

# **Absent: The Absent Meanings in Chaotic Iraqi Women's Lives**

**By**

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## **Abstract:**

The aim of this research is to support another form of knowledge: the polemic of the dehumanized; the "literature [that] re-mythologizes the world" (Foucault, *Power* 12). The researcher chooses *Absent* by Betool Khedairi as the research's subject of analysis to scrutinize the history of Iraq during the Gulf War and its psychological effect on women which is a long-ignored approach. It is an excellent example of literature that is both reactionary and revolutionary. Reactionary because Khedairi reflects the ongoing traumatic events, and revolutionary to change the status quo as it will be clear in the characters' struggle to survive as well as the novel's end. *Absent* tackles crucial issues such as women's psyche, fragmentation, the elusive notion of truth and the absent meanings and dreams in the Iraqis' lives. She deals, one way or another, with Iraqi women's limitations in the form of the conquering, totalitarian and patriarchal restrictions and attempts to examine her female characters' psychological and emotional unity with the difficulties of the inescapable outside world. In this sense, Khedairi's novel deconstructs what has been propagated by the powerful's narratives.

## **Lives for the dehumanized puppets:**

Michel Foucault believes that Man's history is "summed up in two words: Power and Knowledge" (*Power* 119) and war, of course, is one of its faces. In *Discipline and Punish*, for example, Foucault asserts that the ultimate aim of discipline is 'normalization': the production of docile subjects through a refashioning of minds. Systems that operate openly on the marginalized's exclusion, silence and invisibility, use knowledge to establish their own subjective grand narratives that serve their interests and strengthen their hegemony. In other

words, power operates not through physical force, but through the hegemony of norms and knowledge. Thus, the question for Foucault is not the discourse or the narrative itself but "whom does the discourse serve?".

Distance of any kind, as Kenneth Worthy mentions in a paper, "The Whites of Their Eyes" (2013), makes it easier for the consciousness to accept the crimes imposed on the "Other". When the "Other" is faceless, nameless, dehumanized and regarded as inferior, this lessens the sense of guilt and empathy, and makes violent acts acceptable. Therefore, it is important for one to put a face to the victim, which is absent in the case of the Iraqis. People are willing to harm those who are absent to them, but the situation is different if they are close: "The subjects [...] notoriously (and shockingly) were willing to inflict great pain and possibly permanent harm or even death on victims. But they became less willing to do so as the victim was moved progressively closer to them" (Worthy np.). In this sense, the physical and/or the emotional distance makes it easier to accept the pain and destruction against the stigmatized "Other"; this decreases when the victim is no longer nameless and faceless.

Nuha al-Rādi states a conversation in *Baghdad Diaries* (2003) between Mrs. Bush and some of the American children that echoes the voice of America about the war there in Iraq: "Mrs. Bush [...] say[s] comfortingly to a group of school kids, 'Don't worry, it's far away and won't affect you'". The Iraqi writer asks wondering, "What about the children here? [...] Where's justice?" (41). This is another illustration of how the Iraqis and in this instance the Iraqi children are faceless far away objects to the American children. One can see the Iraqi children here as the "Other", the "subaltern"<sup>1</sup>.

The polemic Iraqi war narratives that Iraqi women write help clear out these vague images of the Iraqi people by presenting them as ordinary human beings scattered by war. These narratives reveal that they have pains and sufferings; that they are real people with real problems. Only when one reads their stories and acknowledge their dilemma, will one see their faces and feel the sympathy needed to break such dehumanized distance. Hanan Hussam Kashou writes in

*War and Exile in Contemporary Iraqi Women's novels* (2013): "This is what makes the narratives of war [...] take precedence over any other literary theme in their writings" (90).

"Where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, *Sexuality* 95). For long the Iraqis, as part of the Arabs, struggle against the Western hegemonic discourse about the East. Edward Said states in his *Orientalism*, "[a] certain freedom of intercourse was always the Westerner's privilege because his was the stronger culture, he could penetrate, he could wrestle with, he could give shape and meaning" (44). In other words, the West is able to do all of that through certain kinds of powers. These powers take various shapes and forms, whether it has been through the power of colonization ruling over certain parts of the world, or through another kind of power: the power of knowledge over the "Other". This kind of power, founded on years of inaccurate scholarly texts and "totalizing paranoia" (Foucault, *Anti-Oedipus* xiii), supports inequalities, subjectivity, and establishes false assumptions about the "Other".

The term 'Orientalism' itself is a form of intellectual power. Claiming knowledge of the inferior "Other" is a form of alleged superiority of the mind and justification to control, "[t]o have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for 'us' to deny autonomy to 'it' – the Oriental country – since it exists, in a sense, as we know it" (Said, *Orientalism* 32). The whole tragedy is portrayed when these theoretical false man-made assumptions transfer into real life as the only truth or meta-narrative; the whole tragedy is when truth becomes the casualty of war.

Since the events of 9/11 the powerful meta-narrative of the War on Terror has emerged. Meta-narratives of intervention and war follow painting a stigmatized "Other" for the Western audience either by media representations or through grand war narratives. Riverbend, an Iraqi female blogger, calls these representations the myth:

The Myth: Iraqis, prior to occupation, lived in little beige tents set up on the sides of little dirt roads all over Baghdad. The men and boys would ride to school on

their camels [...] there was one turban-wearing teacher who taught the boys rudimentary math (to count the flock) and reading. Girls and women sat at home, in black burkas, making bread and taking care of 10-12 children. (34)

This myth is refuted by a portrayal of the Iraqi community from within, in which Betool Khedairi's *Absent* describes Iraq as once technologically advanced and Iraqi people as civilised before the occupation. *Absent* proves that the Iraqis did not need the occupation to 'civilize' them, because simply Iraq has been the cradle of civilization. Moreover, Khedairi assures her readers through the novel's characters that the Iraqis, seen as the ignorant and barbaric by the occupiers, are well aware of their oppressors' agendas. To the occupiers' surprise, those supposedly naive people "know that the U.S. leaders are exploiting the situation for their own economic benefit, while deluding themselves that they are fooling the Iraqis with ridiculous justifications for the war on terror" (Cook, "Baghdad Burning" 25).

