



BRILL

JOURNAL OF ARABIC LITERATURE 55 (2024) 527–552

Journal of  
Arabic Literature  
brill.com/jal

# On Freedom-Loving Roosters and Beloved Goats: Animals, Humans, and Iraqi Narrative Prose 1948–1954

*Orit Bashkin*

The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

*oritb@uchicago.edu*

Published online 9 October 2024

## Abstract

This article explores the relationships between humans and animals in Iraqi prose fiction from the 1940s and 1950s. It argues that Iraqi authors wrote about animals to underline not only the inhumane conditions in the nation's rural regions but also the inhumanity of urban existence, which was associated with greed, deception, the absence of family and ethical values, and social death. More specifically, the article studies two short stories: 'Abd al-Malik Nūrī's (1921–1992) "The South Wind" ("Rīḥ al-janūb"), and Shalōm (Shālūm) Darwīsh's (1913–1997) "A Convoy from the Countryside" ("Qāfilah min al-rīf"). Both stories suggest that animals have emotions, and in both, the act of urbanization involves a woman's sacrifice of an animal. The pairing of these two stories accentuates the need for class-based, anti-sectarian and ecocritical readings of Iraqi narrative prose. Reading texts written by Iraqis of various religions liberates such texts from impositions created by nationalists and from their insistence on allegorical meanings. What determines the humans' fate in these stories is not their religion but rather their environment, their dwelling in southern Iraq, their relation to capital (and lack thereof), their family relations, and the very meaningful roles animals play in their lives.

## Keywords

animals – 'Abd al-Malik Nūrī – Shalōm Darwīsh – Baghdad – Iraq – prose fiction – short story – Iraqi Jews – social realism – emotion – sacrifice

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill BV | DOI:10.1163/1570064X-12341532

© ORIT BASHKIN, 2024 | ISSN: 0085-2376 (print) 1570-064X (online)

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 license.

In 1954, Iraqi artist Shākir Ḥasan Āl Saʿīd (1925–2004) produced one of his most fascinating paintings, *The Eloquent Rooster* (*al-Dīk al-faṣīḥ*).<sup>1</sup> The work introduced a paradox: it suggested that animals, nonverbal beings, could master the art of eloquence (*faṣāḥah*) and that this eloquence could be captured by other means than human sound and written language.<sup>2</sup> The Samāwah-born artist, moreover, conveyed through his work literary, philosophical, and medical discourses about the relationships between humans and nonhumans, which circulated in Iraq as a response to mass migration from the villages to the capital city of Baghdad and the constitution of the countryside (*al-rīf*) as a temporal and spatial category.

In this article, I explore the relationships between humans and animals in Iraqi prose fiction from the 1940s and 1950s, when talking dogs, pestering flies, virile roosters, and confused goats occupied Iraqi cultural and literary domains. I argue that Iraqi authors wrote about animals to underline not only the inhumane conditions in the nation's rural regions but also the inhumanity of urban existence, which was associated with greed, deception, absence of family and ethical values, and social death. This critique found its expression in depictions of animals that moved freely in open rural spaces and faced grave dangers as their owners migrated to the city. I look in particular at two short stories. The first is 'Abd al-Malik Nūrī's (1921–1992) "The South Wind" ("Rīḥ al-janūb"), which takes place on a train headed to Karbala. The story portrays the anxieties of a rural mother who hopes to cure the blindness of her daughter and intends to sell the family's rooster to fund this venture.<sup>3</sup> The second is "A Convoy from the Countryside" ("Qāfilah min al-rīf"), written by Shālōm (Shālūm) Darwīsh (1913–1997). The semi-autobiographical story, which predates Nūrī's work, centers on the torturous journey of a poor mother and her children from the countryside to Baghdad. At the heart of the story is the family's goat that, very much like the family itself, finds survival in the city extremely difficult. The mother eventually sells the goat to pay rent and education expenses for the family's boys.<sup>4</sup>

1 Shākir Ḥasan Āl Saʿīd, *Al Deek Al Faseeh* (*al-Dīk al-Faṣīḥ*), 1954; oil on canvas; 60 × 44 cm. [www.artnet.com/artists/shaker-hassan-al-said/al-deek-al-faseeh-the-articulate-cockerel-GjdfacwVENgWv5owR5FX5g2](http://www.artnet.com/artists/shaker-hassan-al-said/al-deek-al-faseeh-the-articulate-cockerel-GjdfacwVENgWv5owR5FX5g2).

2 All translations from the Arabic are my own (even if a translation of the work exists in English or other languages).

3 'Abd al-Malik Nūrī, "Rīḥ al-janūb," in *Nashīd al-arḍ: aqāṣīṣ*, 2nd ed. (Baghdad: Wizārat al-Thaqāfah wa-al-ʿIlām, Dār al-Shuʿūn al-Thaqāfiyyah al-ʿĀmmah, 1986), 71–84.

4 Shālūm Darwīsh, "Qāfilah min al-rīf," in *Qīṣaṣ baʿd al-nās* (Baghdad: Sharikat al-Tijārah wa-al-Ṭibāʿah al-Mahdūdah, 1948), 1–29.

Both stories, I suggest, with their personified animal protagonists, effectively deconstruct the boundaries between humans and nonhumans. Animals, we learn, have emotions: they delight at certain things and fear others; they are connected to other beings, human and nonhuman alike; they resent non-rural spaces; and, most importantly, they desire freedom. In both stories, the act of urbanization involves a woman's sacrifice of an animal. While literary scholars have underscored how Iraqi modernist poetry advanced concepts of urban monstrosity and inhumanity, I show how realistic modern prose fiction mirrored similar concerns. Moreover, the focus on human-animal relations allowed Iraqi writers to undermine, in meaningful ways, sectarian and religious boundaries in Iraqi society.

### Animals and Iraq

The turn to Animal Studies in Middle Eastern Studies has yielded new inquiries into socioeconomic and sociocultural transformations in Arab societies. As historian Alan Mikhail has noted, the transition from a society characterized primarily by intense human-animal contact to one in which this relationship was no longer the basis of commercial and social life enshrined the region's entry into the modern age.<sup>5</sup> While Mikhail deals with early modern Egypt, his conclusions about the ways in which commercialization, urbanization, and integration into the global economy alter relations between species are very relevant to Iraq. Indeed, in a path-breaking environmental study, Iraqi environmental historian Faisal Husain highlights the importance of animals in early modern Iraq, when pastoralism and tribalism created a joint economic force and sociocultural continuum. Iraq's geographical diversity led to the use of various kinds of animals for agricultural, infrastructural, and economic needs. Early modern Iraq was the grazing ground of more than a million goats and sheep and therefore vital to the Ottoman economy. Sheep, protected by their hydrophilic wool, could endure harsh desert conditions; they were less disposed to fighting than pigs and easier to manage in large numbers. Animal husbandry in Iraq, according to Husain, was intertwined into tribal and family structures, which offered a safety net and an operational unit for this unstable mode of production.<sup>6</sup> Husain's book thus clarifies that the musings of intellectuals and poets about animals in the countryside during the first half of

5 Alan Mikhail, *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

6 Faisal Husain, *Rivers of the Sultan: the Tigris and Euphrates in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

the 20th century were not simply romantic or nostalgic gestures but rather grounded in pre-modern environmental realities.

Modernity, however, disrupted this social order. Mid-nineteenth-century Ottoman reforms led to the rise of major landowners; this change generated mass migration to Baghdad, whose population and territory grew considerably by the turn of the twentieth century. Steamboats and trains changed transportation modes and facilitated movement to Baghdad. The city further increased in size under British Mandate, though British colonial politics empowered tribal sheikhs and landlords. Under British colonial rule, rural Iraqis suffered a decline in status, income, and independence of action.<sup>7</sup> These conditions intensified the migration from the southern rural regions to Baghdad during the Monarchic period (1921–1958), especially during the 1940s and 1950s. Huma Gupta and Sarah Farhan described how these migrants often resided in reed and mud settlements in empty plots, under bridges, and on the city's periphery.<sup>8</sup> A wide range of politicians, bureaucrats, sanitary workers, architects, and doctors were engaged in conceptualizing and managing these migration waves; they wanted to supervise the rates of migration and debated the cleanliness, economic potential, and urban settlement of the migrants.

