

# #27

# CORPOREALITY IN CONTEMPORARY IRAQI FICTION

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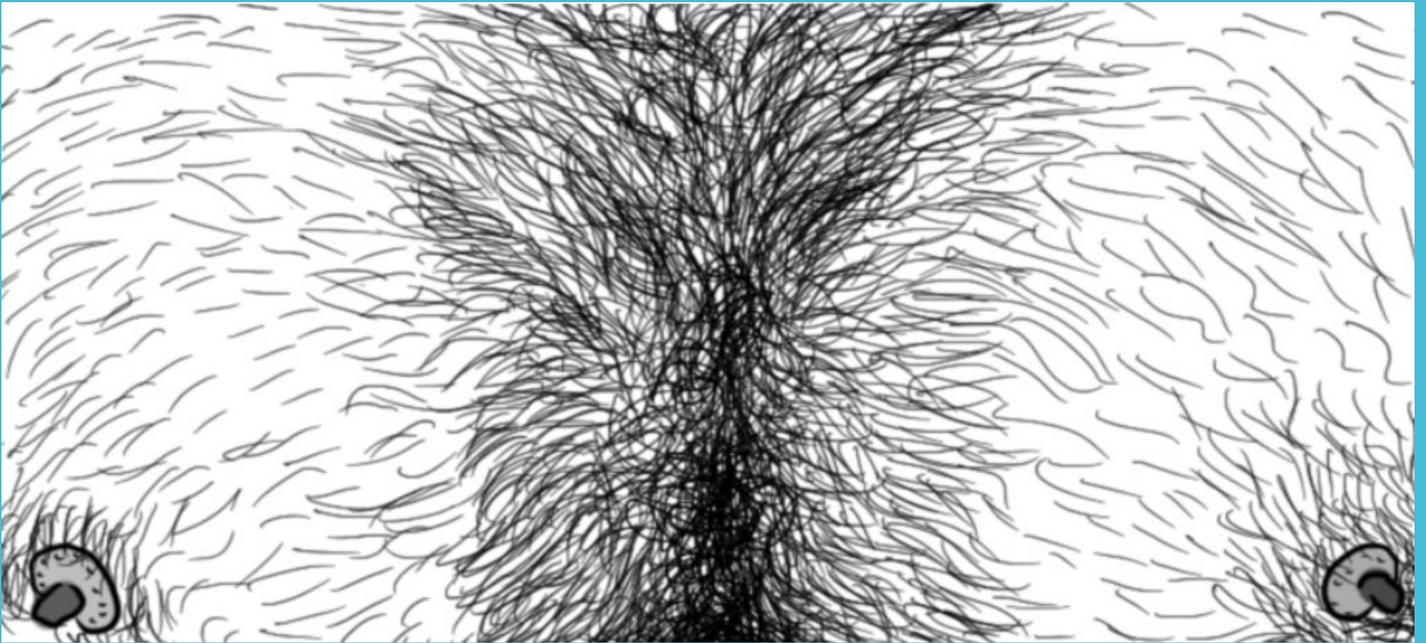
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**Abstract** || The aesthetics of corporeality in post-2003 Iraqi fiction shows a development in perceiving the body both artistically and as a cultural sign. Corporeality is envisioned here on two levels: the first entails corporeality of the text as a dialectic space for the embodiment of corporeal experience. The second, involves the representation of the body as a technique to redefine and question corporeal and sexual identities. This article suggests that this new perception of corporeality indicates a new gaze towards the body in contemporary Iraqi fiction, manifested in: first, the dialectic relation between fragmented narration and fragmented corporeality as an embodiment of annihilation in a post-invasion and war context; second, the aesthetics of illness and disability as a mechanism to question normative bodies and to voice subaltern corporeality; finally, corporeal gender politics which build a novel perception of sexuality.

