayson, the main elements of the “diasporic imaginary” in literature are “space” and “feeling of nostalgia”, two elements that do not belong exclusively to the diasporic imaginary, but especially what he defines as “genealogical accounting”, namely “the genealogical record” (Quayson 2013: 148). The latter is, for him, the constituent element of the diasporic imagination:

“Genealogical accounting involves questions of ancestry, ethnicity, tradition, and culture and provides a distinguishing past to the person or community. Almost without fail, genealogical accounting also involves stories of the ‘how we-got-here’ variety, sometimes with detailed descriptions of the journey itself» on foot, by ship, plane, train,

and other means of transport” (ibid. 151).

All the characters in Inaam Kachachi’s novel live in exile, and the way they look at their country differs according to their experience: an Iraq before the bloody events idealized for those who have hardly known it, or evoked with lucidity by the one who was the last to leave the country. In *Tashari*, we learn that Wardiyya arrived in France with a plane of the Jordanian airline in summer, but for her in Paris, “the sun is not powerful like that of Baghdad” (*Tashari* 24). Wardiyya’s displacement is presented as part of the transformations of the international political and social scene in the second half of the twentieth century: “When Wardiyya tries to define her homeland, she does it geographically. Her country is a fertile place on earth, sheltered from earthquakes, protected between two rivers, home to a million palm trees, flooded by the black gold, sitting at the head of a gulf that believed itself both Arab and Persian” (*Tashari* 18).

For her, Iraq is a country whose history extends as far as the patriarch Abraham. It is home to several important sites in both spiritual and secular history: the Chaldean Ur, Nineveh, the resplendent Baghdad of the Abbasids. From the political

point of view, it is a land of repression and brutality, and socially, Iraq is a land of family solidarity.

Hinda, Wardiyya's eldest daughter, arrived in Canada after a long stay in Amman to await her visa. Canada had recognized the refugee status of Hinda, her husband, and her daughter, who did not experience the camps for Iraqi immigrants in Jordan. They were not “forced to tear their old passport, or to take new names, and did not pay a smuggler” (*Tashari* 195). Despite the initial difficulties – she gets the recognition of the university degree after four years—the future of Hinda is linked to her host country and to her profession of doctor. However, she does not want to sell her apartment in Baghdad: “the houses are multiplying, but the house remains there” (*Tashari* 197). In this case, we can say that the character of Hinda embodies the theory of Roger Zetter on the myth of return: for her “what is mythologized is not return per se, but home” (Zetter 1999: 5). Yasmine, his second daughter, fled to Dubai by car through Jordan, with her husband married in a hurry. She left a house now “an abandoned crypt, silence, darkness, pain waiting for a dark tomorrow” (*Tashari* 19). Wardiyya's son, Barrāq, worked in Darfur with the UN for six months, and then in Sanaa. After a brief

return to Baghdad, where he discovered that it was also dangerous to work for the government or for international organizations (*Tashari* 234), he left for Haiti with a UNESCO mission. Wardiyya and her children share a common imaginary that does not include a return project. She does not want to fall into the trap of nostalgia, “in which the frail and the defeated fall”, she does not want to let go to the memories of زمان الخير (*zaman al-hayr*, “the good times of yore”, *Tashari* 68-69).

Through the stories of her children, we walk a path common to many Iraqi exiles. The writer describes, for example, expectations at consulates, refusals, humiliations suffered by those applying for a visa (*Tashari* 59); or Amman, for example, a city transformed into a “place of hugs, caresses, kisses, tears between the mothers who stay and the sons in exile or who emigrate,” the *manfiyyīn* or *muhajirīn* (*Tashari* 58). Wardiyya's children experience this transnational tragedy and fight feelings of uprooting and strangeness by using their memories and their family and national history. They rethink their relationship with their country of origin by reconciling their multiple identities, national, cultural, religious and political, without compromising the relative stability and sense of belonging to

their host country (Duclos, 2012). At the same time, they are aware of their exceptional condition, a condition that Peter Rose describes in these terms: “For those who are refugees, who persist in their awareness of the difference in their lives” (Rose 2005: 329).