These fundamental transformations influenced animal use in Iraq. The migrants often brought their rural culture with them to the city. In destitute migrant neighborhoods, they used animal skins, along with other materials like mud, palm fronds, clay, and wooden sticks, to construct houses; some kept using animals in the city.<sup>9</sup> Other families, nonetheless, left their animals in the rural areas or sold them, and in their minds, their animals remained connected with the landscape they abandoned. In Iraqi cities, horses and donkeys were used to transport goods and people. Policemen occasionally rode horses, particularly when they broke up demonstrations, especially during mass protests

7 Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, "The Transformation of Land Tenure and Rural Social Structure in Central and Southern Iraq, c. 1870–1958," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 15, no. 4 (1983): 491–505; Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Camille Cole, "Controversial investments: Trade and infrastructure in Ottoman-British relations in Iraq, 1861–1918," *Middle Eastern Studies* 54, no. 5 (2018): 744–768.

8 Sara Farhan and Huma Gupta, "The Campaign to Eradicate Smallpox in Monarchic Iraq," *Jadaliyya* (April 22, 2020), <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/41002/The-Campaign-to-Eradicate-Smallpox-in-Monarchic-Iraq> (accessed October 23, 2021); see also: Huma Gupta, *Migrant Sarifa Settlements and State-Building in Iraq*, Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Architecture, MIT, 2020.

9 Farhan and Gupta, "The Campaign."

of students and workers.<sup>10</sup> Trains, buses, and cars ultimately replaced horses and donkeys; however, smaller animals, like chickens and roosters, continued to be transported on trains, buses, and cheap train-carts by rural passengers traveling to the city.<sup>11</sup> Baghdad's new middle- and upper-class leisure culture had its own animals, from decorative goldfish in expensive hotels to horses used for equestrian sport in the city's clubs.<sup>12</sup>

Modern Iraqi prose fiction mirrored, critiqued, and analyzed the effects of urbanization and the decline of the nation's rural regions. When modern Iraqi authors evoked animals in their works, moreover, they were in conversation with many genres of medieval Arabic literature. Historically, Islam emerged in a tribal society and then moved into urban centers where intellectuals and writers developed an interest in fables, allegories, and encyclopedias, all of which featured animals prominently. As perceptive recent works by Taryn Marashi, Housni Alkhateeb Shehada, Jeannie Miller, and Elias Muhanna suggest,<sup>13</sup> knowledge about animals was essential to medieval intellectuals and their conceptualizations of ethnography, cosmology, geography, medicine, and botany. Marashi also explains that animals that were named and beloved functioned as historical actors whose lives mattered to Muslim chroniclers and geographers and their interpretations of the Islamic past.<sup>14</sup>

Scholars, Peter Adamson most notably, have paid heed to the fact that medieval Muslim philosophers, doctors, and scientists deliberated about whether animals were conscious beings able to feel emotions. Many, especially philosophers, believed in animals' cognitive powers, championed their

10 Elizabeth F. Thompson, "The 1948 Wathba revisited: Comrade Fahd and the mass appeal of Iraqi communism," *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 12, no. 2 (2018): 135.

11 For a broader discussion of the train services in Iraq as part of a colonial network, see: Morton B. Stratton, "British Railways and Motor Roads in the Middle East 1918–1930," *Economic Geography* 20, no. 2 (1944): 116–129.

12 Pelle Valentin Olsen, *Between Work and School: Leisure and Modernity in Hashemite Baghdad, 1921–1958*, Ph.D. thesis, Department of Near Eastern Studies, The University of Chicago, 2020.

13 Taryn Marashi, "More than Beast: Muhammad's She-Mule Duldul and Her Role in Early Islamic History," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53, no. 4 (2021): 1–16; Housni Alkhateeb Shehada, *Mamluks and Animals: Veterinary Medicine in Medieval Islam* (Boston: Brill, 2012); Jeannie Miller, "Man is Not the Only Speaking Animal: Thresholds and Idiom in al-Jāhīz," in Joseph E. Lowry, Shawkat M. Toorawa (eds.), *Arabic Humanities, Islamic Thought: Essays in Honor of Everett K. Rowson* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 94–121; Elias Muhanna, *The World in a Book: Al-Nuwayri and the Islamic Encyclopedic Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). See also the earlier work of Joseph de Somogyi, "Ad-Damīrī's Ḥayāt al-Ḥayawān: An Arabic Zoological Lexicon," *Osiris* 9 (1950), 33–43.

14 Marashi, 1–2, 15.

kind treatment, and even called for vegetarianism. At the core of many of these works was God's universe: God created animals, and they were an essential part of His Cosmos. Thus, the interests of philosophers like Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, d. 1037) went far beyond those of Islamicate zoologists who meticulously examined animal behavior to a more elaborated ethics.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the ninth- and tenth-century philosophers comprising the so-called "Brethren of Purity" group ("Ikhwān al-Ṣafā") produced a text on various animals challenging a multiethnic and multi-confessional group of humans, protesting their subjugation, and demanding justice.<sup>16</sup> Legal scholars devoted attention to which animal should be eaten according to Islamic dietary laws in discussions that covered numerous real and imagined species, from camels to the merman (*insān al-mā*).<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, laws regarding animals were not only about dietary norms but also related to ethical animal treatment.<sup>18</sup>

Arabic literary texts were likewise abundant with depictions of animals. The pre-Islamic *qaṣīdah* introduced animals in different spaces, such as campsites, wild spaces and battlefields, and animals, from riding beasts to onagers, were part of the speaker's mental and physical universe.<sup>19</sup> Animals, such as the elephant or the hoopoe bird (*hudhud*), appear in the Qur'an, and the Prophet Muḥammad is associated with different nonhumans, such as al-Burāq, the winged creature that transported him from Mecca to Jerusalem, or his beloved she-mule, Duldul. Muslims also inherited stories about Biblical protagonists who spoke to animals like King Solomon (Sulaymān). Medieval Arabic *belles lettres*, or *adab*, likewise covered a wide range of nonhuman beings. The book

- 
- 15 Peter Adamson, "Human and Animal Nature in the Philosophy of the Islamic World," in Peter Adamson and G. Fay Edwards, eds., *Animals: A History*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 91–115, "Animals in Philosophy of the Islamic World," *The Mizan Project*, June 10, 2019 <https://mizanproject.org/animals-in-philosophy-of-the-islamic-world/>.
- 16 Godefroid De Callataÿ, "For Those with Eyes to See': On the Hidden Meaning of the Animal Fable in the Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 29, no. 3 (2018): 357–391; for the full text in translation: Lenn E. Goodman, and Richard McGregor, *The Case of the Animals Versus Man Before the King of the Jinn: A translation from the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2012).
- 17 Febe Armanios and Boğaç Ergene, *Halal Food: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 18 Isabel Schatzschneider Hans-Jürgen Brandt, *Animal Welfare in Ḥalāl Market Standards: European conceptions coined in Islamic terms* (Berlin EB-Verlag, 2018).
- 19 Jaroslav Stetkevych, "In Search of the Unicorn: The Onager and the Oryx in the Arabic Ode," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 33, no. 2 (2002): 79–130; "The Hunt in Classical Arabic Poetry: From Mukhaḍram 'Qaṣīdah' to Umayyad 'Ṭardiyyah,'" *Journal of Arabic Literature* 30, no. 2 (1999): 107–27; "Sacrifice and Redemption in Early Islamic Poetry: Al-Ḥuṭay'ah's 'Wretched Hunter,'" *Journal of Arabic Literature* 31, no. 2 (2000): 89–120.

