IRAQI SHORT FICTION:
THE UNHOMELY AT HOME AND ABROAD

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Abstract
The article focuses on the uncanny and the strangely fantastic, as an aesthetic expression of a complex and disturbing reality, in twelve short stories by Iraqi writers spanning half a century of fiction writing by men and women. The theoretical framework is drawn from Homi Bhabha and his post-colonial interpretation of Freud’s concept of the uncanny (Unheimlich). The article highlights motifs and techniques used in selected short fiction: the double in Amin and ‘Abd al-Razzâq, gender in al-Rikâbi and Mamdûh, political satire in al-Ḥariri and al-Kubaisi, sense of exile in al-Amîr and al-Dulaimî, the domestic unhomely in al-Takarlî and al-Nâṣîrî, past/present interface in al-Ramîlî and Khudâyîr.

To live in the unhomely world, to find its ambivalences and ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction, or its sundering and splitting performed in the work of art, is also to affirm a profound desire for social solidarity.

—Homi Bhabha

The collective Iraqi experience in the second half of the twentieth century—when modern sensibilities were being formed—has been characterized by upheavals, wars, revolutions, violence and sanctions amounting to a historical nightmare and a horror serial. The social and psychological effects of such sharp turns and devastating changes have been insufficiently studied, but they were imprinted in the poetics of fiction, albeit obliquely. This study concentrates on short fiction written by Iraqis of different backgrounds to cover the variety of socio-literary registers in their response to Iraqi reality and in their expression of excesses and contradictions in Iraqi culture. The emphasis, however, is not on reading the reality in such works which will require an analysis of a wider range of narratives and a sociological approach to literature. I concentrate rather on how such a complex reality affects the techniques of fictional writing and how diverse and frequent are the “fantastic” and the “strange” in the fictional discourse—both serving to depict an extraordinary reality as well as a strategy of revealing through
concealing. In other words, I am interested in exploring the aesthetic manifestations and the imaginary universe of writing at the edge.¹

Works selected for this study, apart from being a representative sample of Iraqi writing at home and abroad, display artistically a variety of ways—from the simple to the sophisticated—of integrating the strange episodes verging at times on what Freud called Unheimlich, translated as “uncanny” by the psychoanalytic professional Alix Strachey, and more recently as “unhomely” by the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha.

When Freud wrote his essay on the “uncanny” (1919), he was already involved intellectually with his slim, but influential book, Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), which he wrote at the age of sixty-five and in which he indirectly negated his earlier work by emphasizing the drive of the instinct of death over the instinct of life. The most striking aspect of his essay “The Uncanny”—which constitutes the intermediate stage between the earlier Freud with his emphasis on the function of life instincts (sex drive) and that of the later Freud with his privileging of the death instinct (inorganic drive)—is that it bridges these two Freuds and thus stresses ambivalence (Hertz 296-7). In a long analysis of the German term, Unheimlich, and by going to its etymological roots and shades of meaning, Freud comes to the conclusion that it has an ambivalent significance, i.e., two diametrically opposed meanings—that of feeling at home, and that of feeling not at home. In other words, it is the unfamiliar experienced as familiar (Freud 19-60).

The most interesting lesson that Freud teaches us in this long essay is how the repressed gets recognized as familiar/unfamiliar, and by extension the role of ambivalence in pinpointing the repressed.

In his complex argument about the “uncanny” based essentially on his analytic reading of Hoffman’s “The Sandman,” Freud shifts the focus from “intellectual uncertainty” to psychoanalytic “recovery of the repressed,” which turns out to be “the castration complex” in this case. Homi Bhabha, in turn, reinstates the more literal translation of Unheimlich, rendering it as

¹ I am grateful to Jiḥād al-Kubaisī who provided me with the typescript of his story discussed in this study, as the printed version, published in a Gulf daily was unauthorized and mutilated (as he said in a letter to Al-Jaζrah, Dec. 12, 1983). I am also grateful to Michael L. Chyet who provided me with his translation of the Kurdish story “Selfishness.” Citations and quotations are from the English translations (see “Works Cited”) whenever available; otherwise the translations are mine. Names of authors are spelled in this article as the authors spell their names in English. Names of characters are rendered as the translators have transliterated them. Others follow the common system of transliteration from Arabic. The dozen Iraqi fiction writers I refer to in this article are dispersed over the world: al-Dulaimī, Khudayyir, ʻAbd al-Razzāq, and al-Rikābī live in Iraq; al-Kubaisī in Libya, al-Ḥārīrī in Canada, Mamduḥ in France, al-Takārī in Tunisia, al-Nāsīrī in Egypt, al-Ramlī in Spain, and al-Amīr in Lebanon. Four of the writers are women (al-Dulaimī, Mamduḥ, al-Nāsīrī, and al-Amīr).