**Keywords** || Iraq | Fiction | Body | Perception | Writing | Comparative Literature

### Corporeïtat a la ficció contemporània iraquiana

**Resum** || L'estètica de la corporeïtat en la ficció iraquiana posterior a 2003 mostra un desenvolupament en la percepció del cos en dues vessants, artísticament i com a signe cultural. La corporeïtat es concep aquí en dos nivells: el primer implica la corporeïtat del text com un espai dialèctic per a l'encarnació de l'experiència corporal. El segon implica la representació del cos com a tècnica per a redefinir i qüestionar les identitats corporals i sexuals. Aquest article suggereix que aquesta nova percepció de la corporeïtat indica una nova mirada cap al cos en la ficció iraquiana contemporània, manifestada en primer lloc, per la relació dialèctica entre la narració fragmentada i la corporeïtat fragmentada com una encarnació de l'anihilació en un context posterior a la invasió i la guerra. En segon lloc, per l'estètica de la malaltia i la discapacitat com a mecanisme per a qüestionar els cossos normatius i donar veu a la corporeïtat subaltern. Finalment, per polítiques de gènere que construeixen una percepció nova de la sexualitat.

**Paraules clau** || Iraq | Ficció | Cos | Percepció | Escriptura | Literatura comparada

### La corporeidad en la ficción iraquí contemporánea

**Resumen** || La estética de la corporeidad en la ficción iraquí posterior a 2003 muestra un desarrollo en la percepción del cuerpo artísticamente y como un signo cultural. La corporeidad se concibe aquí en dos niveles: el primero implica la corporeidad del texto como un espacio dialéctico para la encarnación de la experiencia corporal. El segundo, implica la representación del cuerpo como técnica para redefinir y cuestionar las identidades corporales y sexuales. Este artículo sugiere que esta nueva percepción de la corporeidad indica una nueva mirada hacia el cuerpo en la ficción iraquí contemporánea, manifestada en: primero, la relación dialéctica entre la narración fragmentada y la corporeidad fragmentada como una encarnación de la aniquilación en un contexto posterior a la invasión y la guerra; en segundo lugar, la estética de la enfermedad y la discapacidad como mecanismo para cuestionar los cuerpos normativos y dar voz a la corporeidad subalterna; finalmente, políticas corporales de género que construyen una percepción novedosa de la sexualidad.

**Palabras clave** || Irak | Ficción | Cuerpo | Percepción | Escritura | Literatura comparada

## 1. Introduction

In the introduction to *Baghdad Noir* (2018), the first ever anthology of Iraqi noir fiction, Samuel Shimon writes that between the years 2003 and 2018 “close to seven hundred novels have emerged from the country (more than had appeared over the entirety of the twentieth century)” (16) and that most of these works deal with Iraq’s contemporary political and cultural issues. This recent inclination towards fiction, which other Arabic literatures also share, is particularly important in the case of Iraq’s contemporary literary scene in view of the fact that, as Haytham Bahooora shows, poetry has always been the predominant literary genre in Iraq since the early modern period (2017: 247). On that account, the literary phenomenon that Jabra I. Jabra describes as the “battle for renewal” takes place on the body of the text, on its form. However, contemporary writings seem to engage with the notion of corporeality to stage two such battles to the extent that it feels safe to consider the employment of the poetics of corporeality in both content and their form. Abir Hamdar notices that there is a turn to the body in recent Arabic literature, which she interprets as “an antidote to the collapse of the collective national and political ideology of pan-Arabism” (2014: 132). While the turn towards the body is unquestionably a universal one in the wake of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), it is not entirely accurate to describe the concern for the body as an “antidote to the collapse” of national identity —at least not exclusively so. Rather, as far this as this article is concerned, the recent writing of corporeality in contemporary fiction indicates more of a perceptual change. I suggest that the turn to the body concerns a writing through the body, a “creating of shifting frameworks and models of understanding, about the opening up of thought to what is new, different, and hitherto unthought” (Grosz, 1994: xiv). In this analysis, I focus on the local and diasporic writings of Iraqi authors who have been engaging with new aesthetics of corporeality in fiction, arguing that these shifting frameworks of the body are enmeshed in its representation as well as in the creative forms of outlining the narrative text. This phenomenon distinguishes some contemporary Iraqi authors from their modern predecessors and from other Arab writers, particularly through the former’s engagement with a transgressive aesthetic of violence. Haytham Bahooora terms such aesthetics “postcolonial gothic,” by which he refers to the works of colonized writers who “wrote back, transforming the conventions of the gothic to rewrite the canon itself, to reclaim indigenous practices, and to narrate the terrors of colonial violence from the perspectives of its victims” (2015: 190). Bahooora shows that one aspect of the postcolonial gothic in the post-2003 writings of Iraqi authors is the deployment of corporeality and the aestheticization of violence, “establishing a metaphysical presence and suggesting that the effects of the violence the narrator has witnessed in daily life have been absorbed beyond the realm of the material” (185). Bahooora focuses particularly on the recurrent imageries of corpses and