The two characters of Afifa, the niece of Wardiyya, daughter of his brother, and his son Iskandar, give a completely different view of the experience of displacement. For them, who have lived in France forever, the question of belonging to a place or idea of a nation takes on a radically different meaning. Throughout the pages, we learn that 'Afifa is the narrator of the novel, and that Tashari is the title of the book but also of his unfinished book of poetry. The word *ṭašārī* evokes a rifle shot, whose shots are scattered in all directions, and represents the metaphor of the fate of the Iraqi people (Kachachi 2013). To explain the meaning of the word *ṭašārī* to his son Iskandar, 'Afifa uses the popular proverb “tafarraq aydī Saba”, (“They scattered like the people of Saba”, *Tashari* 90). The phrase refers to the people of the tribe Banū Azd—an episode described in Surah XXXIV of the Qur'an—who lived in pre-Islamic Yemen and were originally from the kingdom of Sheba. They lived in the city of Ma'rib which was irrigated by a large dam. When the

Ma'rib Dam collapsed in the sixth century, the Banū Azd would have immigrated almost everywhere in the Arabian Peninsula. One branch of the Banū Azd is the Ghassanides, a monophysite Christian Arab tribe that came from southern Arabia towards the third century and founded a pre-Islamic Arab kingdom. One branch of the Banū Azd is the Ghassanides, a monophysite Christian Arab tribe that came from southern Arabia towards the third century and founded a pre-Islamic Arab kingdom.

For Affa, her aunt Wardiyya, the last of the older generation of women in the family, is the link between “what was and what will be” (*Tashari* 188). It is she who restores Afifa a family and national identity after all these years lived in exile. One can understand, then, that 'Afifa is the true displaced person, she who has never experienced exile, and “lived the war by correspondence” (*Tashari* 243). Afifa describes in detail his sense of uprooting in a monologue where she refers to the key concepts of classical Arab culture, including pre-Islamic *qasīda*, such as the dove, ruins, nostalgia:

“I only know the story by outline. I am in my apartment, watching news from the country and writing poems. I interact with Baghdad through the

remote control and it persuades me that I am *wataniyya*, patriotic. The only thing I can do is assemble the subjects and the moan of the dove on the ruins (*al-atlāl*). I also try to strip myself of nostalgia (*al-hanīn*) and stop referring to the passions (*ašwāq*). I do not desire the return (*al-'awda*) to there, not even through the door of science (*bāb al-'ilm*). I broke all links since the screens were invaded by Iraqis who do not look like the Iraqis. They have looted, cut heads ... the strongest is the one who enjoys the highest consideration with the occupier. Those who support the sectarian movements (*tā'ifiyyun*) ask you what is your religion (*madhab*) before saying hello” (*Tashari* 68).

The feeling of unhomeliness, the absence of a “home”, is stronger for 'Afīfa than for Wardiyya and her children who have been uprooted from their land. Ato Quayson (2013) observes that it is possible to experience nostalgia for a place that has never been met. The desire for a lost or even unknown place generates both constraints and possibilities of the imaginary, according to a process that Marianne Hirsch defines “post-memory of exile” (Hirsch 1997: 422). It is for this reason that 'Afīfa writes poems whose essence is the displacement she has never experienced: surreal stories of passports and visas,

employees of embassies and long journeys, cross-border discharges and uprooted families scattered around the world. This struggle against the dispersion of his own family leads Iskandar, the son of 'Afīfa, to design a virtual cemetery, the only place that can bring together the scattered, a cemetery whose number of buried is constantly increasing. Soon, many displaced Iraqi families ask to be inserted into the cemetery database to keep the “virtual” remains of their dead (*Tashari* 2013), because “All [the exiles] love Paris but no one wants to be buried here” (*Tashari* 92). The question of the deceased refers, on the one hand, to the relationship between life and death which concerns all aspects of the lives of those who continue to live in Iraq and displaced.

