

**American War in Iraq:  
A Postcolonial Ecocritical Reading  
of Selected Poems  
by Dunya Mikhail**

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## **Abstract**

The dissertation basically aims to apply postcolonial ecocriticism to the literary works of the Iraqi-American poet and writer, Dunya Mikhail, in her books, *The Iraqi Nights*, *A Diary of a Wave outside the Sea*, *In Her feminine Sign* and *The War Works Hard*, after the 2003 American War in Iraq. Applying ecocriticism to her works reveals that the concept of colonization can be applied to non-human nature which has been violated and devastated in Iraq after war. Moreover, her works emphasize the linkage between the ecological decay and the social decadence of the Iraqi society. Mikhail confirms the interrelatedness between the ecological destruction and the eradication of Iraqis' culture and identity. She presents the truthful images of the imperial actions that have led to the environmental deterioration in Iraq in many of her poems, such as "The War Works Hard," "Innana," "America," "An Urgent Call" and many others. In addition, her works shed light upon the social, moral, geographical and cultural legacy of colonialism.

## الحرب الأمريكية في العراق:

### قراءة نقدية بيئية بعد استعمارية في قصائد مختارة لدنيا ميخائيل

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#### مستخلص:

تهدف الرسالة بصفة أساسية إلي تطبيق النقد البيئي بعد الإستعماري علي الأعمال الأدبية للكاتبة والشاعرة العراقية - الأمريكية (دنيا ميخائيل) في كتبها، *الليالي العراقية، يوميات موجة خارج البحر، الغربية بتائها المربوطة والحرب تعمل بجد*، في فترة ما بعد الحرب الأمريكية في العراق عام ٢٠٠٣. ان تطبيق النقد البيئي في اعمال ميخائيل يكشف ان مصطلح الاستعمار يمكن تطبيقه علي البيئة غير البشرية التي تم إنتهاكها وتدميرها في العراق بعد الحرب. وعلاوة علي ذلك، فإن أعمالها تؤكد الصلة ما بين الإضمحلال البيئي والتدهور الإجتماعي للمجتمع العراقي، وتؤكد ميخائيل العلاقة الوثيقة ما بين الدمار البيئي ومحو ثقافة وهوية الشعب العراقي وتقدم صور صادقة للأفعال الإستعمارية التي أدت الي التدهور البيئي في العراق في العديد من قصائدها مثل "الحرب تعمل بجد"، "اينانا"، "أمريكا"، "نداء عاجل"، والعديد من الأعمال الأخرى، بالإضافة الي ذلك، فإن أعمالها تلقي الضوء علي الميراث الاجتماعي والأخلاقي والجغرافي والثقافي للاستعمار.

Applying postcolonial ecocriticism to Mikhail's poetry reveals her ecological approaches and emphasis on the physical and metaphysical concepts of the land. In her works, Mikhail presents the images of ruin and devastation of the Iraqi ecosystem after being conquered.

In Mikhail's poem, "The War Works Hard," she writes in a sarcastic style to condemn the American invasion of Iraq. Simawe et al comment: "her vision, for instance, in the title poem "The War Works Hard" is unparalleled in its quiet and therefore more effective subversion of war ideologies" (x). In that poem, Mikhail handles both the social and ecological consequences of war, highlighting the violation and ruin of the Iraqi landscape.

In the initial lines, she mockingly praises the war for its damage and devastation. The war was personified as being an immensely destructive power obliterating all the physical manifestations from the Iraqi environment. In addition, the war brings the human disasters and tragedy to the Iraqi people. It is responsible for sounding the alarms, moving ambulances to everywhere, swinging "corpses" through the air and rotating

"stretchers" around the injured. The war enables mothers to shed tears. It is also able to dig under the ruined land and dislodge its hidden things. Mikhail writes:

How magnificent the war is!

How eager

and efficient!

Early in the morning

it wakes up the sirens

and dispatches ambulances

to various places

swings corpses through the air

rolls stretchers to the wounded

summons rain

from the eyes of mothers

digs into the earth

dislodging many things

from under the ruins...