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dismembered bodies, whether through subconscious mechanisms of vision, as in nightmares or supernatural events, or in the actual physical corporeality which testifies to a particular or general case of outrageous physical and psychical violence. To him, the staging of corporeal violence and tortured bodies, regardless of whether the depiction is physical or metaphysical, “stages a relationship between embodied and disembodied violence, between the terror of violence inflicted on the physical self and the concurrent psychic processing of the event” (185) Thus, corporeality in the Iraqi postcolonial gothic, as Bahooora reads it, serves as an allegorical spectacle of violence which “produce[s] a historical ontology that locates violence as a consequence of the political, legal, and material legacy of decades of war and dictatorship” (189).

In what follows, I argue that this metaphysical presence is enacted both on the body of the literary text itself and in the depiction of corporeal violence as well as sexual politics insofar as contemporary Iraqi fiction presents a writing through the body not only to testify, process, and negotiate the corporeal violence witnessed in the invasion, dictatorship, and their aftermath, but also to indicate a perceptual shift of corporeality both in literary and cultural terms. This means that corporeality here is defined both in terms of the structure of the text and in terms of the representational embodiments. The presence of the body as a concept and as an image in contemporary Iraqi fiction defies the canons of corporeal codes and the sexual enactment of gender roles. In this examination, I focus on four different texts: ‘Āliyah Mamdūh’s *al-Tashahhī* (*The Craving*, 2007),<sup>2</sup> Sinan Antoon’s *Waḥdahā Shajarat al-Rumān* (*The Corpse Washer*, 2010), Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankishtāin fī Baghdād* (*Frankenstein in Baghdad*, 2013), and Hassan Blasim’s *Ma‘rad al-Juthath* (*The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories*, 2014). These texts share certain qualities which will allow us to see the uses of corporeality on two different yet interrelated levels: the corporeality of the text, which is its form, and the representation of corporeality, which is the meanings and implications of its metaphors, symbolism, and sociopolitical significations.

## 2. Corporeality of the Text

The body of the text is, undoubtedly, a dialectic space for experimentation and venture into new genres and trends. In artistic writing, the body of the text, and the distribution of silences and written material, informs as much as the actual words, plots, dialogues, characters and so on. Naturally, post-invasion, post-war—or rather post-trauma—writing produces aesthetic experimentation as a mechanism by which to embody the human experience in extreme conditions. It shows how horror annihilates the arbitrariness of language and the willingness to confine and structure its limits in an attempt to control it and to confront the ordeal of epistemological violence implicated in it. Iraqi authors are turning again to experimentalism and to new

<2> The title in English is my suggestion of how to translate it. The novel has been translated only to French as *Comme un Désir qui ne Veut pas Mourir*.