On the other hand, Inaam Kachachi mentions, in the novel, the mass graves that have multiplied in the country since the invasion of Kuwait in 1991. It also tells the relocation of the cemetery reserved for Christians, Chaldeans, Syriac Catholics, Yazidis, Mandeas to Khān Banī Sa'd, north of Baghdad, where the government has established zones for each denominational community. The Iskandar virtual cemetery reflects the unstable, temporary and discontinuous relationship that the displaced have with the places, the

distances, but also with their friends and spouses. According to Ato Quayson “Diasporic forms of social relations are especially intensified in the era of the internet and of social networking” (Quayson 2013: 147), and the solution developed by the young Iskandar perfectly meets the requirements of those who navigate between their homeland and exile and who “in the morning, before putting the kettle for tea on the fire, read the news, and download articles, poems, songs and old pictures from the Internet, which they need to rebuild their virtual country” (*Tashari* 240).

In her novels, Inaam Kachachi has managed to capture the different generations of exiles in Iraqi national history, and especially those who left their country after 2003 (Sassoon 2012: 379 ff). She describes this last generation of exiles in her being beyond and in between, according to the definition of Homi Bhabha (1994: 4, 13), namely “to the above” and “between” two or more social, political dimensions, identity, existential. Bhabha describes this state as an intermediate cultural space, between the past and future cultural space. This is the most complex and interesting space to live in, because it is between a now defined past and a future not yet accessible (*ibid.* 9). This experience of displacement imposes on the

characters in Inaam Kachachi’s novel a new form of belonging, which could be defined as “nomadic citizenship”. However, to conclude, what is striking in the analysis of this novel is that for many displaced Iraqis, the word exile has lost some of its true meaning, the myth of return has finally collapsed, and the countries of their exile have become their new homeland (Bader, 2012).

5. Iraq after the invasion: *The American Granddaughter* as an archive of memory

The allied invasion of Iraq marked the beginning of turbulent political, social, religious and ethnic conflicts, and the beginning of the next link in the chain of repression, wars and economic sanctions that added an extra burden on the lives of Iraqis. On a different level, the year 2003 may be looked upon as the beginning of significant changes in the Iraqi literary scene, which began to develop dynamically despite unfavorable wartime circumstances. Zeina, the protagonist of *The American Granddaughter* (2010) is an immigrant, an “expatriate” living in the United States. For Zeina, the exile was a forced one because of the torture inflicted on her father by the Iraqi government. At the time of their American naturalization, only her mother does not participate fully in the festivities, having the

impression of betraying her native country. She feels indebted to the United States for hosting and protecting her as her country tortured her father and drove them into exile: “But I had been full of pride when they gave me the camouflage uniform. I felt certain I was going on the mission that would finally earn me my American citizenship. It was my chance to repay the country that had embraced me since my adolescence and given me and my family a home” (Kachachi 2010: ٨١).

Iraq rejected them and the United States welcomed them. National belonging was not chosen, it was imposed by the circumstances. This first rejection is duplicated by a second: that of the Iraqis when she returns to the country as a translator for the United States. Naively, she believes the images presented to her by television, she is convinced that the Iraqis will welcome them and recognize her as one of their own. But the reality is quite different: she finds herself confronted with the hateful looks of the people who hate her even more than the soldiers, considering her as a traitor. She is rejected a second time by her compatriots who do not seek to know neither how nor why she became a translator in the army. To this national rejection echoes the family rejection: Rahma is disgusted

to find that her granddaughter works for the Americans and considers that she has been corrupted by the United States. At each of their meetings she cannot help but remind her of the disappointment she feels at this choice. While she had been idealizing this distant family and homeland, her journey demystified her vision of her homeland and her family, based on her origins, and confronted her with the reality of her situation: she is rejected by others and accepted by the others; she is thus obliged to manage a family inheritance rooted in her and a national heritage that she appropriates little by little but always through the prism of the foreign woman that she is:

“We came here to do something great and you ruined it. We brought you a basket full of flowers and you vomited all over it. I have nothing more to say. I’m an army interpreter, and that’s what I’ll remain. I don’t want to be your sister, neither by milk nor blood. Wasn’t it blood that opened that rift between us, and drove me to say ‘you and us’. I couldn’t be anything but American. My Iraqiness had abandoned me long ago. It fell through a hole in my pocket and rolled away like an old coin. I tried to be both but failed” (*idem* ١٦٣).

