Review


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The translator/editor of this relatively slim anthology of contemporary Iraqi fiction deserves our congratulations. For it is a daunting task to edit and translate single-handedly from Arabic 34 selections of fiction by 16 contemporary writers. Despite the heroic effort, the anthology is not, and it does not claim to be, comprehensive. Yet, it represents the major themes and narrative techniques that dominate contemporary fiction writing in Iraq. The selections from each writer illustrate the themes and the narrative techniques employed by the author. The criteria Professor Mustafa used in his selection of fiction writers included in the anthology are several, most important is his desire to compensate for the limited availability of Iraqi fiction in English and represent Iraq’s diverse groups. Although all the works of fiction translated in the anthology were originally written in Arabic, their writers were not necessarily Arab or Muslim. There are two Iraqi Jews, two Iraqi Turkmen, and one Iraqi Assyrian Christian. Moreover, five are women. Mustafa further selects based on what will appeal to his English speaking audience (xix).

The introduction explains the challenge of producing Iraqi literature. The crucibles of fascism, wars, genocidal sanctions, invasion and occupation in the last thirty years of Iraq’s history have killed many writers, but failed to kill the writing spirit (xv-xvi). The introduction then lists the new techniques necessitated by oppressive realities. Under repression, Iraqi writers rediscovered parable, which was an ancient narrative form. Professor Mustafa is correct in identifying parable as one of the renewed techniques used by Iraqi writers “to communicate subversive visions” (xvi), but he does not venture into the reasons for parable. Being the basic discursive device used by prophets in their uphill battles against entrenched realities, parable proved to be highly pointed, very hard to misappropriate, and aesthetically appealing. Hence, parable’s appeal to Iraqi writers under oppression. Other narrative techniques have become convenient masks for Iraqi writers, such as magic realism, and fantasy in general because of the relative freedom of expression it affords under repression.

The selections in the anthology illustrate the above-mentioned masks of narrative technique, especially in works by Iraqi writers who never left Iraq: Muhammad Khodayyir, Lutfiya al-Dulaimi, Mahdi Isa al-Saqr, and Mayselun Hadi. Even a cursory reading of the selections from their fiction reveals a common narrative element that indicates their fear or distrust of reality. This may explain, at least in part, these authors’ flights into the fantastic. Muhammad Khodayyir represents the extreme escape from the real into a heavily symbolic world where even a very close reading of his “Yusuf’s Tales” would fail to establish convincing links between the world of the story and the outside world. What does this twelve stone-tier printing house, which is described as if it were one of the world’s seven wonders, really represent? And who is Yusuf the Printer? Despite the enigmatic nature of characters and events, the storyteller never loses the reader because he never forgets to entertain. From the very beginning of his career as a short story writer, Khodayyir emphasized architecture and elaborate geometrical patterns; his recent fiction forms...
a brilliant labyrinth of shapes and lines. This great author is obsessively interested in verbal arabesque.

The other writers from inside Iraq are definitely less symbolic. Lutfiya al-Dulaimi, for instance, in her “Shahrazad and her Narrators,” uses the legendary Shahrazad, the narrator of the One Thousand and One Nights, as a mask to launch her feminist critique of male scholarship, especially on the history of women, as generally false primarily because it is motivated by sexual fantasies. Despite the poignant encounter between the great scholar, who spent his life researching the “history” of Shahrazad, he fails to see her reality. She chastises him for imagining a desirable Shahrazad appealing to the multitudes and for submitting to the shackles of male desire (34).

More important, the story is not only a critique of male scholarship on women; rather, it is a sweeping critique of all male scholarship on history. In her long dialogue with the scholar on the false and true in writing and scholarship, Shahrazad tells him that male scholarship is based on fabrications and lies to support the politics of power, but creative writing usually goes “beyond your familiar world.” She goes on to make her point understood by elaborating on the problem of male-created cultural memory, which serves as fact (36).

Mahdi Isa al-Saqr, a firmly realistic fiction writer, finds it expedient in his recent fiction to convey particular messages using the fantastic. In his significantly titled piece “Breaking Away” from the real, as the thematic context suggests, the narrator tells of his interactions with an old painter of forests and landscapes. To the old painter, what he paints becomes the real and he learns to enter the painted reality whenever he wants to enjoy green trees, singing birds, and murmuring rivers, as if he were in a paradise. At one point, he invites the narrator to enter with him a painted forest. The skeptical narrator initially could not believe, but later he describes the experience of entering the painting in terms of spiritual experience (52). Evidently, here is a mystical experience that enables the painter, who later teaches the narrator the secrets of entering painted realities, to create an imaginary, peaceful world—a contrast with the ruined realities of Iraq. Initially, it seemed an exercise in Sufism, but later we see that the painter has a Bible on the table next to his bed (54). So he becomes a Christian mystic whose paintings are for him windows unto the other world, a more permanent and peaceful world. It is interesting to note that when the painter was sick, he tells the narrator that death offers a vista onto a painted paradise (54). Hence, to the painter, death and painting are two ways to heaven.

One of the happiest selections is Mayselun Hadi’s fiction. I share the editor’s enthusiasm when he states in his editorial note that Mayselun is “One of the most promising talents to appear on the Iraqi literary scene in the past two decades” (68). Definitely, she offers a new, happy, funny voice in the all too serious world of Iraqi fiction. In the midst of blood and ruin and death, she is able to find a source of laughter? It takes great talent to transcend historical circumstances and celebrate the essence of our humanity. In the three selections by Hadi, “The Realm of the Real,” “The Calendars,” and “Outage,” she creates humor that melts many stoic Iraqi faces into smiles.

In an attempt to compare the selections from Iraqi fiction written in exile with the selections of Iraqi fiction written inside, I need first to identify the main factors that I consider crucial. The first factor is the audience; the second one is the freedom of imagination the Iraqi writer enjoyed while out of the repressive reality called Iraq. Major themes in the fiction produced inside Iraq are primarily open-ended symbolism, mysticism, humor, and historical revisionism, which are the most convenient masks for a people who have been denied freedom of imagination. Iraqi writers, outside Iraq, as the selections from their writings clearly indicate, have been able to write soul-searching critiques of Iraqi society, its government, and the western powers that have been accomplices in the Iraq regime’s criminal acts. Abdul Sattar Nasir’s “Good-bye, Hippopotamus,” and Ibrahim Ahmed’s “The Arctic Refuge” are very effective selections of that critique; the first is an excruciating cry against one’s own country’s torture and imprisonment, and the other is a