*Kalilah and Dimnah* (*Kalilah wa-Dimnah*) presented two speaking jackals in fables originating from the Sanskrit Panchatantra and translated from Middle Persian by ‘Abdallah ibn al-Muqaffa’ (d. 759). These fables shaped literary, philosophical, and artistic discourses in Islamicate societies.<sup>20</sup>

The interdisciplinary encyclopedic masterpiece of Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Amr al-Jāhīz (d. 868) the *Book of Animals* (*Kitāb al-ḥayawān*) provided readers with stories and poems dedicated to many species. To al-Jāhīz, knowing the cosmos meant knowing its animals and expressing marvel at divine creation.<sup>21</sup> However, language was the key difference between men and animals, even for writers who acknowledged that animals can sing and feel, especially for writers deeply committed to Arabic, like al-Jāhīz. In this respect, humans, unlike animals, possessed the ability to express articulated and intelligible language (*faṣāḥah*).<sup>22</sup>

Islamicate literary and cultural products also included miraculous nonhumans and hybrids beings like the *jinn*s (about whose conversion to Islam we read in Qur’ān 72) and angels. They appear in the *Arabian Nights* and especially in *Marvels of Creation and Miraculous Aspects of Beings* (*‘Ajā’ib al-makhlūqāt wa-gharā’ib al-mawjūdāt*) by Zakariyyā al-Qazwīnī (d. 1283).<sup>23</sup> Works on animals and nonhumans, like *Kalilah wa-Dimnah* and *‘Ajā’ib al-makhlūqāt*, were often illustrated and provided the visual imagery of the nonhuman universe. As Persis Berlekamp reminds us, these illustrated texts aimed to provoke our wonder at God’s creations and communicate philosophical and theological currents.<sup>24</sup> Ido Ben-Ami has demonstrated that al-Qazwīnī’s manuscripts circulated in Ottoman societies, where early modern literati celebrated their astonishment by God’s universe and man’s attempt to control it through detailed depictions of animals.<sup>25</sup>

20 Robert Irwin, “The Arabic Beast Fable,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 55 (1992): 36–50; Eloise Brac De La Perrine, Ada El Khiari, Annie Vernay-nouri (eds.), *Les Périples De Kalila Et Dimna: quand les fables voyagent dans la littérature et les arts du monde islamique/The Journeys of Kalila and Dimna: Fables in the literature and arts of the Islamic world* (English and French Bilingual Edition) (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2022).

21 Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāhīz, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1998).

22 Valentina Colombo, “The modernity of Jahiz and his Kitāb al-Hayawān” *Ḥadīth al-Dār/Hadeeth ad-Dar* 33 (2011), 2–9.

23 Zakariyyā ibn Muḥammad al-Qazwīnī, *‘Ajā’ib al-makhlūqāt wa-gharā’ib al-mawjūdāt* (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīdah, 1973).

24 Persis Berlekamp, *Wonder, Image, and Cosmos in Medieval Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

25 Ido Ben-Ami “Wonder in early modern Ottoman society: A case study in the history of emotions,” *History Compass* 17, no. 7 (2019): e12578.

The writing about the connections between political power, humans, nonhumans, and the countryside expanded in the early modern period and acquired dimensions relating to class differences. In *Brains Confounded by the Ode of Abu Shaduf Expounded* (*Hazz al-quḥūf fī sharḥ qaṣīdat Abī Shādūf*), written in the Egyptian dialect by the seventeenth-century scholar Yūsuf al-Shirbīnī, readers learn about the primitivism, stupidity, and misfortunes of the people of the countryside.<sup>26</sup> Adopting earlier medieval tropes, the work, as Gabriel Bear has shown, reflects the attempt of its rural author to distance himself from the peasantry.<sup>27</sup> In doing so, he not only provides descriptions of animals, but also animalizes the peasants, who are depicted as producing animalistic sounds, dwelling with animals, and being beaten and sold like animals, particularly in urban spaces.

The movement of Arab modernity (al-Nahḍah), which produced its own encyclopedism, zoography, and botany, scrutinized animals in its print culture, particularly in its scientific-cultural magazines like *al-Hilāl* and *Al-Muqataṭaf*. In Nahḍawī discourses, the comparison between humans and animals was intended to champion the powers of human sciences and innovation and human language. The influence of Darwinism in the field of the sciences called for a new imaging of human-animal relations and generated much debate in Arab circles. In Iraq, Jamīl Ṣidqī al-Zahāwī strongly promoted this view as part of his broader support of scientific progress.<sup>28</sup> The rise of nationalism and romanticism led to renewed interests in peasants and tribesmen in literary works. As Samah Selim's pioneering work has illustrated, the rural imaginary engendered novel concepts of modernity, urbanity, and nationalism in Egyptian literature.<sup>29</sup> The unspeakable traumas of the twentieth century also instigated the writings of modern animal fables. Settler colonialism in Palestine motivated Palestinian literary critic Ishāq Musā al-Ḥusaynī (1904–1990) to compose

26 Yūsuf ibn Muḥammad Shirbīnī, *Hazz al-quḥūf fī sharḥ qaṣīdat Abī Shādūf*/*Brains Confounded by the Ode of Abu Shaduf Expounded*, trans. Humphrey T. Davies (bilingual edition) (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

27 Gabriel Baer, *Fellah and Townsman in the Middle East: Studies in Social History* (London: F. Cass, 1982), 1–47.

28 On the debate on Darwinism, see Marwa Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). On al-Zahāwī, see Wiebke Walther, “al-Zahāwī, Djamīl Ṣidqī,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_SIM\\_8074](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_8074) (accessed February 28, 2024); Dina Rizk Khoury, “Looking for the Modern: A Biography of an Iraqi Modernist,” *Auto/Biography and Construction of Identity and Community in the Middle East*, ed. Mary Ann Fay (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 109.

29 Samah Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880–1985* (New York: Routledge/Curzon, 2004).



*Memoirs of a Hen (Mudhakkirāt dajājah)* in 1940.<sup>30</sup> Reviving a medieval genre, Ḥusaynī nevertheless was concerned more with the very bleak Palestinian present and advanced utopian visions for Palestine's future.

The Iraqi cultural scene after World War II responded to these medieval, early modern, and modern representations of nonhumans at a time when intellectuals and writers experimented with new literary forms and engaged in radical politics. As Muhsin al-Musawi explains, despite ongoing disappointments, this generation was unique: “their attachments to ideals, and their love for their homeland, endowed their writings with much passion, anxiety, and hope.”<sup>31</sup>

These writers also redefined their relationships with the countryside. Iraqi nationalists often romanticized the village, where, in their view, humans and nonhumans lived in harmony. Furthermore, they marveled at the Bedouins' command of camels and horses, with some going as far as to compare Bedouins to medieval European knights because of their mastery of horsemanship. This romanticism was visible in paintings by 'Abd al-Qādir al-Rassām (1882–1952), which valorized the peaceful landscape around Tigris and Euphrates rivers, where the horses of Ottoman soldiers intertwine into the surrounding green and blue scenery. Since national elites wanted to halt, or at least supervise, rural migration to Baghdad, this idealization of man and animal made much sense. Nationalists, however, were also disturbed by what they saw as the peasants' excessive loyalty to animals and held that tribal people preferred their family *and* their animals to the nation.<sup>32</sup>

The Iraqi left, radical nationalists and communists, in contrast, depicted the miserable lives of peasants who were at the mercy of callous landlords, *mukhtārs* (heads of villages), and aghas (Kurdish tribal leaders), and demanded land reforms and improvement of social services to rural populations. The constant exploitation of peasants and their voicelessness indicated that peasants

30 Iṣḥāq Musā al-Ḥusaynī, *Mudhakkirāt dajājah*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1967). The work appeared in George J. Kanazi's translation as *Memoirs of a Hen: A Present-Day Palestinian Fable* (Toronto: York Press, 1999).

31 Muhsin Jassim al-Musawī, *Reading Iraq: Culture and Power in Conflict* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 142. On the intellectual scene in this period, see Muḥsin Jāsim al-Mūsawī, “al-Adab al-qīṣaṣī wa-ittijāhāt al-naqd,” *Ḥaḍārat al-ʿIrāq*, (Baghdad: al-Maktabah al-Waṭaniyyah, 1985), 319–344; Ibrāhīm Khalīl Aḥmad, “al-Jam'īyyāt wa-al-nawādī al-thaqāfiyyah wa-al-ijtimā'iyyah,” *Ḥaḍārat al-ʿIrāq*, (Baghdad: al-Maktabah al-Waṭaniyyah, 1985), 145–80; Yāsmeen Hanoosh, “Contempt: State Literati vs. Street Literati in Modern Iraq,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, no. 2–3 (2012): 372–408; Hilla Peled Shapira, *The Prose Works of Gha'ib Tu'ma Farman: The City and the Beast* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2018).