جننا لنقوم بعمل عظيم، وهم افسدوا كل شيء.
تقيأتم على سلة الورد التي قدمنا لكم. ليس عندي
كلام اخر. سأبقى مترجمة الاحتلال ولن اكون
اختك. لا بالحليب ولا بالدم. الدم الذي حفر
خنادق بيننا. جعلني اقول "نحن وانتم". ليس في
قدرتي سوى ان اكون أمريكية. عراقيتي تخلت
عني. سقطت من حبيبي، تدرجت بعيدة مثل
فلس منقرض. حاولت ان اكون الاثنتين فلم أفلح.
كجه جي، إنعام. الحفيدة الأمريكية، ص. (١٧٩)

At the beginning of the novel, Zeina recalls her experience in Iraq and sadly defines her present condition – “A dressing table turned upside down, its mirror cracked”, and even “a floor cloth”, and “a squeezed rag, one that we use to mop the floor” (*ibid.* 1) – and she explains the profound sorrow she feels after returning from Baghdad to Detroit:

“Yet, I like this sorrow of mine. I feel the softness of its gravel as I wade with bared soul into its fountain, and I have no desire to shake off its burden. My beautiful sorrow, which makes me feel that I am no longer an ordinary American but a woman from a faraway and ancient place, her hand clutching the burning coal of a story like no other” (*ibid.* 3).

لكني أحب شجني هذا واستعذب نعومة حصاه
وانا أخوض بروحي العارية في ساقيته ، ولا
ارغب ان أطرح عيئه عن كاهلي. شجني
الجميل الذي يشعرني بأنني لم أعد امرأة

أمريكية عادية بل انسانية من منبع اخر، بعيد
وموغل في القدم ، تطوي اليد على جمرة حكاية
تندر مثيلاتها
(كجه جي، إنعام. الحفيدة الأمريكية، ص. ١١)

Basing her thought on that of Levinas, Judith Butler makes the construction of individuality in the recognition of the face of the other, a call to non-violence, resistance to fear and anguish:

“He [Levinas] makes use of the ‘face’ as a figure that communicates both the precariousness of life and the interdiction on violence. He gives us a way of understanding how aggression is not eradicated in an ethics of non-violence; aggression forms the incessant matter for ethical struggles. Levinas considers the fear and anxiety that aggression seeks to quell, but argues that ethics is precisely a struggle to keep fear and anxiety from turning into murderous action” (Butler 2006: xviii).

To pick up pieces of the cracked mirror – that is why Zeina requires interaction with others. Each individual can exist as such only if he recognizes the existence of the other, the limit of his own being, a recognition that engenders a necessary responsibility towards the other. This individual ethic pushes Zeina to engage. On the other hand, this construction of the individual

identity implies a collective and makes her understand that she is not the only one to decide what she really is.

For the young interpreter begins a dramatic, dual path: on the one hand, a journey into Iraq's hell, in a country torn by bombing, plunged into mourning, devastation and anger, in an atmosphere of brutal interrogation and massacres, in which not only thousands of Iraqis die, but also many young American soldiers; on the other, an even more tragic inner journey, in search of her own identity: is she American or Iraqi? Is she an American, like her fellow soldiers and friends killed by the rockets and mines of the Resistance, or an Iraqi, like her grandmother or as Muhaymen, the mysterious Islamist militant whom Zeina falls in love with? Zeina will lose all illusions, all her certainties, one after the other. She will return to America broken, with a cemetery in her heart. The central theme of the novel is, undoubtedly, the identity crisis of the protagonist, the inner tear, the laceration between her belonging to the Iraqi people by birth and that of adoption to the American people, the awareness of not being able to accept and share the values of Iraqi people but not even the choices of the American government. It is her “hybrid” identity that answers Homi Bhabha's

claim for a migration that challenges the well-established national identity:

“The act of emergence in the antagonistic *in-between* of image and sign, the accumulative and the adjunct, presence and proxy. It [minority discourse] contests genealogies of ‘origin’ that lead to claims for cultural supremacy and historical priority. Minority discourse acknowledges the status of national culture – and the people – as a contentious, performative space of the perplexity of the living in the midst of the pedagogical representations of the fullness of life” (Bhabha 1994: 157).