forms of literary and aesthetic expression, particularly in the writing of new fictional genres such as noir, Sci-Fi, graphic fiction, online and electronic fiction, and animation. Some reviewers talk about the new Iraqi novel when referring to the fiction written after 2003. Others, more generally, suggest the aesthetic emergence of postmodernism in contemporary Arabic literature, in which the writing of corporeality reveals “history imprinted on the body” (Neuwirth, Pflitsch & Winckler, 2010: 491). Translator and scholar Yasmeen Hanoosh suggests that “[t]he strangeness with which the work of many contemporary Iraqi writers at once rivets and disorients the reader is perhaps the best metaphor for the incongruity of modern Iraq’s cultural and political history, and a shrewd reminder of the cyclical nature of the country’s collective calamities” (2013). Therefore, the reconfiguration of the body of the text in these new literary tendencies seems to relate to the political, literary, and philosophical reconfiguration of the writing subject and the rearticulation of his and her self-image. Of these recent reconfigurations, this section is concerned with the narratological technique of fragmentation, arguing that the fragmented corporeality of the text can reveal as much meaningful content as the hermeneutic material.

Fragmented narrative in contemporary Iraqi fiction, and particularly in the novels examined in this article, takes various modes. Firstly, there is the mechanism of shifting perspectives or of narrative voice. In Saadawi’s novel, the fragmentation of the text creates a visual effect in order to make us perceive the city as the ultimate narrator of the novel. Through the different fragments of narratives, the reader has access to different peepholes that can expose the aspects of the city which weave the story. In Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer*, the narrative of dreams and nightmares—which interrupts the lineal narrative yet completes it—takes a slower pace and involves an abstract, poetic use of the language as opposed to the narrative of thoughts and events which tends to lead to a quicker pace and a more realistic tone. This strategy, in addition to transitioning the reader from reality to dream, and from realism to magic realism, also leads the way from the conscious to the unconscious, materializing the processes of repression and the embodiment of self-image. Jawad’s first nightmare, for instance, is narrated in six separate segments. Each segment indicates a different perspective from which the scene is visible, as if Jawad has two pairs of eyes, one belonging to Jawad the dreamer, the other belonging to Jawad the dreamed. In the first segments, both the dreamer and the dreamed share the same visual perspective: when the dreamed is blindfolded, the dreamer does not see, he can only hear and feel other somatic senses. In the sixth segment, however, when the blindfold is removed from the dreamed’s cut-off head, the dreamer recovers his sight, but not the dreamed. Through segmentation, the poetic narrative style of the dream enables the reader to see how Jawad looks at himself, perceiving himself as living dead. Additionally, through the separation between the dreamed and the dreamer’s gaze “the mind is conscious of the self’s corporeal

dismemberment and simultaneously witnesses the spectacle as a voyeur” (Bahooora, 2015: 185). This act of voyeurism confirms to Jawad his inexpressibility and, to the reader, the embodiment of the impossibility of a rational way of telling the story; only through the violence of (de)structuring the text and through the corporeal violence staged in the scene can the meaning be fulfilled.

This play with perspective meddles with the structure, altering the meanings of what is real and what is unreal, confusing beginnings and endings, present and past, time and space, breaking the classic form of narration and defying established narratologies. This may be the technique which most closely mimics the labyrinthine operations of memory and desire. Constant recourse is made to this in *al-Tashahhī*, as the corporeal memories of Sarmad Burhān al-Dīn are interrupted by the memories of his lovers, whose voices participate in the narrative in first person, so that it is as if Sarmad’s corporeal memories are narrated through the bodies of his lovers. The same can be said about Sinan Antoon’s four novels. In his first novel, *I’jaam* (2004), the title and the outline of the events in the story situate the reader in a position from which he or she cannot make sense in order to be able to tell the story. Throughout the novel the word game of “(T)here” moves the narrator between present and past, jail and freedom, intensifying the fragmentary effect as the reader cannot figure out where the scene begins or ends and cannot determine whether it happened or not. In fact, this “(T)here” renders the body the ultimate space of being and the ultimate narrative since this confusion collapses the notions of time and space, leaving the suffering of the body —through memory— as the only coordinate at which the narrative begins and ends, and from which the body is visible.