32 Jamīl, 131.

were no different than the animals they farmed and cultivated. Thus, as early as 1933, the social-democratic newspaper *Al-Ahālī* cautioned that the Iraqi peasants were viewed as mere animals whose sole goal was to produce agricultural goods. Like animals, they were denied political representation, a right reserved only for their landowners.<sup>33</sup>

This radical view manifested itself artistically. In social realist paintings, animals occupied the place of humans and turned more bizarre and unrecognizable. Neoclassical poets reflected on the situation as well. Interwar and postwar neoclassical poets, mostly Shi'is from the mid-Euphrates regions, had already addressed the sufferings of the peasants and their animals when they wrote about the countryside. More radically, the modernist poetic revolution of Baghdad stimulated other images of humans and nonhumans in rural spaces and urban locales to critique urban and capitalist structures. Many poets were influenced by T.S. Eliot's criticism of the city, pointing to its spiritual emptiness and monstrosity, as evidenced in the poems of 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayyātī and Badr Shākīr al-Sayyāb.<sup>34</sup> While much has been written on Sayyāb's utopian rural memories, his poems also reflect on ecological disasters in the countryside, presenting crows and locusts pillaging harvests and grains. Animals in civilized spaces, of the state and city, were often associated with torture and impending doom.<sup>35</sup> Haytham Bahooora, moreover, demonstrates that animal imagery was not simply confined to the binary between urban carnage and village nostalgia. Ḥusayn Mardān's poetic satire of bourgeois family values and propriety applauded animalistic instincts. Only animals, Mardān wrote, truly fathomed the meaning of freedom, and he further advised his audience to read his sensationalist, sexualized poetry only if they wished to unleash their inner animal.<sup>36</sup>

As literary critic Bāqir al-Zajjājī has argued, Iraqi novels addressed rural spaces to conceptualize the impoverishment of the nation's rural hinterlands,

33 See Fu'ād Ḥusayn al-Wakīl, *Jam'iyyat al-Ahālī fī al-'Irāq 1932–1937* (Baghdad: al-Jumhūriyyah al-'Irāqīyyah, Wizārat al-Thaqāfah wa-al-'Ilām, 1980), 200–201.

34 Shmuel Moreh, "Town and Country in Modern Arabic Poetry from Shawqī to al-Sayyāb," *Asian and African Studies* 18 (1984), 161–185.

35 Terri DeYoung, *Placing the Poet: Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab and Postcolonial Iraq* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); Hussein N. Kadhim, "Rewriting 'The Waste Land': Badr Shākīr al-Sayyāb's 'Fī al-Maghrib al-'Arabi,'" *Journal of Arabic Literature* 30, no. 2 (1999): 128–170.

36 Haytham Bahooora, "Baudelaire in Baghdad: Modernism, The Body and Husayn Mardān's Poetics of the Self," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 2 (2013): 313–329; Ḥusayn Mardān, *Qaṣā'id 'āriyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Jadīd, 2007).

its reasons and effects on peasants and tribal communities.<sup>37</sup> Social realist and modernist authors likewise wrote on animals to contemplate how shackled beings operated in a corrupt political order created by humans. These authors were keenly aware of the fact that animals were a feature in the literary and cultural production of ancient and medieval Iraq, from the bulls and sphinxes of Babylon to medieval dragons. Nonetheless, the animals in their prose works functioned in ways radically different from the medieval genres. Their animals were protagonists. Like medieval philosophers, Iraqi prose-writers established that animals had actual emotions and rights like humans. However, they did not employ animals' unique qualities to revel in the majesty of God's cosmos, but rather to mock the worldly order, which was frequently at odds with nature, and at times, to ridicule religion itself.

### A Liberated Rooster

Iraqi writer 'Abd al-Malik Nūrī was born into an elite family; his father was a high-ranking officer appointed as Minister of Defense following the 1936 military coup. He studied for two years at the American University of Beirut and then completed a law degree in Baghdad in 1944. As a high school student, Nūrī became interested in writing prose works, and he published his first collection of short stories *The Messengers of Humanity* (*Rusūl al-insāniyyah*) in 1946. It was, however, his second collection of short stories, *The Anthem of the Land* (*Nashīd al-arḍ*, 1954), which positioned him as one of his country's most gifted writers. Fabio Caiani and Catherine Cobham have characterized Nūrī as a progressive, leftist, secular-minded intellectual and narrator whose talents were recognized by critics in the Arab world. Nūrī, they explained, belonged to a generation of writers committed to a new artistic fiction who were inspired by Dostoevsky, Saroyan, Camus, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Gorky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Joyce, and Woolf. Concurrently, however, Nūrī also expressed his admiration for al-Jāhīz, advocating for the fusion of classical Arabic heritage (*al-turāth*) with Western literature.<sup>38</sup>

37 Bāqir Jawād Zājjāji, *al-Riwāyah al-'Irāqīyyah wa-qadiyyat al-rīf* (Baghdad: Manshūrāt Wizārat al-Thaqāfah wa-al-'Ilām, 1980).

38 Fabio Caiani and Catherine Cobham, *The Iraqi Novel: Key Writers, Key Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 30–72; Musawī, *Reading Iraq*, 120–121; 'Alī Jawād al-Tāhir, "Abd al-Malik Nūrī wa-riyādat al-qīṣṣah al-'Irāqīyyah," July 18, 2018, <https://almada-supplements.com/view.php?cat=20117> (accessed November 3, 2021); Nāṭiq Khulūṣī, "Abd al-Malik Nūrī wa-tajdid al-qīṣṣah al-'Irāqīyyah," July 14, 2021, <https://almadasupplements.com/view.php?cat=24427> (accessed November 3, 2021); Fu'ād al-Takarlı, "Hadhā huwa

One of the collection's most celebrated texts is "The South Wind" ("Riḥ al-janūb").<sup>39</sup> It tells the story a rooster, a mother called Khḍayrah (Khuḍayyirah), and her blind daughter, Khāchiyyah. The three are headed to Karbala where a religious charlatan, ironically called Muḥyī al-Dīn ("the reviver of the faith"), promises to cure the daughter's blindness with his special healing powers; the mother intends to sell the family's rooster to pay this sheikh. The three find themselves on a hellish train ride characterized by sweat, thirst, and the loud voices of pilgrims making their way to Karbala. When the mother falls asleep on the train, the rooster escapes her grip. As Hilla Peled Shapira's insightful analysis proposes, the narrative empowers the rooster; the latter seems happier, freer, and more mature than the mother and the daughter who are struck by different kinds of blindness: "for Nūrī, blindness in this case is a means for criticizing both the greedy cleric who exploits the poor and needy, as well as the simple people's literal and metaphorical blind belief."<sup>40</sup>

Very much like the journey depicted in Ghassān Kanafānī's *Men in the Sun* (*Rijāl fī al-shams*),<sup>41</sup> and influenced by existentialist writings, the emphasis in the story is not on the arrival of the protagonists to the city but rather on the torturous passage itself. The text collapses images of ecological and technological calamities: the train is a metallic monster which cannot protect its passengers from the blazing sun rays. To make sense of her travails, Khḍayrah endows the voyage with religious meanings and repetitively, almost mechanically, says "Allāhu akbar" ("God is great") in a rhythm that correlates to the movement of the train. She is not alone; the other travelers on the hellish train are pilgrims, and, like the mother, who is envious of them because they would visit the shrine of al-Ḥusayn, chose freely to board the suffocating vehicle.

The story's opening lines indicate that the train is seen through the eyes of animals and humans who live like and with animals. The train "ran like a

---

'Abd al-Malik Nūrī," July 14, 2021, <https://almadasupplements.com/view.php?cat=24426> (accessed November 3, 2021).

39 An English translation appeared as early as 1967, although Nūrī considered the translation of a story situated in the rural areas and exploring traditional people rather than of one of his urban stories as an Orientalist act. For the translation, see: Denys Johnson-Davies, "The South Wind," *Modern Arabic Short Stories* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 120–129; for the interview, see: Imān al-Bustānī, "Abd al-Malik Nūrī al-ladhī raḥala bi-al-ṣamt," July 14, 2021, <https://almadasupplements.com/view.php?cat=24424> (accessed November 3, 2021).