To trigger the conflict in the soul of Zeina is Rahma, the octogenarian grandmother, widow of an Iraqi colonel, a woman firmly anchored to her own principles and to the love of country. Rahma is also torn between the immense love for her niece and the disgust that the young girl's choice inspires. In the end, grandmother will die of heartbreak, unable to accept what she considers an infamous, unforgivable betrayal. Her strong fiber will be broken by pain and shame. The third character of the novel is Muhaymen, a young man linked to Zeina by a “milk brotherhood”: a former communist, a former prisoner of Iranians during

the Iran-Iraq war, the man is now a militant in the Army of the Mahdi, the armed Islamist organization led by Imam Muqtada al-Sadr.

Rahma's inscription in Zeina's unconscious testifies to the illegible traces of the historian's "ordinary" approach. This imprint left by Rahma on the protagonist is built from childhood and marks the whole novel. Indeed, from the second chapter on, the novel is punctuated with the nursery rhymes that her grandmother sang to her, and other childhood memories. While her commitment stems from the attacks on the World Trade Centre, the desire to see Rahma again immediately appears to be a major issue for Zeina's return to Iraq. The personality and life of her grandmother anchored in the narrator to the point of upsetting her. Here is an excerpt from the first chapter of the novel:

“My grandmother Rahma rocks me back and forth, after settling me on her warm lap with my face towards her... I look at her, spellbound by the pale rosiness of her face, and cling to her arms. My legs dangle on either side of her, not reaching the sofa on which she's sitting with her knees elegantly touching, in the way she learnt from the Eve magazine. My educated grandmother, who could read and write and follow the

press, who seemed a marvel among women of her generation. She leans forward with me until the world starts to spin in my eyes, then she snatches me back, repeating all the while the old rhymes that engraved their message forever upon my still-soft memory.” (Kachachi 2010: 4).

أنظر مسحورة إلى وجهها الأبيض المشرب
بالحمرة وأتشبث بساعديها وساقاي تتدليان من
الجانبين. لا تلامسان التخت الذي تقعد عليه
ملمومة الركبتين بأناقة، مثلما تعلمت من مجلة
"حواء"... جدتي المتعلمة التي كانت تقرأ
وتكتب وتطالع الصحف، بدت أعجوبة بين نساء
جيلها.
تميل علي بصرها إلى الأمام حتى تكاد الدنيا
تدور في عيني، ثم تنتشلني إلى الورا، وهي
تردد محفوظاتها القديمة التي تحمل رسالة
انحرفت في ذهني الطري.
كجه جي، إنعام. الحفيدة الأميركية، (12-13)
(ص).

The ending of the novel is very bitter: the protagonist returns home to America, apparently safe and sound, but with internal wounds probably incurable: the feeling of guilt for the death of her grandmother, the pain for the many comrades killed, the torment for a people plunged into the hell, despair for an unfinished love and, above all, the loss of identity and self-confidence. Zeina feels “a dog with two houses”, but is not at home in either. The narrator of *The American Granddaughter* gives her experience

when she has just returned home. The novel opens and closes on the same moment, thus encompassing the rest of the story in a great analepse. It is the same with the plot of the attack, whose essence is the last thoughts of a dying person. In addition, the protagonist is prisoner of the event: Zeina cannot understand why she was rejected by the Iraqis and does not find what to do with her life back in the United States.

6. Conclusions: the writer's artistry

Although the novel is a reminder of memory, and introspection on the part of the narrator, the effectiveness of writing is nuanced, but it still contains the key to understanding, remained inaccessible to the narrator. Indeed, the writing represents for Zeina a way to try to overcome her condition, and her computer is both a logbook of her experience in Iraq and a diary witnessing the decomposition of her identity. The conflict she has with the novelist comes to embody the challenge and difficulties of writing:

“The words filling my head are white clouds taking flight. They move and merge and change shapes, then all at once they stop and pour forth their acid rain. My fingers race on the keyboard, trying to capture

the images before they disperse, like white clouds chased by the wind. I write knowing that death could come at any moment. In the form of a roadside bomb, or a mortar shell that drops on my head inside the Green Zone and leaves me burning like a matchstick. ... I ignore the writer who's intruding on my space at the computer, sitting shoulder to shoulder by my side, as if we were a duet forced to play on one piano. She wants us to type together – four hands, twenty fingers – the story of the American granddaughter returning to the family home in Baghdad. But I don't want her by my side. I push her away and fight against her persistence. I keep pressing the backspace key, deleting the words she writes” (*idem* 26).