Antoon’s second and third novels are similarly structured in fragmented bits and scenes which are constructed through the characters’ memories. In *The Corpse Washer*, the narrative builds the story through the hero’s interrupted memories, nightmares, and daily tormented life. In similar fashion, *The Baghdad Eucharist* (2012) is a collection of post-mortem reflections on memory, pain, and political conflict accessed through the description of photographs and memories of the dead. His fourth novel, *The Book of Collateral Damage* (2016), consists of fragmented narratives of different voices and memories, including even the voices and memories of plants, animals, and inanimate objects. This entanglement of narrative voices, or the intermitted narrative voice, deconstructs the notion of any coherent linear story. As these multiple voices and shards of memories diversify the narrative discourse, they shatter the hero figure, and the notions of creativity and authorship become subjective. If there is such a thing as a coherent body of a text, then contemporary Iraqi fiction brings its corporeality into question.

In the stories of Hassan Blasim, fragmentation takes yet another form. Blasim writes in a cinematographic style: he relies on sequences of short, dramatically intense sketches and descriptions of brief sce-

nes, creating an effect similar to watching short experimental films. This can be clearly observed in his stories “The Song of the Goats,” “The Dung Beetle,” “Ali’s Bag,” and “The Truck to Berlin.” Blasim’s narratology also tends to rely on second-hand narrative technique, that is, a narrator telling another narrator’s story. This is a technique which he uses to show how refugees’ stories come together to form the whole (un)conscious experience of the refugee’s transition from home to exile, and from location to dislocation. This correspondingly links to another shared peculiarity of fragmented textual corporeality, that of the tendency to mystify the narrative through recourse to a recently found manuscript or a government paper which contains the body of the text. Examples of this include Sinan Antoon’s *I’jaam*; Ali Badr’s *Papa Sartre* (2001) and *Maṣābīḥ Urshlīm* (Jerusalem’s Lights, 2006); Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad*; Maīyādah Khalīl’s *Nescāfeh ma’a al-Sharīf al-Raḍī* (Nescafé with al-Sharīf al-Raḍī); and Ḍīyā’ Jibaīlī’s *La’nat Marquez* (Marquez’s Curse, 2007), among others. This technique brings the issue of the official archive into question: among the piles of “official history” and registers, one forgotten story manages to escape the silence. It also symbolizes the dilemma of confronting individual and collective histories: how to read (deal with) all this heritage of minor historical events and individual stories which have been silenced throughout years of censorship, and those grand narratives dictated by the Ba’ath regime and the American war propaganda. It is not simply the narration of trauma and fear, as many critics and scholars have suggested; it is the epistemological horror which arises when facing the impossibility of telling a lineal, coherent story. In *I’jaam*, the body of the text is the interpretation of an undotted text in Arabic, written by a disabled prisoner who has willingly codified his diaries. This unintelligible text is inserted, later, between the directive order which issued the interpretation of the manuscript found in the prison facility, and the interpreter’s report, which classifies the manuscript, “a record of the unrelated thoughts and illogical recollection of a prisoner” (97). The unintelligible body of the manuscript, like the prisoner’s body, is a limping narrative, incarcerated by stigma and the state’s interpretation, telling nothing but the ordeal of finding meaning in an impaired reality.