Some are lifeless and glistening

others are pale and still throbbing... (1-16)

In the preceding lines, Mikhail relies heavily on the visual imagery in the quick penetration of the Iraqi landscape. Mikhail tends to use contradictory images: "lifeless and glistening" and "pale and still throbbing" to imply the disorderly chaos of war and the remaining glimpse of hope. Mikhail's poetic lines are short, quick and tense, evoking attention and focusing sharply on the catastrophic results of war. In addition, these lines speed up the events of the poem that correspond to the frenzy of war. Pierre Joris argues: "Here is the new Iraqi poetry: a poetry of urgency that has no time for the traditional (in Arab poetry) flowers of rhetoric; terse, unadorned, stripped & ironic, Dunya Mikhail's lines move at the speed of events-be it war or love . . . ." (qtd. in Simawe et al. 63). Mikhail continues:

It produces the most questions  
in the minds of children  
entertains the gods  
by shooting fireworks and missiles  
into the sky  
sows mines in the fields

and reaps punctures and blisters  
urges families to emigrate  
stands beside the clergymen  
as they curse the devil  
(poor devil, he remains  
with one hand in the searing fire)... (17-28)

In the preceding lines, Mikhail continues to use her visual images in the description of the unrelenting horror of war. It is able to confuse children and entertain gods because of its brutal force of shooting "fireworks" and "missiles" into the sky, laying "mines" in the fields, causing "punctures," and "blisters," urging families to immigrate and supporting the clergymen's claims about the devil.

Mikhail's usage of the action verbs in her poem, such as "wake up," "dispatches," "swings," "rolls" and "produce," personifies the war and gives it human characteristics. Moreover, these action verbs increase the extended effects of war. In the following lines, Mikhail still examines the dreadful effects of war as it continues to destroy everything in its path without mercy:

The war continues working, day and night.

.....

it contributes to the industry

of artificial limbs

provides food for flies

.....

achieves equality

between killer and killed

.....

builds new houses

for the orphans

invigorates the coffin makers

gives grave diggers

a pat on the back

.....

It works with unparalleled diligence!

Yet no one gives it

a word of praise. (29-52)

As has already been mentioned, the war becomes a source of inspiration for tyrants to make long speeches. It awards medals to generals and adds new themes to poets. The war results in the death industry and environmental disintegration that are represented in building new houses for the orphans. Thus, the Iraqi environment has been transformed into a suitable place for the 'proliferation of flies' and the 'production of prosthetic limbs.'

In the preceding lines, Mikhail reconfirms her views, which have been mentioned in one of her interviews, that the killer and the killed are equal because "the killed one dies physically and the killer dies morally" ("Dunya Mikhail: 'The War Works Hard"). Mikhail concludes her poem with a sarcastic tone that the war shows its great diligence. Nonetheless, no one praises it.

Mikhail writes her poem, "America," in a deep sense of anguish and distress that is imbued with a longing for her homeland. She has suffered from the identity conflict as being both an ally and enemy of both countries. Mikhail mourns for her lost country which has been scattered in the midst of war and destruction. John Freeman notably views: "Mikhail signs of the

longing and undoing of exile, mourns the loss of her language, describes its gendering and the re-engineering on her tongue, a poet's most important muscle. Delicate, beautiful, day-stopping" ("In Her Feminine Sign"). Mikhail says:

Please don't ask me, America

I don't remember

on which street

with whom

or under which star

Don't ask me

I don't remember

the colours of the people

or their signatures (1-9)

As being an exiled poet, Mikhail argues that all Iraqis are spiritually exiled in their homeland. They forsake the glamour of their country. Mikhail emphasizes Said's quotation that "for the native, the history of his or her colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss to an outsider of the local place, whose concrete geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and

somehow restored" (*Nationalism* 77). Therefore, she searches for the geographical identity of Iraqis as they live alienated and isolated from their environment. In her following lines, Mikhail depicts the Iraqi people living in death. So, she is not able to recognize their names and faces or distinguish their flags, language and writings. She cannot determine whether sleeping in their houses or being homeless, sleeping on sidewalks and in airports:

I don't remember if they had  
our faces  
and our dreams  
if they were singing  
or not  
writing from the left or right  
or not writing at all  
sleeping in houses  
on sidewalks  
or in airports  
making love or not making love

Please don't ask me, America

I don't remember their names

or their birthplaces

.....