احتشدت الكلمات في رأسي وتسارعت وتدافعت
مثل غيوم بيض تهرب على عجل، ثم توقفت
مرة واحدة وزخت مطرها الحاذق على
أصابعي. أتسابق مع لمسات الحروف على لوحة
الكومبيوتر لئلا تنتشت مني الصور كما تنفتت
تلك الغيوم البيض وقد طردتها الريح. [...] لا
أرغب في الإستجابة لهذه المؤلفة اللجوج التي
تزاحمني على الكومبيوتر وتجلس لصقي،
الكنف للكنف، كأننا ثنائي يعزف، مرغما ، على
بيانو واحد. إنها تريد أن ننقر معا ، بأربع أيد
وعشرين إصبعاً، قصة الحفيدة الأميركية العائدة
إلى بيت العائلة في بغداد. وأنا لا أريد هذه
المؤلفة إلى جوارتي، أدفعها عني وأتمرد على
محاولاتها وأنقر على لمسات تمسح المكتوب
على الشاشة
(كجه جي، إنعام. الحفيدة الأميركية، ص 34)

The words here are actors, and this translates their ability to concretize the images so that they do not get *tatafitat* (“disintegrated”). They are presented as both autonomous and fleeting entities, which operate in an emergency. The mention of the *مطر* (*mutrun*, “rain”) can make one think of a periphrasis to indicate the tears and emphasizes the implication of the emotions in the need to write. The play of writing and erasure suggests the difficulty of finding the right words, and the confrontation between the narrator and the novelist indicates the importance of the issue contained in the writing of this family and patriotic story. On the other hand, the irruption at this moment of the entity represented by the novelist also proposes to consider the act of writing as an act of duplication which emphasizes the distance from self intrinsic to the writing of oneself.

The interview that the narrator of Inaam Kachachi’s novel reads in *USA Today* has a similar function. This is to give voice to the mothers of soldiers who died in Iraq to create a patriotic feeling among the readership. Their word is delivered in their individuality, but each story is not chosen at random. Similarly, no article is presented as it is, the narration does not create a real effect by simulating a quote of an article.

The words are reported and summarized by the narrator who then serves as a subjective filter between the reader and the newspaper. It explicitly states the journalistic purpose of such articles: “It was Memorial Day, and the newspaper was flying its kite over the cemeteries and the grief-stricken homes. Nobody wanted to forget or help others forget. Photographers flocked to the mothers and set up their cameras on the doorstep of their tears. People liked to read about grief, and this woman was too weak to fight the readers’ requests” (*ibid.* 127).

كنا في يوم الذكرى، ميموريال داي، وعدد
الجريدة يحلق طائرة ورقية فوق المقابر
والبيوت المفجوعة. لأحد يريد أن ينسى أو
يساعد على النسيان. يجري المصورون إلى
الأمهات وينصبون الكاميرات على عتبة الدفعة.
الناس تحب قراءة الفجيعة وهذه المرأة أضعف
من أن تقاوم رغبات القراء
كجه جي، إنعام. الحفيدة الأميركية، ص. 141

The designation of the characters is from the most general to the particular: *liaahad*, (“no one”) refers to the whole society, then this group is divided into socio-professional categories with *المصورون* (*almusawirun*, “the photographers”) and *الأمهات* (*al'umihat*, “the mothers”) to finally arrive at *هذه المرأة* (*wahadhih almar'a*, “this woman”), who, by the use of the demonstrative, accentuates

the visual dimension related to the photograph illustrating the article and representing Regina Barnhus. The sensational dimension is denounced as being at the same time the engine of the journalists whose greed is translated by the verbs يجري (“were thrown”) and ينصبون الكاميرات على (yansubun alkamirat ealaa, “turned [their devices on]”). It is shared by the readership that تحب قراءة الفجیعة (tahba qira'at alfijayea, “likes [the reading of a disaster]”) and whose curiosity is described in the translation as أضعف ('adeaf, “weakest”). These terms contribute to the construction of the satirical register used to denounce the inhuman practices of the media.

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