Another fragmenting narrative technique that concerns the body of the text is intertextuality. Various contemporary fictional works return to the classics, that is, the literary classics of Arabic and Western heritage. By the word ‘return’ here, I refer to processes such as re-reading, rewriting, and redefining, or simply evoking or alluding. This tendency conveys a psychological drive to protest and to approach differently, to present or represent a classical or a deeply rooted element of culture and serve it in a new context. “The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes” by Hassan Blasim, for instance, echoes *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962). Artemio Cruz’s decadent life and tragic fate subtly juxtaposes a certain historical moment in the history of Mexico with the torturous life of an Iraqi refugee—who ironically names himself Carlos Fuentes—condensing the contradictory histories of the

human experience facing emotional and physical violence. Similarly, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* sheds a new light on monstrosity and precarious lives by referring to a major text from the corpus of Western grand narratives; and the fact that it does not refer to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1823) but rather to Kenneth Branagh's film adaptation is highly significant: purposely neglecting this masterpiece is a form of critique which highlights how far Western grand narrative is from the precarious reality of those victims of such a narrative. It indicates an attitude and a political statement concerning the literary canon and its exclusion of the silenced voices of those who inhabit the worlds of these authors. In addition, the epigraphs opening Sinan Antoon's novels come from the Qur'ān, The Bible, and from works belonging to the Western and Arabic literary canon, thus positioning these novels in a dialectical angle where they respond to these texts. This strategy is also used by other authors, such as Maīyādah Khalīl, who evokes Roberto Bolaño alongside al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, or 'Abd al-Hādi Sa'dūn, who evokes Cervantes's *Coloquio de los perros* (1613) in his *Memorias de un Perro Iraquí* (2012). Referring to the canon, or what I call the return to the classics, is not merely an attempt to rewrite the canon: it is, rather, to write on the margins of the canon, like graffiti on the walls of institutional buildings or like hashtags on social-media sites. It includes the Iraqi voice in the universal humanistic scope, and meddling with the corporeality of the text, through intertextuality, it makes the body of the Iraqi text visible.

Regardless of the texts' intentions, which is certainly open to debate at this point, the present sociopolitical context and the speed with which social media is changing our cultural interaction prepare the setting for narrative strategies to revisit the world canon and to express a desire to reinterpret not only Arabic and Muslim heritage but all human heritage, an attempt, that is, for subaltern subjects to relate to the canon. This increasing tendency towards intertextual techniques shows how the corporeality of the text has become a focus of writing: as fragmented text expresses fragmented corporeality and a fragmented sense of a coherent self; intertextuality fragments the unity of a text by blemishing its body with foreign texts.

Jeffrey Sychterz describes the fragmented text as wounded: "The wound opens the body and undoes a previously closed narrative" (141). On the one hand, fragmentation expresses "an urgent need to break with knowable boundaries of Iraqi fiction and poetry to demonstrate the ways physical violence perpetrated upon Iraq can affect textual violence" (Golden, 2021: 274). On the other hand, as Patrick Deer writes, "the founding violence of the modern Iraqi state [is] an open wound that refuses closure, monumentalization, and reinscription into a nationalist narrative" (2017: 327). Thus, the body of the text, through its "wounds," disrupts the established coherent narrative, spilling subdued histories which defy the nationalist myth, whilst also revealing the untranslatability of the loss and the fragility of a unified narrative built upon the conundrum of feelings released

by the shock and awe of war. Indeed, it is a material manifestation of the impossibility of reconstructing a coherent narrative to describe the nightmarish Iraq wars, for there is no such thing as *the* story after 2003, but, rather, there are stories bursting out of the body of the text. Let us not forget that the fragmentation of the text also recreates the effect of military bombardment and invasion. A broken or a wounded intertextual text is an active mimesis of the destroyed buildings, the dismembered bodies, and the invaded city. Correspondingly, it also evokes the shattered society and social narrative in the post-invasion period. Just as stammering is one of the multiple reactions to post-traumatic disorder, fragmented narration is a symptom of cultural devastation. In this sense, fragmentation can be read as an aesthetic technique of annihilation, an obliteration of nationalist grand narrative, expressing the loss of the ideal, coherent national narrative, and bringing forward the particulars of individual and collective memory in its most shattered representation.