Don't ask me . . .

I don't remember

what time it was

or what kind of weather

language

or flag (10-31)

Mikhail hints at the Iraqi people who depart this life worthlessly without any consideration of their struggle for survival or any interest in their mortalities. In the following lines, Mikhail investigates the blurred Iraqi landscape and the lack of contact between Iraqis and their environment as she cannot determine whether having any luggage or not while departing their country:

Don't ask me . . .

I don't remember

how long they walked under the sun  
or how many died  
I don't remember  
the shapes of the boats  
or the number of ports  
... how many suitcases they carried  
or left behind (32-40)

In her lines, Mikhail arouses nostalgia for her country in a more profound pictorial description which seems amazing in its broken syntactic structure that enhances the dynamic process of the sensory and intellectual apprehension of the miserable conditions of Iraqis and their country.

Mikhail's usage of the kinesthetic imageries along her poem, such as "singing," "writing," "walked" and "carried," produces a dynamic movement, enhancing the perception of the Iraqi people and their land. Commenting on her poem, Deborah Campbell argues that Mikhail's poetry is "a brilliant poetic exploration of language, gender, place, and time, seen through the mirror of exile" ("In Her Feminine Sign").

At the end of her poem, Mikhail implicitly rebukes the American colonization schemes. She disproves their claims of spreading democracy and freedom in Iraq; they have spread murder and terror otherwise. Mikhail urges America to increase its concerns for human rights, giving its hand to the oppressed. She prompts it to host the Iraqi refugees who have fled from the war zones without questioning them. In her last lines, Mikhail wonders about the benefits of America's invasion of the world while losing its moral values. She writes:

Stop your questioning, America  
and offer your hand  
to the tired  
on the other shore  
Offer it without questions  
or waiting lists  
What good is it to gain the whole world  
if you lose the Soul, America? (43-50)

In her poem, "Airplane," Mikhail characterizes the images of ruin and destruction to emphasize the colonizers' profligate and

felonious deeds against the Iraqi ecosystem and people. The colonizers have left Baghdad to their homeland, not taking into their consideration the magnitude of the destruction they have left behind. Mikhail thereby refers to the 'environmental racism' of the colonizers who view that the world's environment has to be conquered and controlled according to "their superego." They consider that their "homeland's mist is intrinsically superior to bright sunshine, as it is green to ocher. The mother country thus combines only positive values, good climate, harmonious landscape, social discipline, and exquisite liberty, beauty, morality and logic" (104) in Memmi's words.

In her poem, Mikhail explores the manifestations of violating the Iraqi land, as represented in the images of "accumulated clouds" that are identical to the "corpses" of the dead. Mikhail also examines the inability of the Iraqi people to inarticulate with their environment which has been transformed into a region of violence and decay, as represented in the "kidnapped people," and the "children" who grow up in the midst of ruin. Therefore,

the Iraqi immigrants seek asylum and political refugees to flee  
from their awful conditions:

The airplane coming from Baghdad  
carries American soldiers  
and rises up  
and up  
over the moon  
reflected on the Tigris river  
over clouds accumulated  
like corpses  
over an ancient harp  
over skin stroked with hands  
over kidnapped people  
over ruins growing up with children  
over long lines at the passport office  
over the open lid of Pandora's box.  
The airplane  
with its exhausted passengers  
will land six thousand miles away

from that finger

amputated in the sand. (1-19)

In the preceding lines, Mikhail's image of the "amputated finger in the sand" implies the violence and cruelty of war to Iraqis. It should be noted that Mikhail throws light on the cultural and religious customs of Iraqis, as represented in the image of "skin stroked with hands" which refers to Shia Muslims who cut themselves with knives and swords to mourn the death of Imam Ali. Mikhail's mention of "Pandora's box" signifies that the American war is the root of all evil in Iraq. According to the Greek mythology, that mentioned box has been created by Gods as a punishment to the mankind. ("The Myth of Pandora's Box").