The danger in this kind of management of truth is that it twists the realities through pre-existing framework of knowledge leading to, in this case, the chaotic situation in Iraq, thus denying a full understanding of the different layers of historical, political, economic and social contexts that frame the Iraqi war. This ultimately serves to reinforce common misconceptions about the Arab world. Claiming the only truth implies that there is a singular true narrative, and that this narrative is itself raw and unquestionable. The question becomes: how can the faceless create, in Gramsci's term, a "counter-hegemony". Khedairi's aim in *Absent*, as the other Iraqi women writers, is to shift the focus from truth claims to the construction of narratives that represent multiple layers of context.

She tries to offer a counter-narrative of the realities of U.S. occupation of Iraq to Western as well as the Eastern readers eager to know the real story. As an Iraqi woman belonging to the marginalized, she presents a first hand experience of the war as unfiltered news; a narrative parallel to the regime of truth giving voice to and by othered Third World women. By that way she informs her readers that these women are not fragile nor ignorant but intellectual fighters.

### Iraqi intellectual fighters:

The Iraqi scholar Ferial J. Ghazoul explains that the Iraqi women emerged onto the nation's literary scene since the second half of the twentieth century, mainly as poets. Through their contributions, they discuss important women's issues in Iraq, such as female domesticity, marital relationships and women's role in Iraqi society. These writers include Daisy al-Amīr, Samīra al-Mani, Suhayla al-Husaynī, May Muzzaffar, Luṭfiyah Al-Dulaymī, Buthayna al-Nāisrī, Alīya Mamdouh, Ni'mat al-'Aziz, Salīmah Ṣālih, and Amīnah Haydar al-Ṣadr and of course Nāzik Al-Malāikah, a pioneer in the free verse movement. Despite the rise of Iraqi women writers in the latter half of the twentieth century, it was not until the 1990-91 Gulf War that women began to discover their new and unexpected potentials in the literary canon. This potential shattered the trend of male-dominance and constructed Iraqi women's empowerment. Of course themes and concerns of Iraqi women writers have changed according to the current situation they have at hand in their country. But there is no doubt that Al-Malāikah's and her peers' writings pave the way for contemporary Iraqi women to write about issues of concern to them in their particular Iraqi society.

In her extensive study on Arab women's literature, Miriam Cooke in her 1996 book *Women and the War Story* highlights that women have historically "had no authority to speak of the dead and dying" simply because war stories often depends on firsthand testimonies by male soldiers (3). They have been silenced and ignored in their accounts of war. But in Iraq, as in Palestine and Lebanon, the case was different. There was no such thing as a home front and battlefield. The war was fought on their land. Civilians were among the casualties who died because of rockets, of bombs dropped from the air, from explosions, from snipers and from any use of a deadly weapon that was available during the Gulf War. This can be expressed by whoever lived through this war whether male or female.

If these Iraqi war narratives are read from the postmodern perspective, then this means that the Iraqi women are reinterpreting and rereading the history of war from an exclusive point of view that has nothing to do with the admitted grand one. It is the postmodern project of rejecting universal standpoints in order to embrace differences and heterogeneity and emerge new forms of thought (Foucault, *Madness* 386). Through their rereading of the events in their literary works, readers acknowledge the fact that history means truth is challenged. Like

postmodernist writers, they “do not deny that events occurred in the past but rather question how events are recounted” (Michael 41). From the postmodern perspective, history is a constructed narrative, hence it is open to different interpretations and its facts are questioned. Thus, Iraqi women’s texts take on a perspective that allows women to engage in history. Along with, they redraw the stereotypical image into a humanized one that belongs to a people who have endured suffering under certain power structures and discursive colonization, because, as Kashou believes, in the postmodern sense only "the person’s psyche is what matters: it is the subject and nothing else" (100).

During the 1970s most of the Iraqi population witnessed an economic growth and a prosperous life as a result of the country's petroleum reserves and industry. The country's rise in income and living standards resulted in an important shift in the social and the economic status of Iraqi females, as increasing numbers of women benefited from employment and education opportunities. Accordingly, the economic and political instabilities of the 1980s were similarly reflected on the female conditions. For Iraqi men, the war meant death, injury, and the destruction of their careers, but for Iraqi women, the impact of war means the burden of double or triple roles, as mothers, wives, workers, and also as soldiers on the home front.

Besides, as the Iraqi scholar Yasmin Husein Al-Jawaheri highlights, the classical Iraqi family, as the case with other Arab families, is patriarchal and hierarchal with respect to sex and age. She writes in *Women in Iraq: The Gender Impact of International Sanctions* (2008), "[p]atriarchies are central to the social organization of almost all Middle Eastern [...] communities where citizenship is not premised on equality among individuals, but rather on the dominance of male elders over keen groups". Based on this order, "women are organized and addressed in the context of their positions within patriarchal structures" (94, 95). Male control of family's income inevitably places authority in male hands, leading to male dominance and proprietary rights over women and girls. At the times of instability, women undertake huge responsibilities that they have not used to before both in the home and at work. In the traditional patriarchal/ hierarchal society where women are restricted and traditionally represented as custodians of the nation's honour, times of upheavals constitute a huge additional pressure on them.

Born in Baghdad in 1965, Betool Khedairi has devoted her literary career to novels that act as social commentaries on Iraqi society. Like Dalal, the protagonist of her *Absent*, Khedairi studied French literature, receiving her Bachelor's degree from the University of Mustansirya. Although Khedairi lived many years outside Iraq, she only writes about her mother land. Her courageous soul has risked a great deal to tell the truth as she sees it. That is why her literary works are far from the "propaganda literature". As a female Iraqi author who wrote during the 1990-91 Gulf War and during her experience in exile thereafter, Betool Khedairi demonstrates the ways in which the experiences of war and exile in the 1990s affect them as women. Set during the economic embargo in Baghdad in the late 1990s, Khedairi's *Absent* discusses the way in which the nation's harsh political and economic circumstances tortured but also empowered Iraqi women in the years following the Gulf War:

The very manner in which her female characters tell their stories [through Dalal the narrator] [...] deviates from the conventional male narrative and contributes to a new female-dominated method of storytelling [...] Dalal also focuses the majority of her narrative upon personal relationships rather than international or governmental ones [...] the majority of her narrative centers around the interactions that take place between the various occupants of her apartment and between her aunt and Abu Ghayeb. (Minoff 40-41)

The book is an inside perspective on the real status of Iraqi women and the fact that they are suffering. *Absent*, acts as unfiltered news which informs the readers with the daily bombing that was not reported in the U.S. media and the desperate life in a war that is said not to be war.