Furthermore, fragmentation does not merely defy traditional narratology and unified metanarratives: it also challenges dualism and rationality. In Varley-Winter's opinion, "the closer a text feels to the body, the more the text fragments" (2018: 4), and as this closeness emerges (un)consciously through the act of writing, "[f]ragmentation therefore challenges mind-body dualism, coinciding with what Kristeva and Cixous describe as strategies of *écriture féminine*, in which meaning is convulsive rather than cumulative" (ibid). To question mind-body dualism implies an ontological inquiry, which can extend this challenge as far as defying the constellation of thought that supports it, namely ideology or monotheism. In this sense the fragmented body of the text makes a transgressive text which violates the logic of signification established by the semiotic universe of the Iraqi culture prior to 2003.

### 3. Corporeality and Representation

In addition to narrative techniques, the examined works employ metaphors and representations of the body as a perceptual instrument through which to redefine and question concepts like gender, self, beauty, and pain. Beauty and gender are negotiable terms amidst the surreal violence and the questionable reality that these works present. Staging physical pain informs the reader about psychological agony and distress. These representations operate on three different areas: the annihilation of the body as annihilation of the self, the aesthetics of illness and disability as a mechanism by which to question normative bodies and to voice subaltern corporeality, and the questioning of corporeal gender politics as effected through a subverting perception of sexuality.

The annihilated body is presented in the literary works that depict the violated and tortured body, the body in its utmost materiality: blood, flesh, dismemberment, bodies obliterated in wars and sectarian

violence. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and *The Corpse Exhibition* are particularly exemplary here: the materiality of the body in these two works is an aesthetic recourse which can take the form either of a sudden and exaggerated involvement of corporeality, dramatizing violence and criminality, or, on the other hand, it can take the style of “Repulsive Realism”: a critique of sociopolitical decadence and squalid reality, manifested in the representation of mundane repulsive corporeality (for example, bodily fluids, feces, vomit, rotten material, etc.).<sup>3</sup> The description of the noseless body of the monster in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, “the body of a naked man, with viscous liquids, light in color, oozing from parts of it” (26), is clearly a metaphor by which to describe the war’s destruction of the Iraqi social structure after the years of dictatorship, genocidal sanctions, and the sectarian conflict brought about after the invasion in 2003. The same can be said of certain images in Blasim’s stories: “the smell of bodies, sweaty socks and the spicy food they were eating in the darkness made it even stuffier” (2009: 912); or more graphically: “some shat in the food bags, and the repulsive smell built up inside the truck like strata of rock” (929); or “they found her feeding me shit. A whole week she was mixing it with the rice, the mashed potatoes and the soup” (2013: 65); and “Christ fell to his knees. He could hardly breathe and he pissed in his trousers. He opened the bathroom door and crawled into the restaurant” (486). These parallelisms between food and feces are metaphors for the unbearable precariousness and ungreivability of Iraqi lives which the author is revindicating.

In the same manner, Blasim recurs to repulsive realism for the embodiment of precariousness in depicting the body’s displacement of place, which he treats as parallel to the transformation of identity and the positioning of the self, regarding Otherness, particularly in the narrative of refugeedom. The transitioning journey that inscribes its burden on the bodies and the memories of refugees is central in his writings. Examples of this include the mother’s bones in “Ali’s Bag,” the transformation of a character into a wolf in “The Truck to Berlin,” and the naked delirium in “The Wolf.” Each of these examples shows corporeal hysteria as a metaphor for epistemological violence and dislocation implied in the displacement from home to exile. Refugee literature and art represent this displacement of refugees as a process of dehumanization and bodily transformation, a mechanism of defense with which to challenge the inevitable horror of neglect, forgetfulness, and death.