In her poem, "An Urgent Call," Mikhail examines the postcolonial ecocritical theory in reference to less "ideal" or more "primitive" forms of the human in Said's words (qtd. in Adams and Mulligan 53). She hints at the figurative animalization of the Iraqi people as being considered primitives or semi- humans from the Western's points of views. In her works, Mikhail examines the desecration of the Iraqi land which

has changed into big jails in which the prisoners are mistreated and oppressed by the colonizing forces. As a result, Iraqis have a sense of helplessness and despair because they lose the means of interaction with their land. In the same context, Nelson comments: "people around the world- in Iraq and Syria, in Gaza, in Ukraine and in any number of other contested areas-are willing to sacrifice their own lives for the substance of the national community." Thus, Mikhail not only examines the physical damage of conquering the land, but also its spiritual significance as it represents "dignity" for Iraqis in Fanon's words(34).

In that poem, Mikhail sheds light on the bestiality of the imperial crimes towards the Iraqi people after the 2003 invasion. Mikhail starts her poem with making mention of "Lynndie England" who is a former U.S. Army soldier, serving in the 372<sup>nd</sup> Military Police Company. She has got involved in the torture scandal of Abu Ghraib prison. The images of that scandal indicate to the colonizers' blatant violations of the human rights of the Iraqi people. The images have been terrifying. They

express the outrageous behaviors of the colonizing forces. They have shown bound and raped men piled on the top of each other like a pyramid. Some of the veiled prisoners have been connected to electrical cables. An awful image has shown a barking dog held inches away from a face fixed in terror. Just as memorable as the horror of the victims has been the cunning smile of American soldiers in many of the images (Hall).

As a result, Mikhail condemns these abominable actions, urging Lynndie to leave Iraq and return back home. Mikhail also refers to the imperial ambitions of the colonizers as Lynndie would never lose her job of abusing prisoners because she would find many other prisons in the conquered countries around the world:

This is an urgent call

.....

Hurry up, Lynndie,

go back to America now.

Don't worry,

you will not lose your job.

There are prisons everywhere, (1-14)

Mikhail claims that the colonizers, represented in the character of Lynndie, never mainly aim to bring benefits to the Iraqi people and to revitalize their land. Otherwise, the colonizers tend to devastate and spoil the Iraqi environment with their fatal weapons and "combat boots." They consider that Iraqis have no right to live in dignity or prosperity because of their racial stereotypes as uncivilized and "barbarians" in Mikhail's words:

Don't worry  
nobody will force you  
to feed the birds  
when you carry a gun.  
Nobody will force you  
to work for the environment  
when you wear combat boots.  
Don't worry  
we will send an email to God  
to tell Him  
that the barbarians

were the solution. (21-32)

Mikhail still rebukes and exposes the immoral and anomalous behaviors of the colonizing forces. She argues that Lynndie has not only been accused of the humiliating abuses of the Iraqi detainees, but she has also been involved in a moral scandal. She has given a birth to a bastard during her illegal relationship with another soldier pictured in Abu Ghraib scandal:

Don't worry.

Take a sick leave

and release your baby

from your body,

but don't forget

to hide those terrible pictures,

the pictures of you dancing in the mud.

Keep them away

from his or her eyes.

Hide them, please.

You don't want your child to cry out;

The prisoners are naked (33-44)

Mikhail reminds Lynndie of her shame, asking her to hide "the terrible pictures" of scandal from the eyes of her child for fear of being scared. Notably, Mikhail's depiction of Lynndie as "dancing in the mud" while torturing prisoners refers to the erratic behavior and sadism of the colonizing troops.