Most Iraqi women were under tremendous psychological pressure, and although most were far too proud even to complain, it was not difficult to recognize their permanent fatigue because of having to work so hard both inside and outside. One of the Iraqi women interviewed by Al-Jawaheri narrates her trauma saying:

Every day when I get home, I am so exhausted that I don't even have the energy to eat. I just want to reach my bed and stretch out my suffering body and my troubled mind. However, I often experience sleepless nights [...] When everything falls silent, I am still awake thinking of my children, their future, and what their

lives will be like if I die. This whirlpool of thoughts is taking the last drop of my energy. (121)

Iraqi women complained of stress, insomnia, and health problems. Young women were highly depressed and tense because of the mounting social constraints out of instability and the non fulfilment of their basic needs. There is also women's perceptions of themselves as tired, ill, hopeless and worthless. In addition to this, the psych-social trauma have led to numerous families being broken up. Yet, Khedairi's novel shows that these circumstances give the women in Iraq the chance to fight and prove themselves despite all the previous hardships and restrictions. Although the female characters in Khedairi's novel appear to be empty and absent, they assume the role of fighters to survive during a period of great destruction within Iraqi society.

### *Absent's women fragmented in squares:*

*Absent's* female characters are fragmented, distributed and disturbed. They recall the woman Dalal saw in a painting: "The woman in the painting appears coarse, like a solid figure decorated with a grainy coat. There are purple, pink and blue squares. There's a breast in one square; the other breast in another square. A face is in one square, and the rest of the body is in another" (Khedairi 21). Khedairi's women are psychologically, mentally and physically distributed in squares. In her portrayal of the female characters, Khedairi attributes their sensations of disturbance to various reasons but all related to war and sanctions. Umm Ghayeb's house, Umm Mazin's house and "Saad's Hairdressing for Ladies" are centers for women's gatherings. The writer successfully employs these communities to reveal Iraqi women's secret traumatic stories to the readers, and thus to know the unknown.

Umm Ghayeb, for example, tells Dalal about the solitude of some of her female customers to whom she sews clothes and who spend their nights alone after the death or the disappearance of their husbands in war: "she likes to listen to her bedroom curtain [...] she closes her eyes and imagines it's the sound of her husband's dishdasha [...] yet her husband died few years ago" (Khedairi 41). She adds: "I have another customer who repeatedly hugs her pillow [...] and says to it 'Goodnight, darling' [...] Her husband, missing in action, lost on the battle field" (Ibid 43). These women are suffering psychologically and somehow experiencing early stages of hallucination.

According to Craig Steel, the School of Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences at the University of Reading, in his "Hallucinations as a Trauma-based Memory: Implications for Psychological Interventions" (2015), hearing voices and seeing visions may be a hallucination, in terms of the schizophrenia diagnosis, and categorized as the re-experiencing of a traumatic event with respect to PTSD. Common symptoms that schizophrenic patients suffer from are failure to understand what is real, confused thinking and hearing voices that others don't hear. These women of Umm Ghayeb's stories experience delusions in their refusal to accept their husbands' deaths and their strong belief that they can see and hear them. This sense of delusion or hallucination is a tendency to dissociate from reality or from the traumatic event in particular. Steel believes that these individuals are prone "to an increased level of trauma-related intrusive memories which may be appraised in a manner consistent with the experience of hearing voices or seeing visions" (4). War has snatched away so many men and there are no accurate statistics to the number of widows in Iraq, but it is estimated that after Iraq-Iran War and the Gulf War over 20 percent of young Iraqi women had lost their husbands. This group of Iraqi women became the most vulnerable under sanctions. Single women breadwinners were the worst affected by the increasing despair of the Iraqi society under sanctions. Not only had they lost their husbands, but the economic embargo had also decreased the support previously provided by the state.

Every corner in Umm Mazin's house speaks out with similar traumatic stories. As a soothsayer, she is regarded as these women's rescuer: the women who have lost their way, the

women who are suffering for any reason, and the women who have lost their husbands as a result of black magic. Despite her flawed diagnoses and treatments, Umm Mazin seeks to build and rebuild relationships. In Umm Mazin's house, there are no secrets. The women sit in a circle around her, like the talking or healing circles in psychotherapy. Each one tells her story and listens to the others' stories. Umm Mazin tells each woman her fortune from her coffee cup and tries to cure her using herbs and honey. She acts as a therapeutic environment to the tired and the drowning souls.

Khedairi describes the women as completely absorbed by Umm Mazin's analyses of their states and future. If this shows anything, it proves the desperate need of these women to seek help and to speak out their problems even to a soothsayer, as Uncle Sami, one of Dalal's neighbors, puts it: "Every person needs to believe in something. Believing in trickery willingly is another form of faith" (Khedairi 112). But according to Dalal, Umm Mazin's phenomenon is an indication of Iraqi women's drawback because of war, as she objects, "She uses verses from Qur'an to deceive people, and [...] to convince them of the effectiveness of her spells. She also encourages women to wear the hijab, and insists that a woman's religious duty is to stay at home" (Ibid 111). Khedair agrees with her protagonist and explains this drawback, ironically, through one of Umm Mazin's customers: "Those days are gone—when we had compulsory education, free stationary, and uniforms" (36).

In their 2006 article "Women in Post-Saddam Iraq" Lucy Brown and David Romano call attention to the war's effect on Iraqi women's education. Because of the financial crisis, many Iraqi families deprived their daughters of going to school, believing that girls' education is less important than that of boys'. As a result, Iraqi women lacked respectable chances for employment throughout the 1990s; hence, they were back to the domestic sphere. But as their husbands served in the battlefield, women became the sole breadwinners in the home front. So, they are forced to work anything not requiring good education in order to get food for themselves and their children.