40 Hilla Peled Shapira, "Religion and Politics: On the Motif of Blindness in 'Abd al-Malik Nūrī's 'Riḥ al-janūb' and Ghā'ib Tu'mah Farmān's 'Ammī 'abburnī,'" *Journal of Arabic Literature* 44, no. 3 (2013): 377; for her analysis, see 371–393.

41 Ghassān Kanafānī, *Rijāl fī al-shams* (Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalī'ah, 1963).

cautious serpent through the dry wilderness, slowly traversing the barren, dusty deserts.”<sup>42</sup> The train dehumanizes its passengers, depicted as mere bodies (*ajsād*), heads (*ruʿūs*), and flesh piled on top of flesh (*laḥm ʿalā laḥm*), perspiring on uncomfortable wooden seats.<sup>43</sup> These broken bodies merge with the nonhuman creatures onboard. While in Babylonian mythology, such hybrids were endowed with divine powers, in Nūrī’s text, the merger of species signifies the feebleness and defenselessness of humans. The passengers fall victim to flies, which “cling to the wet faces, hands, eyes and hair,” “feast on the overheated and dusty bodies,” and settle on Khḍayrah’s mouth.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, the rooster is amalgamated with Khḍayrah’s chest, entrapped in her red robe and held under her palm, only peeping with one eye to see its surroundings. This position generates conflicting images: the rooster is a baby, a body-part, and a creature seeking to free himself from the human’s firm hold. The mother and the rooster share much in common: they come from the village, they suffer on the train, and both fall asleep and dream as an escape from the heat (although the rooster dreams about his past in the village and the mother dreams about a happy future for her child in the city). Khḍayrah, moreover, does not want to kill the rooster and seems to like him; when hearing the voices of other roosters from afar, “Khḍayrah remembered all of a sudden her red fat rooster, settled in her lap. She looked at him with affection, and stroked his hot back.”<sup>45</sup> Her decision to move to the city tragically alters the harmonious rapport in the village (where the rooster impregnated chickens); in the city, the animal becomes a commodity and an object of religious sacrifice.

The rooster desires freedom, and we see many things on the train from his perspective as he tries to break free. Employing sensory functions identical to those of humans, he sees, remembers, smells, and hears the humans on the train. Like other rural migrants, he has memories of an idyllic past:

In his little head memories of a happy yesterday arose: the grain he gathered in the shaded yard; the wide spaces he proudly enjoyed; the shade of the palm trees; the little bits he discovered in golden balls made of dung; the palm branch lying on the ground, upon which he exercised every morning; and the edge of the fence on which he stood to release its mighty crow, full of virility and youth. Finally, this beloved white hen he mounted several times a day; he deliciously felt his stallion-like virility,

42 Nūrī, 71.

43 Nūrī, 72.

44 Nūrī, *ibid.*

45 Nūrī, 74–75.

puffing with pride and self-assurance. He would pounce upon his opponent, the other rooster, vigorously and powerfully, smashing him, nearly finishing him off. Now, however, he does not know where he might be taken, and what his fortune might be. He does not know anything but this strange shudder he feels, which only occasionally frightens him, and this heavy hand that almost suffocates him. But why worry? All things eventually end, and every place has tasty grains, golden balls of dung, pretty white hens, weak opponents he would like to fight, grassy land, and open air.<sup>46</sup>

The rooster emerges as a caricature of a young man whose only care in the world is sex, fighting, and food. From his vantage point, the village is affiliated with plenty of nourishment and shade and with having a voice. Rural life is repetitive, yet enjoyable, and the fact that he has no need for commodities, capital, and clothing makes the rooster content and enables him to imagine a joyful future elsewhere. His obesity, red feathers, and nakedness are juxtaposed with Khḍayrah's dirty red robe. In addition, whereas Khāchiyyah is blind, and consequently her cousin refuses to marry her due to her disability, the rooster can see with one eye and enjoys multiple sexual activities, without any need for the institution of marriage. And his sense of self, pride, and love of freedom facilitates his escape when Khḍayrah finally falls asleep:

The sun! The sun! He only wanted the sun. And when the sunlight engulfed the rooster again, he found himself falling onto another terrain, a harsh, solid land. To his astonishment, this land did not move like the strange vessel, this dirty, scary snake. For the first time since the beginning of this cursed journey, he felt he was free of every chain, and of all that he feared. And now he could enjoy this wide, boundless land, with all its richness and goodness just under his beak. He is returning now, respected and mighty, to this nature, devoid of human beings.<sup>47</sup>

The text contrasts the torment of the penetrating sunlight experienced by the passengers with the warmth of the rays felt by the rooster. While an incoming train might kill the rooster, as he marches toward the station, he enjoys freedom, as he had in the countryside, perhaps for the last time. The text echoes existentialist discourses prevalent amongst Iraqi and Arab writers during the

---

46 Nūri, 76–77.

47 Nūri, 83–84.

1950s, especially Sartre's radical conception of freedom<sup>48</sup> and prewar romantic ideals, particularly Jean Jacques Rousseau's notion that man is born free and is only shackled by societal norms. The closing lines revisit Khḍayrah, happily dreaming, while the south wind "turns living creatures into beings that are only half alive."<sup>49</sup> Readers know that, once awakened, her misguided optimism would quickly vanish.

Thematizing the sufferings of rural women was commonplace in Iraqi literary works of the time, and narrators such as Fu'ād al-Takarlī and Ghā'ib Tu'mah Farmān, as well as poets like Nāzīk al-Malā'ikah, devoted much space to their poverty, subjection by men, oppressed sexuality, and murder. In "The South Wind," women's marginalization is intertwined with other thematic concerns, especially migration, religion, and ignorance. In this context, Jacques Derrida's commentary on animals and humans can shed valuable light on our exploration of "The South Wind." Derrida contends that the concept of shame framed the relations between humans and animals and the former's right to dominate the latter. Humans, unlike animals, have a sense of shame at their own nakedness and feel the need to cover their naked bodies. Religious texts, especially the first chapters of the book of Genesis about original sin and the expulsion from Paradise, bolster this sense of shame. Animals, in contrast, do not attach their nudity to immorality or indecency, and they remind humans of their own animality, especially when humans are naked.<sup>50</sup> As we have seen, in "The South Wind," the rooster is nude and blissful, whereas the religious women are clothed in dirty robes, whose uncomfortable nature is enhanced by the heat on the train. Being unreligious and nonurban, the rooster thus offers a radical alternative to Iraq's modernity and religiosity.

Feminists, however, have critiqued Derrida for conflating between men, women, and the human in his analysis. Several scholars of gender have further pointed to the similarities between women, the subaltern classes, the disabled, and animals, as beings on the margins of society, ridiculed for their lack of reason and propriety. As Susan Fraiman noted, feminists struggled to undo certain notions

48 Yoav Di-Capua, *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Decolonization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 131–151.

49 Nūri, 83–84.

50 Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); for feminist critique see: Lisa Guenther, "Who Follows Whom? Derrida, Animals and Women," *Derrida Today* 2, no. 2 (2009): 151–165; see also Judith Still, *Derrida and Other Animals: The Boundaries of The Human* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

that women and animals are linked together as avatars of nature; that they are similarly debased by their shared association with body over mind, feeling over reason, object rather than subject status; that men are rational subjects, who therefore naturally dominate women and animals alike; that masculinity is produced in contradistinction to the feminine, animal, bodily, emotional, and acted upon; that degree of manliness is correlated to a degree of distance from these and other related categories—physicality, literalness, sentimentality, vulnerability, domesticity, and so on.<sup>51</sup>

“The South Wind” seemingly underscores the connections between subalternity, gender, disability, and animals, all victimized by Iraq’s land regime, and its systems of privileges, which discriminated against southerners and southern Shi’is in terms of the division of state’s resources and the provision of health-care, water, and education services. This regime thus trapped the mother, the blind girl, and the rooster in a mobile furnace, and turned them against one another. Nevertheless, Nūrī’s third-person male narrator, despite the compassion he shows for the women, has its limits. He favors over them a male, man-like animal, because the food that the rooster eats and the spaces he roams are outside the realm of capitalism in that they require no form of production, rent, or payment, and because his sexual relations require no institutional marriage. Thus, it was not only civilized urbanites but also Nūrī himself who could be thought of as responsible for splitting the women-animal harmony emblematic of the countryside.