In Mikhail's poem, "A Half-burned Page on Al-Mutanabbi Street," she asserts that colonizers aim to eradicate the natives' identity and to make them dislodged from their heritage by destroying their cultural artifacts. Mikhail examines the intangible significance of the land, emphasizing the linkage between environmental devastation and the eradication of the history and culture of the colonized people. In her poem, Mikhail has stumbled on a half- burned page from the book of *The Pigeon's Ruff* or *Tauq al-Hamama* of Ibn Hazm Al- Andalusí in the midst of the torn bodies and shredded books:

Is this a sign then?

Floating in the air, this single page

A single page from a half-buried book

A half-burned book on al-Mutanabbi Street

Al-Mutanabbi Street whose tales were

Interrupted by a bomb

A bomb that threw the books away

Like a student would after finals

This very page from "The Pigeon's Ruff"

Flew up and fell down

Between the scattered bodies

To cling to her chest

Aren't these the same lines

He once recited to her?

"As I come to you, I hurry

Like the full moon crossing the sky

And as I leave-if I leave-I move slowly like the high stars'

"motion"

(1-17)

In the preceding lines, Mikhail's declaration of the content of the page and its depiction as clinging tightly to the slain woman's chest affirm that Iraqi culture and heritage are not eradicated, still being the guidance of mankind, even if its material

manifestations are damaged. Mikhail writes her poem in free verse, adopting an organic form that arises out of the events of the poem. Her use of the irregular form of the poem coincides with the external scenes of chaos and destruction. Mikhail's poem, which has first been written in Arabic and translated into English, presents intertextual and cultural hybrid forms.

Mikhail considers that the brutal attacks of lone wolf terrorists on the Iraqi environment have amounted to genocide and cultural cleansing. The emergence of these terrorists and their endeavor to eliminate the heritage of mankind are considered "pragmatic acts of resistance" (Nelson) as they tend to "mark out the lines on which a decolonized society will be recognized" (Fanon 38). So, they attempt to establish a new state bearing their own hallmarks and to destroy the vestiges of the old colonial regime.

In one of her interviews published in 2016, Mikhail declares that "extremist groups were destroying the statues of Iraqi civilization. They were not killing people; they are attacking Iraqi history homes" ("The Impact of Islamic State on Culture"). She continues: "extremist groups even destroyed graves just

because they are symbols they did not understand like Aramaic, Hebrew or crosses" ("The Impact of Islamic State on Culture"). Reacting to these violations, Mikhail wrote "My Grandmother's Grave" as an expression of her resentment against the monstrous acts of lone wolf terrorists towards the Iraqi heritage and their disrespect to the deceased.

Mikhail starts to explore the social and ecological impacts of the successive wars on Iraq. She uses an implied metaphor as she compares the calamities befalling the Iraqi people to the "descending clouds" that destroy them. Mikhail also touches upon the "hanging gardens" in Babylon, (the town that was a kingdom in ancient Mesopotamia) to remind the world of the historical and cultural landmarks of Iraq:

The clouds descended on us  
war by war,  
picked up our years,  
our hanging gardens,  
and flew away like strokes.

We said there isn't worse to come. (40-45)

Mikhail depicts lone wolf terrorists as "barbarians." They have come to destroy "the mother of two springs" that refers to the city of Mosul which is characterized by its fine climate, beautiful gardens and whose autumn is like the second spring. Mikhail examines the destruction caused to her "grandmother's grave" and the "clay tablets" which represent the landmarks of the Ancient Near East and Assyrian civilization. Mikhail reveals that lone wolf terrorists have destroyed priceless and ancient statues of Iraq; among them is the ancient Assyrian winged bull sculpture which has been a symbol of protection against enemies. That sculpture, which has the head of a human being and the ears of a bull, is described by Mikhail as having expressive eyes of "sunflowers" with reference to its giving and longevity. Mikhail's last lines convey a feeling of sorrow over the symbols of early Iraqi civilization that have savagely been smashed and ruined:

Then the barbarians came  
to the mother of two springs.

They broke my grandmother's grave: my clay tablet.

They smashed the winged bulls whose eyes  
were sunflowers  
widely open  
watching the fragments of our first dreams  
for a lifetime. (46-53)

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