In chapter eight, Dalal works as an assistant in “Saad’s Hairdressing for Ladies”. The walls of “Saad’s Hairdressing” echo the dilemma of other women during sanctions, as one of the customers reveals her neighbor's trauma narrating:

Her husband has started drinking heavily since he received a warning telling him to cease his trading in cigarettes. He was told that this trade had now been restricted exclusively for the sons of eminent politicians [...] in a moment of anger, he opened their large freezer cabinet. It was empty of course [...] so he pushed his wife into it. Then he sat down on top of the lid, and started singing. If it hadn’t been for the neighbors, the poor thing would’ve suffocated. (Khedairi 119)

Women are traditionally expected to pick up the pieces when men are physically or/and psychologically unfit. Iraqi men, traumatized by the circumstances, found themselves unemployed or able only to generate unstable and scarce incomes. In such circumstances, women were expected to be at home and to cope with the frustration and anger of their men folk. Although women were counted on to manage all this mess, it was not possible for them to obtain any sort of psychological support.

If Khedairi presents snatches of some unnamed female characters' experience scattered here and there throughout the novel, she successfully wrapped them with the experience of her major female characters. While Dalal and the other female residents of Dalal’s apartment experience a sense of purposelessness as the war continues, they utilize the war to construct relationships as a community to strengthen each other, as in the case of Umm Mazin who fosters camaraderie among the women in the building. The women who occupy Dalal’s apartment also try to become productive members of a war-torn-Iraqi society. In the novel Khedairi creates a new frame of reference in which everything is identified through its relationship with a woman. For instance, rather than referring to Abu Ghayeb as her uncle, Dalal calls him “my aunt’s husband” (Khedairi 2). Dalal's building as well was known as the "teacher's block" as a reference to Umm Ghayeb's profession before war and then as "Umm Mazin's building" after Umm Mazin's movement to it (Ibid 26). This is significant as the important figures defining things and giving their meanings are the previously portrayed secondary characters. Each one of

the major characters witnesses a struggle for survival or a deterioration and then disappearance through the course of the novel's events.

Ilham, a nurse and one of Dalal's neighbours, is the first female character whose trauma comes in blood and flesh to the readers in the form of loneliness, financial need and cancer. Her career makes her the closest to the catastrophes of her people during war. Although she can't bear the many recent sights of death, injuries and deformations, she tries to cope with her new surroundings. Ilham seems to be strong and independent, but deep inside she wants to "escape from the hospital, to get away from the image of the little ones when they die" (Khedairi 79). Images of sick and dying Iraqi children were everywhere and well known to everyone. Information on child mortality, according to the Iraqi Ministry of Health and the UNICEF, proved that sanctions had claimed the lives of more than a million Iraqi children since 1990. Al-Jawaheri supports this in her book stating:

A joint survey by UNICEF and Iraq's Ministry of Health estimated that during the period from 1990 to 1997, round 500,000 children under five had died. More cautious studies by foreign researches also showed horrific rises in infant mortality, malnutrition and disease [...] as a result of the Gulf war and sanctions. (123)

The economic crisis weakened health care systems in Iraq and turned hospitals into grievous places for patients and also for health workers, the majority of whom were women.

Ilham sufferings are more prominent after discovering her cancer and the consequences that follow. During the sanctions there is no place for the weak and the ill, so she is under the threat of terminating her contract with the hospital if her illness is uncovered. The question for her and for the reader is where she will get the money for the operation and the chemotherapy treatment in a country where securing primal human needs becomes hectic.

All her life Ilham is tortured by the feeling that she is rejected because she has been abandoned by her Parisian mother when she was a six-month-old baby. The French woman was unable to have any connection with the Iraqi land and returned to France. After that Ilham knew

that her mother married “one of her own kind” (Khedairi 59) and forgot anything related to this Middle Eastern country including her daughter. In Ilham’s imagination, her mother is happy in her luxurious environment and there is no need to occupy her time and mind with the Orient or even with the conditions of her sick daughter in a war-torn-country. Ilham curses her mother telling Dalal: “I bet you, she’s sitting in a Parisian café right now sipping a hot chocolate” (Ibid 80). The relationship between Ilham and her mother is a replica of the one between the indifferent West and the suffering East and a representation of Samuel Huntington's infamous clash of civilizations and the great divisions among humankind.

Her sense of being rejected drastically affects her psychological conditions. Moreover, her illness with the hardships of her country destroy her soul turning her into a void structure, exactly like the statue of Shahrazad in Abu Nuwas street. Ilham draws a comparison between herself and Shahrazad statue: “I wish I was like her [...] Actually, I’m like her in some ways: the hard solid exterior. Bronze on the outside, hollow on the inside [...] Can you imagine how strange it feels to be a structure filled with emptiness? Just air going in, and air coming out” (Khedairi 81). Her life, like many Iraqi women, is exhausting and for her the fight for survival out of this dilemma seems endless.

As the novel progresses, Ilham is “no longer of any use” (Kedairi 132). Her role fades away and suddenly disappears not because she died out of cancer but because she was imprisoned. She was accused of selling human organs to a butcher. Khedairi does not clarify whether she is innocent or guilty and if it has anything to do with her illness and economic hardships. Her end is shocking, gloomy and vague to everyone like the conditions of her country. All what everybody knows as Saad expresses it that they may never see her again. Dalal predictably replies: “It’s quite likely that there will be another group of women that we won’t be hearing of from now on” (Ibid 132).

It seems that Dalal's prediction comes true. "Mouth, nose, and eye ... he who talks will die" is Umm Mazin's new spell to protect those living in the building from all harms after

Ilham's accident (Khedairi 133). She asks her assistant Badriya to purify all the floors using one of her potions called "the termination of all sorrows" not knowing that the following sorrow is hers. Umm Mazin's sorrow comes in the form of a missile that took out the left wing of her flat. She was greatly injured and could not move for weeks while Badriya was in a state of shock. Till fixing her apartment she lived in Ilham's empty flat which is ominous. Weeks after the accident, Umm Mazin was imprisoned as she was accused of causing physical and mental harm to some women who used her potions. Readers will get to know that her illiterate Badriya sold the wrong potions to the wrong customers during her illness. Umm Mazin is the second character to disappear from the neighborhood and the novel.