### The Binding of Rabshah

Shālōm (Shalūm) Darwīsh was born in ‘Ali al-Gharbī, a district of the Maysān Governorate in southeastern Iraq, whose administrative center is ‘Amārah. The region’s population was Arab Shi’i and Kurdish at the time, and Darwīsh’s own father was a cloth merchant from Erbil, where communities of Aramaic-speaking Jews (often known as “Kurdish Jews”) resided. After the passing of his father, when Darwīsh was eight years old, his mother moved the family to Baghdad, where he was educated in both Jewish and governmental schools. He attended the Baghdad College of Law, graduating in 1938,

51 Susan Fraiman, “Pussy Panic versus Liking Animals: Tracking Gender in Animal Studies,” *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 1 (2012): 99; for her general critique of Derrida and animal studies, see 89–115.



and worked as the secretary of the Jewish community (1929–1944). In 1947, by now a successful lawyer, Darwīsh began to serve as parliament member, representing the social democratic organ *al-Ḥizb al-waṭanī al-dīmuqrāṭī* (The National Democratic Party). He left his parliamentary position in protest of the improprieties of the Iraqi voting system. After he was falsely accused of being a Zionist, and due to the oppression of the democratic forces in Iraq, Darwīsh left Iraq in 1950. Darwīsh began publishing works of narrative prose in the Iraqi press and later authored two collections of short stories, *Freed and Enslaved* (*Aḥrār wa-‘abād*, 1941) and *Some People* (*Ba‘ḍ al-nās*, 1948). “A Convoy from the Countryside” is his most famous story, commented on by a wide range of critics, especially Reuven Snir.<sup>52</sup>

Darwīsh’s formative years in southeastern Iraq fostered his interest in animals. While scholars often underscore the Baghdadi nature of Iraqi Jewry,<sup>53</sup> the Iraqi Jewish experience was not only a Baghdadi one and Iraqi Jews also lived in south-central Iraq, in provincial towns like Nāṣiriyyah, Hindīyyah, Shāmiyyah, Ḥillah, Dīwāniyyah, and ‘Amārah. Jewish notables like Menaḥem Ṣāliḥ Dani’el, the Mu‘allim-Sassūn family, and the Khalāschi family owned lands in these regions and Southern Jews worked for and with the Jewish landowning families and were involved in the commerce in grains. In the interwar period, the improvement of infrastructure and transportation encouraged Jewish migration from the south to Baghdad.<sup>54</sup> The Ḥillah-born intellectual Aḥmad Sūsah (a Jew who later converted to Islam) remembered rural Iraq fondly, most notably the Bedouins riding their horses. This milieu, Sūsah intimated, caused him

52 Reuven Snir produced an analysis and English translation of the story in Reuven Snir, *Arab-Jewish Literature: The Birth and Demise of the Arabic Short Story* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019), 63–76, 216–228. He translated the story into Hebrew and commented on it in Reuven Snir, *‘Arviyut, Yahadut, Tsiyonut: ma’avaḥ zehuyot bi-yetsiratam shel Yehude ‘Iraq* (Jerusalem: Mekhon Ben-Tsevi le-ḥeker ḳehilot Yiśra’el ba-Mizrah: Yad Yitshak Ben-Tsevi ve-ha-Universiṭah ha-‘Ivrit bi-Yerushalayim, 2005), 174–182, 530–539; Reuven Snir, “Ha-ḥazon ha-tsiyoni ve-ha-sifrut ha-‘aravit shel Yehude ‘Iraq: Shayara min ha-kefar le-Shalom Darwish,” *Ze’ev Harvey, Galit Hasan-Roken, Haim Saadoun, and Amnon Shiloah* (eds.), *Tsiyon ve-Tsiyonut be-ḳerev Yehude Sefarad yeha-Mizrah* (Jerusalem: Mišgav 2002), 537–560. See also: Emile Marmorstein, “An Iraqi Jewish Writer in the Holy Land,” *The Jewish Journal of Sociology* 6, no. 1 (1964): 91–103; Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Ilāh, *Al-Adab al-qiṣaṣī fi al-‘Irāq mundhu al-Ḥarb al-‘Ālamīyyah al-Thāniyyah, ittijāhātuhu al-fikrīyyah wa-qiyamuhu al-fannīyyah*, Baghdad: al-Jumhūriyyah al-‘Irāqīyyah, Wizārat al-‘Ilām, 1977, 324–361.

53 Lital Levy, “Self and the City: Literary Representations of Jewish Baghdad,” *Prooftexts* 26, no. 1–2 (2006): 163–211; Sasson Somekh, *Baghdad, Yesterday: The Making of an Arab Jew* (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2007); Shmuel Moreh, *Baghdād ḥabibatī: Yahūd al-‘Irāq, dhikrayāt wa-shujūn* (Haifa: Maktabat Kull Shay’, 2012).

54 Batatu, 233–360; Nabil al-Rubay‘ī, *Ta’riḫ madīnat al-Dīwāniyyah al-siyāsī wa al-iqtisādī wa al-ijtimā‘ī*, vol. 1 (Hillah: Dār al-Furāt lil-Thaqāfah wa-al-‘Ilām fi al-Ḥillah, 2015).

to love the Arabs and their culture.<sup>55</sup> Sūsah, however, was the son of a wealthy merchant. For the Darwīsh family, poor and in need of a breadwinner, the rural world was quite different; Darwīsh, like Nūrī, challenged this type of romanticism and focused on smaller, cheaper, and much-beloved animals.

The sentimental text presents a rollercoaster of shifting moods and feelings, from love, affection, and joy, identified with rural Iraq, to fear, panic, and terror, identified with the city. Guilt is perhaps the most powerful emotion that frames the narrative. Darwīsh's story poses the dilemma I opened with, namely the ability and inability of prose fiction, and language itself, to communicate the nonverbal. By placing an animal at the center of his short story, Darwīsh pays great heed to affective gestures. Moreover, the story reflects on the power of sound to convey feelings and to forge bonds between different species. Darwīsh was certainly not alone in conceptualizing animalistic and nonhuman voices and wrestling with the challenge they posed for narrative practice. As Rochelle Rives has shown, of importance is not only the binary between human speech and animal voice but also the role animal voices play in generating physical and emotional intimacy with humans.<sup>56</sup>

"A Convoy from the Countryside" opens with the following words: "He can now well recall how he tried, for the first time in his life, to cross the big street in Baghdad."<sup>57</sup> "He can now well recall" frames key traumatic moments in the narrator's consciousness regarding his arrival to the city and his experiences living in it for the first time, and the events are viewed from the vantage point of the child-narrator, Salīm. Threatened by a sea of cars, the rural convoy is baffled and disoriented:

It was a large group, including himself, his sisters, some of the older ones clasping remnants they had salvaged from the countryside to the capital, and his brother, over two years his senior, dragging with him their goat, whom they named Rabshah, and who came from the countryside with the family members. She accompanied them in their long and harsh expedition from their tiny, remote village in the south. With them, she boarded a steamship that fought the tides day and night, making its way

55 Aḥmad Sūsah, *Fī ṭarīqī ilā al-Islām* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasah al-'Arabiyyah li al-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr, 2006), 15.