It is surprising that Umm Mazin has not predicted this at all; Dalal explains: "In these situations, Umm Mazin merely says, 'people follow their destinies, they have no choice'" (Khedairi 132), Her explanation of the mutilation of life is an indirect embodiment of existentialism, existential nihilism in particular that John Fowles<sup>2</sup> describes in *The Collector*: "I think we are just insects, we live a bit then die and that's the lot. There is no mercy in things [...] There's nothing" (277). As Umm Mazin is forced to surrender her career, Umm Ghayeb replaces her as a dominant woman in the professional sphere.

Dalal's aunt is after generating income as the economic sanctions tighten. Under sanctions, informal economic activities became a phenomenon. The informal network often relies on acquaintances. Women engaged in this type of activity often express exhaustion and frustration because of the double burden of household work and production responsibility. Khedairi introduces Dalal's aunt as sweeping Abu Ghayeb's scales, which fall from his body due to his psoriasis. "Despite the traditionally feminine act of sweeping that this moment captures, it also draws attention to the physical decay of Abu Ghayeb, whose psoriasis signals a symbolic loss of strength" (Minoff 43). As a beekeeper, when Abu Ghayeb explains to Dalal that the male bees "have shorter bodies and no stinger" (Khedairi 67), rendering them less productive than their female counterparts, he allegorizes the uniquely Iraqi female power to rebuild Iraqi society. Moreover, as Dalal tells her aunt about the bees, Umm Ghayeb explains that the death of the queen bee is regarded as a state of chaos in the colony, which leads the male worker bees to be

called false mothers. The gender role reversal in bee colonies following the chaos of the queen bee death mirrors the shift in gender roles that the chaos of war brings about in Iraqi society.

Umm Ghayeb is a prominent character when it comes to the comparison between Iraq's "Days of Plenty" and Iraq's "Days of Sanctions" and how this affect women's psychological, marital and economic status. Khedairi fluctuates between the present and the past to depict the deterioration in Umm Ghayeb's way in treating her husband and her frenzied concerns to shield her family against the sanctions' aftermath.

During the "Days of Plenty" Dalal's aunt, as a teacher of arts and craft, was full of passion. She used to wait for her husband's arrival every afternoon in his orange Volvo:

When Abu Ghayeb comes and sits down, she quickly brings him his comfortable slippers and takes away his outdoor shoes, and withdraws with complacency, as if tucking away the noise of his elegant shoes in her pocket.

She reaches out with a smile and takes the bag of shopping he brought back with him. (Khedairi 19)

The house was full of all kinds of foods and drinks. Yet, Khedairi brings the readers back to the "Days of Sanctions" as Dalal bemoans: "Today, the fridge doesn't get filled, not even halfway, and the car is no longer in the garage" (Ibid 19). Besides, Umm Ghayeb no longer gives attention to Abu Ghayeb or even to his presence and interests.

As a seamstress after the sanctions, Umm Ghayeb is totally absorbed in fabrics, threads and collecting buttons like a drug addict. This is her only source of money. Thus, anything related to it is sacred and untouchable. Her house is no longer known as "the teacher's block" but "the House of buttons":

She has a huge number, see-through plastic boxes where she keeps her precious buttons. No one is allowed to approach her possessions. Each box has a small

sticker indicating its contexts. Plastic buttons, wooden buttons, metal buttons [...] Sometimes she writes on the box the type of button it contains: teardrop, circular, cuboid, reed. On others she writes in a clear hand the occasion the type of button would suit: wedding, graduation, mourning. (Khedairi 21)

However, Umm Ghayeb's madness about her job can be explained differently by many critics. For example Al-Jawaheri concludes that the experience of war opens up unprecedented spaces for the women to renegotiate their roles and reconstruct their identities. Natalya Minoff also believes in her study on Iraq that "[w]ith their male family members and loved ones away on the battlegrounds [or incapable of supporting their families], Iraqi women took advantage of their absence to assert themselves in unique ways" (15). This deconstructs the colonial view of Third World women as fragile, ignorant and helpless; a view that Riverbend sarcastically mentions: "I can see the image now - my cousins roaming the opening of our cave, holding clubs and keeping a wary eye on the female members of their clan [...] and us cowed, frightened females all gathered in groups, murmuring behind our veils" (92). Unlike the stereotypical Western representation, Iraqi women capitalize upon the assumed feminine roles in a way that award them influence and importance.

To the new Umm Ghayeb, the role of her job cancels her husband's role as the supporter. That's why she replaces anything related to her husband or his presence with buttons. Boxes filled with buttons literally colonize Abu Ghayeb's shelves, wardrobe and underneath his bed and he is literally "drowning in a sea of beads, buttons and threads", as he angrily objects in one of his quarrels with Umm Ghayeb (Khedairi 22). Abu Ghayeb is aware of his wife's transformation, and may be jealous of her new character and this is clear in his actions. On one occasion he throws a handful of melon seeds at her saying, "Here you are; dry them, paint them and make buttons out of them" (Ibid 22).

Khedairi's Umm Ghayeb is equipped with the power to survive and, unlike the other figures associated with absence, shows the shift of gender roles that the period of war and sanctions brings about:

As the chaos and carnage of wartime disrupts all sense of normalcy, the female characters use this lapse in order to abandon their traditionally female roles and seek empowerment [...] Despite Abu Ghayeb's attempts to relegate his wife to the home, she, too, succeeds in her economic endeavors, eventually superseding her husband in her monetary earnings. (Minoff 41)

Because of his failure attempts to maintain his role as the dominant member of the household, he becomes a stubborn and a difficult to please person. He lost all ties with his wife and this consequently affects their marital relationship.

Because war disrupts the conventional gender roles, the traditional marital relationships have gone out of fashion for the Iraqis as Uncle Sami puts it (Khedairi 113). It is Umm Ghayeb who tries to force her husband to follow her instructions while he resists this new threat. Their marriage becomes a relationship built on one concept "who will control whom?". In one of their arguments, Umm Ghayeb says:

"I suggest that you close down this apiary before we lose even more in expenses"

"Have you gone mad, woman?" [...] He asks her "Where did you get this money"

"From my work, of course?"

She then adds, "My work, which generates a speedy income"

[...]

"My profession will be the winner in the end, you'll see" [Abu Ghayeb adds]

[...]

He walks past her as she follows him with her eyes, "You'll fail" [she tells him].

(Ibid 97, 98)

The previous discussion is like the way the deaf and the dumb communicate. Neither of them is ready to understand the other. When Abu Ghayeb describes his wife as the "nectar provider" (Ibid 98), he unintentionally positions her as the queen of the bee hive who is the mother of all and thus positions himself as the male bee who has no other job but fertilizing the queen. One of the paradoxes of the sanctions on Iraqi society, as Al-Jawaheri mentions is that while family was the focus of everyday life, financial and/or emotional support become increasingly difficult among its members. For both of them, the previous strong familial ties have weakened.

Umm and Abu Ghayeb's challenge extends to forcing Dalal to follow one's path rather than the other's. For example, Abu Ghayeb accompanies Dalal to the tennis court where he raises his bees to teach her to be his successor. There, in one of the windows in front of the tennis court, Umm Ghayeb is watching them jealously. He is stealing her assistant. Dalal in this situation is playing the role of the worker bee; she must work here and there as she does not want to take anyone's side. For them, each wants to have the upper hand. Abu Ghayeb wants to preserve his fading control as a husband while Umm Ghayeb feels her new power as the breadwinner of the house. Abu Ghayeb believes that once he begins selling honey and becomes the provider of his family's daily expenses, he will regain the upper hand in the household.

The appearance of another woman in Abu Ghayeb's life represents the peak of their troubled relationship. She is Randa, a Jordanian woman whom he met in an international fair discussing scientific papers that deal with agricultural education, crop yields and pest prevention. Abu Ghayeb finds in Randa many things in common including the psoriasis. The reader discovers that Umm Ghayeb's worries because of the new intruder is not out of her passion to Abu Ghayeb but out of her passion to her new self.

Khedairi represents many Iraqi women through Umm Ghayeb's character; women who were stereotypical wives during time of stability and comfort and who accepted to be number two after their husbands. But because of the sanctions and bearing responsibility, they find unlimited inner potentials that help them survive during traumatic wars. Because of this, they discover the new feelings of independence and control as providers of their families. In other words, Iraqi women find out that they have the power to overcome catastrophes without the help of anyone; they are not fragile and not followers. They are no more number two and they will not let this feeling go. That is why when Umm Ghayeb senses the threat that her husband will be out of her "circle of control" after his relative professional success and the appearance of Randa she outrages. She resists shrinking to her prior position as the shadow of her husband. Umm Ghayeb expresses this long-lived burden saying:

I wasn't jealous of her specifically, but I was jealous of the people and the reasons that made you become the person you are [...] you've adapted in your work, you've fought against adverse circumstances, and you're always optimistic. On top

of that, you're able to get around without any hindrance. You represent to me everything that I'm unable to become. (Khedairi 170)

Umm Ghayeb is not jealous of Randa but of Abu Ghayeb himself and of the traditions and the circumstances that hinder back women and privilege men.

However, by the end of the novel Umm Ghayeb meets the traumatic fate of many Iraqi women after the arrest of her husband. He was accused of selling Iraqi paintings abroad. Umm Ghayeb and Dalal lose any contact with him and don't know where he is. With the disappearance of her supporter during the "Days of Plenty" and her competitor during the "Days of Sanctions", Umm Ghayeb also fades away. She loses her mind and she loses the meaning of life by the end of the novel: "My aunt is standing on chair facing the big window. [...] She thinks she is tracing out the clouds [...] Her face has aged several years"(Khedairi 208). Umm Ghayeb meets the end of her stated customers. After the loss of her husband, she similarly suffers from visual hallucinations and becomes psychologically unstable. She loses any contact with time. For her there is no way out of this trauma. Dalal describes her aunt in the final pages as fragmented or, as what Robert C. Solomon writes in his book *Existentialism* (1974), possessed by "a sense of disorientation, confusion, or dread in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world" (1, 2). She does not remember whether Dalal has graduated or abandoned her studies. That's why she keeps asking her, "Have you graduated?" and "How are we going to survive" (Khedairi 209). Dalal comforts her aunt by telling her that she has found a job in a warehouse:

She spreads out her prayer mat facing the clouds that hang up in front of her, and starts to kneel.

After she kneels down for the second time, she suddenly turns toward me and asks distractedly, "Where is this place". (Ibid 209)

By the end of the novel Umm Ghayeb surrenders, as she cannot bear all the psychological, economic and social burdens set upon her. Finally, all what she hopes for is to set herself free from her absurd world and to trace the clouds. Although Dalal is the narrator and the protagonist of *Absent*, the psychological analysis of her aunt's character during the "Days of Plenty" and after, her ups and downs with her husband, together with her unintentional fight to get rid of the traditional patriarchal clutches through unleashing her potentials, and her final surrender are very enlightening to the researcher.

Readers can sense the postcolonial feminist characteristics in Khedairi's text if not explicitly then implicitly. The endurance, survival and sufferings of Third World Iraqi women and their ability to face the tough conditions are representative of the way *Absent* and other Iraqi women narratives convey their feminist impulses: "It confirms their independence and power, and if these women weaken in times of crisis, so do the men in their narratives; even more so than the women"(Kashou 117). But it must be mentioned that Iraqi women writers present the male counterpart as women's husbands, sons, brothers, fathers, and lovers. The men are not considered as their enemy, as this is not their goal. The real enemy is war itself and its lawlessness, which produces the beastly features of men.

"Witnesses confirmed that a small bundle was ejected from the front seat windows [...] The bundle settled in the sand; it was me" (Khedairi 1). These few lines introduce Dalal to the reader as an ejected person from her surroundings. Her description when she survived her parents' accidents as 'bundle' and 'ejected' foreshadows her role in the novel. Dalal also sees herself as a "figure hanging in the middle of a mirror in a darkened room" (Ibid 12). This dark suspended depiction of herself indicates the way in which Dalal's presence is defined, by her absence.