56 Rochelle Rives, "The Voice of an Animal: Robert Bresson and Narrative Form." *Symplokē* 24, no. 1–2 (2016): 345–370.

57 Darwīsh, 1; Snir compares this opening and the writing technique of the narrator to *al-Ayām* by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn; see Snir, *Arviyut*, 176.

to the capital painfully slowly, at a pace that couldn't match a limping donkey climbing a steep hill.<sup>58</sup>

When we think of a convoy or a caravan, designated here by the Arabic word *qāfilah*, we often imagine a moving group of tribesmen or merchants in the desert. Here, the convoy is a family uprooted from its rural surroundings and situated in a bustling street. Conjuring, and also parodying, the convoys of Israelites crossing the Red Sea, the family, led by their courageous, Moses-like mother, is in need of a miraculous rescue. The state of utter bewilderment is reflected in Rabshah's passivity, being dragged by a young human. Concurrently, however, we realize that she is part of the family; the family *named* her and cares deeply for her wellbeing. The adjective "small" (*ṣaghīr*) is used numerous times in the text to describe both the family and Rabshah; this smallness sustains the intimacy and love between them. Finally, as in the short story "The South Wind," moving vehicles are compared to animals. If Nūrī's train resembles a snake, the members of the convoy feel that the boat resembles a limping donkey. A limping man, rather than a donkey, will also end the story.

The family responds to crossing the road with nonverbal, affective, and bodily gestures; they shout out of fear, and their goat bleats with them. Rather than civilizing the convoy's members, the city animalizes them and they become "lost sheep detached from their herd and shepherd."<sup>59</sup> The mother, however, assumes the role of the shepherd; she reprimands her children, and asks them to trust her, because "she belongs to the people of Baghdad,"<sup>60</sup> a city where she lived before she joined her husband in his remote village. Knowing the city means she has a way of coping with the moving machines that petrify the children. The solution for this predicament, however, comes when streetwalkers take pity on the convoy; they grab the hands of the children, asking them to close their eyes so that they could cross the street. Rabshah initially resists, but then she capitulates to the power enforced on her by human hands and crosses the road with the family. It is clear that in order to navigate through the city the family will need human assistance, and, symbolically, to turn a blind eye to rural ethics and values. Yet it is the animal that will resist the demise of these values most vehemently.

The family's introduction to the metropolis includes elements that sociologist George Simmel identifies in modern urban life: enormity, speed, a large population, dense crowds, threatening bodily closeness, and a lack of space

58 Darwīsh, 1.

59 Darwīsh, 6.

60 Ibid.

which lead to a sense of desertion and an inability to maintain independence and individuality. The agony of those lost amongst buildings, institutions, and, more generally, the state's space-conquering techniques, their sense of smallness and their loss of culture and identity in this impersonal capitalist structure—all of this is mediated through the relationship between animals and cars.<sup>61</sup>

The family's fear of cars corresponds to broader discourses in the Arab Middle East. In "Automobility and Citizenship in Interwar Lebanon," Kristin V. Monroe claims that car driving shaped national and everyday life in the interwar era. Cars, she clarifies, represented not only the power of the state to utilize new technology, but also allowed urbanites to travel to the rural areas. Driving cars, moreover, had gendered dimensions, and educated men both derided and rejoiced at women's ability to handle them.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Iraqi governments took much pride in introducing modern transportation means, although satirical journals often lampooned the mayhem on Baghdadi buses. If, for urban and national elites, cars connected the countryside to city centers, in Darwish's text, cars separate rural people, who regard them as mobile killing machines, from urbanites and force the villagers to rely on city people.

After the opening scene, the narrator's memories carry him back to the countryside and to the birth of Rabshah in their family's home. The family's children cried at the sight of Rabshah's mother's suffering from the pains of delivery, and screamed with joy as Rabshah appeared into the world, stroking her hair and kissing her. Darwish privileges again affective signs between humans and nonhumans (shouting, stroking, crying) to indicate that the two female goats and the human family constitute the same social unit. Matters, however, turn grimmer when Rabshah's mother enters the pantry, eats the grains in it, and consequently dies from food poisoning. This moment indicates that once goats enter into a built environment, tragedies unfold. This disaster, nevertheless, further accentuates the model of an inclusive family of various species:

This calamity doubled their attachment to little Rabshah, and from that day they sensed this mysterious feeling that bonds one orphan to another; they had tasted before her the bitterness of being orphaned when their own father left them to struggle in this world with no support. They thus

61 Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1950), 455–470.

62 Kristin V. Monroe, "Automobility and Citizenship in Interwar Lebanon," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34, no. 3 (2014): 518–531.

provided this orphaned goat the support they lost when their own father died, and which they did not find among other humans. With time, she became more than a goat; she is their friend, their solace, and their partner in their satiety and hunger.<sup>63</sup>

All species in this family yearn for lost paternal love and an invisible bond “understood only by the heart, and unseen to the eye” that attaches the goat to this human group (*al-jamā'ah min al-nās*).<sup>64</sup> From the get-go, then, the text signals suspicion towards words, preferring sounds and emotions in their stead.

As the narrator's consciousness drifts back to the city, we find the family frantically searching for their relatives' house. Walking in the street is difficult for Salīm, who trips over the holes in the pavement. The whole exercise turns Salīm into an anti-Flâneur of sorts. If, for Charles Baudelaire and later Walter Benjamin, modern urban strolling and exploration echoed bourgeois leisurely culture and consumption, for the poor, city-walking is physically painful, scary, and confusing.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, this depiction turns our attention to the state's neglect of the city's poorer neighborhoods, which endangers the safety of city-walkers, especially of children.

The family finally finds the house, but the dark room in which they are to stay resembles a cell. Locked in this room, Salīm confesses that he fears for Rabshah's life, since a limping man whom the urban family members mention in passing might kill her. His sister, while willing to give up her bracelet so that the family could get into a new house, later comes up with another solution, which she “finds painful to articulate,” asking her mother how much the family might earn if they sold the goat.<sup>66</sup> Salīm protests angrily, but Rabshah makes things difficult by urinating in the small room, wetting the bed and his brother. While the goat acts no differently than a petrified toddler, this action jeopardizes her existence. By now, speechless Salīm is overtaken by sleep and in his dreams he sees the limping man, holding a knife, “baring white teeth, like those of a wolf, snorting a devilish, scary laughter,”<sup>67</sup> attempting to kill Rabshah first and then Salīm himself.<sup>68</sup>

63 Darwīsh, 4–5.

64 Darwīsh, 2.

65 Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, trans. Howard Eiland et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1995).

66 Darwīsh, 19.

67 Darwīsh, 21.

68 Darwīsh, 21.

The city, then, introduces new measures between species; the sister appraises their animal, once a sister-like being, in relation to other things; rent, food, and education.<sup>69</sup> The women in the family, moreover, are the first to push for the change in Rabshah's status. Psychologically, Salim begins to understand Rabshah's fate: if the city turned his family into voiceless sheep, it animalized the limping man who is now seen as the wolf.

The story ends in the morning. The limping man arrives and a transaction takes place; he buys the goat. Trembling, the mother hands over the goat. Rabshah turns to Salim and his brothers, "as if looking at them for the last time, bidding them farewell, telling them many words, whose meanings Salim and his siblings understand."<sup>70</sup> In a scene akin to an execution, "the shepherd tightens the rope around her neck." Rabshah refuses to move, turning to Salim, "seeking his rescue." The children's sobbing moves even the limping man and he promises Salim that he will not harm Rabshah and that Salim can come and play with her. The story ends thusly:

The shepherd goes out, dragging behind him the goat while she helplessly resists him, turning her head to her friends (*aṣḥābihā*) who come down the road to bid her farewell, "Good Bye! Good Bye Rabshah! Allah Protect Rabshah!" And she answered their prayer, "Maa, maa, maa."<sup>71</sup>

The story opened with Salim's brother dragging the goat and ends with her being dragged away by a limping man, who is most likely a butcher. But since the story reflects Salim's repressed memory, the word butcher is never mentioned in the text. The sound *mā'* or maa repeats throughout the text; Rabshah's speech is "Maa, maa, maa," and the children's voices repeatedly call upon their mother, saying *māmā* or *Yammāh* (Oh, mother!).<sup>72</sup> Darwish, in this regard, mirrors Rabshah's voice and the wide range of words and gestures that the family employs to communicate with her. On some level, speech is associated with violence and capital, and emotionality is associational with the countryside. It is, after all, the capitalist order in the city that requires a sacrifice of an animal, as the family members reevaluate motherhood, caregiving, and the hierarchy

69 In this context, Emile Marmorstein, who compared Darwish to Thomas Hardy, noted that the story let his reader decide "whether to confine his emotions to the pathos of a moving story or to extend it to the sacrifice of human value demanded by modernization, [and] the clash between spontaneous affection and a mixture of hostility and self-interest" (Marmorstein, 92).