She is an invisible and incomplete person with an illness that caused her crooked mouth: "My lips were drawn across to the right side of my face as though someone were pulling them with an invisible string" (Khedairi 12). Khedairi employs Dalal's crooked mouth as an echo of her voicelessness. During the "Days of Plenty" and the "Days of Sanctions" her interests and needs are of no importance to anyone. Everyone comes first then she comes later:

Everyone was too busy with his or her daily routine [...] My aunt paid no attention to my predicament [...] Abu Ghayeb used to go out on expeditions [...] His mind registers all these places and dates, but when it comes to me, he's oblivious to the passage of time! [...] Each year he deferred my operation [...] Then the war started [...] It's too late. (Ibid 14)

There is no attention at all to her physical and thus psychological needs. Dalal herself sacrifices everything, even her education, to please others, but she forgets to stop and ask herself "What about me? What about my mouth?"

Dalal allows the stream of events to direct her life without any attempt to turn the wheel and take another path. As a student of French literature, Dalal seems to be a brilliant student and a good reader that Ilham advises her to start taking things seriously regarding her future:

The time will come when the Western nations will return to our country to reconstruct it. In the near future, we'll need a lot of interpreters and translators [...] pay attention to the team of the United Nations inspectors looking for what they call "weapon of mass destruction" [...] You must learn all the scientific terms that are used in the fields of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons (Khedairi 84).

Dalal's answer is "I'll give your suggestion some thought" (Ibid 84). Of course, Dalal's promise to Ilham becomes too far by the passage of time. Instead, she surrenders to others' plans for her. In one of her visits to Uncle Sami, she tells him, "I'm weary of everyone in this building trying to teach me his or her profession. I'll end up having learned several trades, but still no prospects [...] I didn't expect that very soon someone else would also be offering to teach me his profession" (Ibid 78). This person turns out to be Saad the hairdresser as she begins to work as his assistant while also working with her uncle at the apiary and with her aunt in sewing clothes. Dalal speaks for educated women who constitute a large scale of the Iraqi population. These women experience pressure more than housewives as they deal with tough circumstances inside and outside their homes or what is known as double trauma. As a consequence, many women are forced to leave either their job or their education. Like the bee worker, Dalal works hard to satisfy the others and contribute to the household's finances till she finally abandons her study, and the dream of being a promising translator seems unattainable.

Years later Dalal works in a warehouse like a machine that does not think nor feel. During her work there she saw the United Nation inspectors for weapons of mass destruction and instead of being there as an interpreter she was just watching them from a distance, gazing out of the window, acting once again as an ejected bundle from the scene.

## The informative technique and the fragmented notion of truth:

Fiction allows Iraqi women writers to use their imagination but for the sake of the narration of events as insiders. At the same time, fiction does not have the restrictions that nonfiction narratives impose on its writers. So, "imagination, their maternal instincts in protecting the human side of their nation, and their feminist impulses that reveals strength in the female Iraqi voice all provide a realistic and a crucial perspective to the Iraqi national narrative" (Kashou 100). Writing gives the Iraqi women the power to formulate their characters and society in fiction canon. Their sub-narratives allow the readers all over the world to have a different valuable insight to the situation and to unmask the vague "Other". Khedairi as an insider writer feels that it is her mission to use her words against "the tyranny of globalizing discourses" to call for "an insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (Foucault, *Power* 83). She wants to inform the global readers of Iraq's situation after the Western 'peaceful' invasion for democracy. That is why she mingles news here and there with the fictional events of the novel. *Absent* aims at presenting the daily sufferings of the ordinary and the marginalized Iraqis that counter the pretexts of the one voiced ideology sponsoring 'truth'.

There are many examples of *Absent's* informative technique as when Dalal reads a piece of news in one of her visits to Umm Mazin:

Beside me is a young woman immersed in a newspaper. I inch my way closer so that I can share the news [...] I delve into its pages gratefully. "When the city of Basra was bombed in the early days of the conflict, a large number of people died [...] The cloud of pollutants covered an area of 1.5 square miles annihilating all plant and animal life [...] it eventually seeped through into the underground wells of drinking water [...]" (Khedairi 55).

However, Khedairi does not mess things up by transforming into a news reporter. She intelligently keeps the balance between entertaining and informing her readers. She mixes her informative technique with black humour. To exemplify, her mouthpiece narrates: "we hear reports from major cities in the north that Sulaimaniya and Arbil have been affected by daily power cuts [...] Duhok has no electricity at all except for a single generator". That's why people

leaving in the provinces "have started calling Baghdad, 'Paris the city of lights'" (Ibid 102). As if Khedairi believes in the Arab proverb, "A woe makes one cry, another makes one laugh".

In an ironical dialogue between Dalal and Abu Ghayeb, Khedairi tackles Nietzsche's belief how the highest values have the lowliest 'origins', how morality is rooted in immorality and how all values and knowledge are manifestations of the will to power. Foucault, after him, exposes the links between power and domination on the one hand and truth and knowledge on the other. The dialogue illustrates this crucial relation in Khedairi's attempt to refute the pretext of the Allies' war on Iraq:

Abu Ghayeb calls out from the bedroom, "What is the latest news, Dalal; what are they saying?"

[...] "The United States declares that the war it waged in early 1991 was a 'clean war'. 'Smart weapons' were used that struck their targets accurately".

Abu Ghayeb laughs as he says, "Yes, 'intelligent missiles.' They stop at a red light on their way to the explosion". (65)

With their intelligence, they deprived a whole nation of their rights to live a normal life. Moreover, *Absent* ruins the Allies' claims that the reason for their war on Iraq is to save the Iraqis and found the democratic life in Iraq through uncovering the barbaric and illegal actions of the attacking troops against the Iraqi soldiers and the citizens like using the napalm to burn the soldiers. Abu Ghayeb through usage of black humour wished that Umm Ghayed can make protective outfits to the Iraqi army.

In other cases, Khedairi tends to use intertextuality from books to present to some readers and to remind others with the horrific incidents that Iraqis have gone through during war. She copies Geoff Simons in *The Scourging of Iraq: Sanctions, Law and Natural Justice*<sup>3</sup>:

Between 16 January and 27 February (1991) some 88,000 tons of bombs were dropped on Iraq, an explosive tonnage judged equivalent to 7 Hiroshima-size atomic bombs. Thus for a period of the war Iraq was subjected to the equivalent of 1 atomic bomb a week, a scale of destruction that has no parallels in the history of warfare. (24)

She also quotes part of Anthony Anrove's in *Iraq Under Siege: The Deadly Impact of Sanctions and War*<sup>4</sup> admitting, "We have devastated this country, so its level of childhood mortality is now worse than that of Sudan"(79). It is noticeable that Khedairi borrows parts from Western texts to support her to falsify the Western media, the European and American pretexts behind the Allies' war. By that way she proves that some Western intellectuals who represent part in the Western society object what is happening in Iraq and thus she avoids generalization, and her rationality proves her work to be unprejudiced.