70 Darwish, 27.

71 Darwish, 28–29.

72 Snir, *Arab-Jewish Literature*, 71–72. On the ending, see also: Snir, *Arviyut*, 177–179.

between species. Rabshah, not unlike many humans in the city, becomes a commodity whose value is measured not by the joy she brings the family but rather by what her sale would provide. The last lines refer to the family as the *aṣḥāb* of Rabshah, a word meaning both “friends” and “owners,” and this double meaning signifies the fluctuating status of Rabshah in Baghdad.

Rabshah's gender is significant in this regard. Throughout the entire text, both Salīm and Rabshah are effeminate orphans: emotional, crying, dependent on the mother, and devoid of education. The end alters the gender relations. When Salīm refuses to part from Rabshah, his mother tells him, “Salīm, don't cry; it's a shame; you are a man now.” Reuven Snir sees the use of the *mā'* and *māmā* sounds and the contrast between the orphans and the women in the family as representing a change in gender roles in which the females in the family assume leadership.<sup>73</sup> In my view, the end signifies a transformation in gender roles with respect to Salīm himself. The sacrifice of Rabshah, in this sense, transforms the compassion of a rural, effeminate child into the cruelty and animalism identified with adult urban men.

Derrida's reflections are useful in unpacking the significance of Rabshah's sacrifice, particularly his commentary on the role of the dead animal in the tale of Cain and Abel. In Genesis 4, Cain, the son of Adam and the older brother of Abel, is an agricultural worker. He submits as his offering to God of the fruits of the earth, but God refuses them, preferring the offerings of the rancher Abel, the first-born cattle. In his jealousy, Cain kills another living being, his brother Abel. The punishment, in Derrida's analysis, animalizes Cain, who is now to be hunted and tracked: “By killing his brother Cain falls into the trap; he becomes prey to the evil lurking in the shadow like an animal.”<sup>74</sup> God then promises this human-turned-animal protection from vengeance, as if God had repented having preferred the animal sacrifice. God vows to take revenge on anyone who attempts to kill Cain. In a way, the story of vengeance that started with the sacrifice of an animal never ends. Derrida rejects the importance of animal sacrifice and is sympathetic to Cain, seeing the killing of any living being as problematic. In his analysis, God's rejection of the fruits of the land led to another killing and the opening of a cycle of violence.

Nūrī and Darwīsh convey similar feelings. In Nūrī's story, as we have seen, the rooster escapes its destination as a sacrificial animal. In Darwīsh's story, the sacrifice of the sister goat brings with it a great degree of guilt and shame. The murder represents the human entry into a world marked by capitalism and civilization and traumatizes the narrator as an adult; and it turns the

73 Snir, *Arab-Jewish Literature*, 71–72. On gender in the text, see: Snir, *ibid.*, 181–182.

74 Derrida, 43–44.

entire family to a Cain of sorts. Salīm and Cain are both haunted because of the murder of a sibling (Abel and the sister-goat), although Salīm is tormented by his own memories and guilt. In the biblical story, Cain becomes a “fugitive and wanderer” due to his grave sin, whereas in our story, homelessness and migration lead to the sacrifice of an animal, childhood memories, and unconditional love.

### On Gods and Scapegoats

Iraqi literature, especially narrative prose, is often sidelined, being compared to its more “mature” Syrian, Lebanese, and Egyptian counterparts. I hope that the two sophisticated stories I commented on disprove this assumption. Their readings also challenge certain linear evaluations of Iraqi prose. While some critics look at Darwīsh as a storyteller whose writing predated the more mature prose of the 1950s,<sup>75</sup> this article has proposed that both works are compelling artistic creations that are in conversation with one another. These modern Iraqi authors used animals very differently from the medieval genres expressing wonder at God’s world, and their personification strategies emanated from their rebellion against capitalist civilization.

The pairing of these two stories accentuates the need for class-based, anti-sectarian, and ecocritical readings of Iraqi narrative prose. Snir notes that although Darwīsh was not a Zionist, a state official read his story as a Zionist allegory, in which the migration from the countryside to Baghdad symbolized Iraqi Jewish migration from Iraq to Israel and Rabshah stood for Zionism itself.<sup>76</sup> Emile Marmorstein, representing a Jewish national interpretation, suggests that a “simple Muslim” might find Darwīsh’s stories entertaining, while a “sensitive Jew might detect a symbolic allusion to the deterioration of the condition of his co-religionists during the years preceding their emigration.”<sup>77</sup> Reading Darwīsh’s story with texts written by Iraqis of various religions, however, liberates the text from impositions created by nationalists and from their insistence on its allegorical and sectarian meanings. Moreover, we not only ought to consider Darwīsh’s works together with other Iraqi and Arab authors

75 ‘Abd al-Ilāh sees Darwīsh’s work as representing a “naive” stage of narrative prose, although he recognizes Darwīsh’s pioneering use of the Iraqi dialect. See: ‘Abd al-Ilāh, 324–361.

76 Snir, *Arab-Jewish Literature*, 70; Snir, *Arviyut*, 180–182.

77 Marmorstein, 92.



of different faiths, but we ought to put Rabshah together with other animals discussed in this literary field.

Reading Darwīsh and Nūrī together further reveals the commonalities between Judaism and Islam with respect to sacrifice and civilization. Both religions have origin stories rooted in tribal societies (be it ancient Canaan or Arabia), whose mythical heroes and patriarchs, with their wives, sons, and animals, are a topic of continual study and interpretation. Both religions commemorate Abraham's willingness to sacrifice a son: Isaac in Judaism (Genesis 22:7–8), and Ishmael in Islam (the Qur'ān does not specify which son was to be sacrificed, but later exegetical sources identify this son with Ishmael). Both Jewish and Islamic exegesis referred to a ram as the sacrificial animal taking the place of the son. In both religions, the narrative about Abraham and his son assumed great importance; in Judaism it is attached to the sanctity of Jerusalem, whereas in Islam it concerns Mecca and the Ḥajj's rituals. These stories are different from Christianity, where God's son, or the Lamb of God, is indeed sacrificed and no animal is offered in his stead.

Darwīsh and Nūrī grew up in societies where the stories about Abraham and his son circulated widely, and where animals were slaughtered on 'Īd al-Aḍḥā and in order to celebrate the birth of a son or the move to a new place of lodging, among many other social occasions. Their texts incorporate and subvert these foundational narratives. In "The South Wind," the sacrificial animal, in its secularism, rejects its role as the savior of the protagonist's daughter. In "A Convoy from the Countryside," the son, Salīm, objects to the sacrifice of his beloved goat-sister. As Abraham tries to deceive Isaac and not to tell him about his bitter future, the mother and the butcher, try to deceive Salīm. Unlike Isaac, Salīm, as a grown man, is traumatized by this sacrifice.

Assyriologist Samuel Noah Kramer reveals that many stories in Genesis originated from Sumerian mythology. The Cain and Abel story, for example, had parallels in Sumerian tales about the competition between shepherd gods and farmer-gods for Divine intervention and affection.<sup>78</sup> Iraq, the cradle of civilization, produced the earliest stories about the transference from tribal to settled communities and the sacrifices it demanded. Darwīsh and Nūrī intervened in these age-long questions regarding animal sacrifice, civilization and sin. Like Derrida, they rebelled against the sacrifices both civilization and religion demanded.

An ecocritical analysis of both stories, however, could further minimize the role religion plays in these texts. What determines the protagonists' fate

---

78 Samuel Noah Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology: A Study of Spiritual and Literary Achievement in the Third Millennium B.C.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961).

is not their religion but rather their environment, their dwelling in southern Iraq, their relation to capital (and lack thereof), their family relations, and the functions of animals in their lives. Such a reading elides the similarities or differences between Judaism and Islam altogether, and focuses instead on a moment in Iraq's history when new technologies and capitalist arrangements made the lives of humans and animals alike into a living hell. In both stories, the sacrifice of an animal is not meant to be an offering to God, and thus both accentuate the pointlessness of animal murder in a godless world.