Khedairi follows this informative technique through the camera of Uncle Sami (Abu Raid) and the pen of his deceased wife: "My wife documented the daily events [...] in her own words; I do it using images" (75). Umm Raid's was not a journalist, but an ordinary housewife who documented her fears in her "Umm Raid's Diary". This makes her words about what is happening in Iraq authentic and unbiased as it has no other intentions but mirroring reality. She did not write for anyone but for herself and she did not take the side of anyone but the ordinary people to whom she belongs. Dalal reads on the first pages from the diary: "Twenty thousand houses, flats and residential complexes were destroyed and one hundred thousand palm trees were killed by the bombardment. I heard that a woman had to have a caesarean section without an anesthetic" (Khedairi 61). The diarist also described how the factory of household cleaning and the plastic factory were bombed and the environmental consequences that resulted. Although Umm Raid was killed in the war, the survival of her diary suggests the value of the written word as a form of art.

Regarding Uncle Sami, with his camera, he regarded himself the master of the universe and a special person. He reached the extent that he, as he narrates to Dalal, "was the only one who possessed the truth, in my little box that recorded the moment without any falsity [...] I was mistaken [...] I became pretentious and considered myself superior to the rest of humanity, and in particularly to my wife " (Khedairi 76). Through Uncle Sami's words, Khedairi refutes the illusion of the hegemonic one voiced perspective possessing "singular true story". He discovers that in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the world, people must open their ears and minds to different voices that interpret events and circumstances. Khedairi believes that the words of Uncle Sami's wife and the pictures of his camera must work together and not separately

to give a full and clear understanding of the events. Through Uncle Sami's story. Khedairi refers that there is nothing called one's singular true story but multiple layers of context.

Ironically, Uncle Sami realizes that he was wrong when he lost his wife and his sight. After reading his amateur wife's diary, he found out that his professional camera that never lies can lie as "[i]t depends on where you have positioned yourself" (Khedairi 77). Because of his career as a photographer, Uncle Sami did not give himself time or chance to see behind the scene or evaluate his perspective, inner feelings, or as he calls it, his 'position' towards the surroundings that his camera was recording. He only would wish to record the moment with his camera as he valued himself by the level of his professional success. On the other hand, his wife used the power of her pen to express her inner feelings and interpretation to what she was witnessing. Because writing was not her profession but her desire, she only wrote when she felt that she was in the right position and at the right time. Uncle Sami reached his wife's level of vision when he lost his sight and so his career. His vision is converted from the outside to the inside. In other words, he gives attention to his position and to what is behind the scene: "Now I only see what's happening inside me, I'm now closer to myself, and I've come to understand it" (Ibid 76). With his blindness, Uncle Sami acquires "the third eye"<sup>5</sup>.

### *Absent's end: A new beginning:*

*Absent's end* launches many questions concerning Khedairi's belief regarding Iraq's future and women's role to reconstruct it. Does Khedairi surrender to the pessimistic vision of the future? Is her novel a call to change the status quo in order not to meet her characters' fate? Sometimes people have to experience full destruction in order to concentrate on building. Similarly, the novel's end suggests that Khedairi does not lament and surrender to a fate that might be cruel and violent.

The novel ends with Dalal trying to teach a teenaged newspaper distributor called Hamada how to read: "If you can't read, how will you know what the world wants from us? [...] Repeat after me: alif, baa, taa. ..." (Khedairi 211). The end that Khedairi chooses gives many

messages. Khedairi's protagonist realizes the connection between power and knowledge. If you attain knowledge and education, you are the one who will have power. You are the one who will force the way others regard and respect you and not the other way round. So, the way for rebuilding Iraq and giving it its voice among nations is through educating the future generations. Another message that Khedairi gives her readers is that despite Iraqi women's hardships, they try to contribute to the societal reconstruction of Iraq through giving the future generations the chances that they could not have and the dreams they could not fulfill and the lives they could not live. The Iraqi women see in the future generation the persons they could not become. That is why Dalal who abandoned her education and lost everything in her life will give life to Hamada. Khedairi's pen tells Iraqis and non Iraqis that the way out of Iraq's full destruction is in brand new beginnings, "alif, baa, taa. ...".

This research questions the relation between hegemonic power, the production of certain knowledge and truth in dealing with the Iraqi war. It is concerned with the interlink between the destruction of the nation and the destruction of women's psyches. Khedairi's *Absent* provides an important contribution to read and understand the fiction of Iraqi women and the themes of war beyond the front line and into the homes of the Iraqis. Belonging to writings for long regarded as the periphery of the literary canon or the sub-narrative, she counteracts the gendered stereotypes that all women in the non-Western world tend to be housed into. She uses the power of her pen to write about the story of suffering that her nation experience and her people endure. By that way she gives them a face, a name, a life and a human touch they have been deprived of in other narratives.

### Notes

- 1- Subaltern is a term first used by the Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci to refer to the proletariat. It is then used in post-colonial studies especially by Gayatri Chakravorty

Spivak to refer to groups in formerly colonized countries who were marginalized and were not part of the hegemonic power; hence, their voices were not heard.

- 2- The author who is regarded as both modernist and postmodernist aims out of his novel to depict the danger of dividing people into "the good" and "the many", and attaining power.
- 3- A 1996 book about the impact of the Gulf War and the economic embargo on the Iraqis. Simons shows in his book how the war violated all the protocols that tries to preserve the Iraqis humanities and primitive needs of food and medicine.
- 4- Arnov's 2003 book examines the tendency to invade Iraq as part of Bush's war on terrorism with no clear evidence. The book gives due concern to the children of Iraq in the face of such horror.
- 5- It is a mystical concept of type of vision that provides enlightenment and full understanding beyond ordinary sight.

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