In accordance with Audrey J. Golden’s critique of the depiction of torture in Blasim’s fiction, the scenes which depict a shocking materiality of the body —as in “The Corpse Exhibition” or “The Reality and the Record”— are interactive in the sense that they ask the reader to “take part in creating violence” (284). By staging unimaginable violence “we are challenged to do just that —imagine it” (ibid). Imagining the unimaginable pushes the limits of the literary or artistic work to be an instrument of self-evaluation by questioning the ethical limits of

<3> The term “repulsive realism” refers to narrative techniques in *I’jaam* in Albazei, S. A.

representation and the engagement in the act of voyeurism. However, the problematic issue which makes the representation of atrocities become a dialectic space for reflection is that, at a certain point, the staging of such horrible images of the body might correspond to the narcissistic demand of the Other for the privilege of empathy. As Susan Sontag writes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*,

[t]he imaginary proximity to the suffering inflicted on others that is granted by images suggests a link between faraway sufferers [...] and the privileged viewer that is simply untrue, that is yet one more mystification of our real relations to power. So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. (2004: 91)

The annihilated body, here, is a shattered and shattering mirror, questioning the viewer's moral stand, for it would be unethical to look or sympathize, and at the same time it would be unethical not to. The monstrosity of the creature in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* lies in the need to make the horror of violence visible. Hadi builds the monster's body "so it would be respected like other dead people and given a proper burial" (26). Hadi could not bear the fact that his friend's body, shattered in an explosion, could not be distinguished from the body of the horse which was dragging his working carriage. Hadi's need to provide his friend a proper corpse and burial emerges from his ethical stand on accepting this horrible way of dying.

In *The Corpse Washer*, the dialectical relation between Jawad's desire to become a sculptor—bringing dead stones to life through art—and his anguish at earning a living by washing corpses reaches its impasse after Jawad's nightmare of washing a Giacometti statue on the washing bench and watching it dissolve: "One of Giacometti's statues lies on the washing bench. I assume I am meant to wash it. As I pour water over its tiny head, the sculpture dissolves into tiny fragments. I put the bowl aside and try to pick up the pieces and repair the damage, but everything disintegrates in my hands" (141). Jawad, trapped in this job in which he is exposed to annihilated bodies to the extent that bringing a stone to life through art not only means nothing anymore, but also is impossible, for his quotidian exposure to annihilated bodies makes death a material living reality which devalues his artistic aspirations. Jawad's selfhood is in a way torn by the same ethical dilemma as the reader of such violence-charged images: for him it is unethical and traumatizing to be exposed to this unimaginable yet real violence—hence his nightmares—and at the same time to be tortured by guilt for not wanting to wash corpses, because as a Muslim and a devoted son, he feels it is his moral duty to prepare these corpses for a decent burial: "I saw an eye hanging on the wall by a thread and shedding tears. When I asked you about it you said, 'it longs for another eye or perhaps it is crying for the sun'" (166). This extract from one of Jawad's dreams shows how he is unconsciously aware of the fact that these corpses' pain and suffering need to be heard and acknowledged. Therefore, again, concerning

spectatorship, the presence of the annihilated body stages a notion of torn selfhood which either eases the guilt by the act of sympathizing or silences the guilt as a self-protective mechanism.

*Al-Tashahhī* manifests the annihilation of the body through a different kind of violence, through illness and disability. Sarmad Burhān al-Dīn's body is obliterated by obesity and sexual impotence. The passage in which he narrates the physical changes his body undergoes as he is gaining weight (13–15) reveals his anxieties as his body loses its corporeal structure, skin, and even the ability to speak. The fact that his impotence can be interpreted as a phallogocentric metaphor for a loss of national identity is simply inaccurate, let alone sexist: rather it is Sarmad's nervous collapse that stands for the collapse of his identity, for it is only after this that he begins to question his sense of belonging: "what I have to do is to tear off this country and pull myself out of it to discover the lack of its biological, physical, chemical, moral and existential functions" (253).<sup>4</sup> I suggest that Sarmad's obesity and impotence, the annihilation of his body, are metaphors for the untranslatability of the pain and suffering that dislocated individuals live through. His obesity stands for the piling up of sources of pain: abuse, betrayal, exile, precariousness of life, and illness; and his sexual impotence stands for his loss "in translation," his inability to translate himself or his place in the world. Additionally, this is the first time in Iraq's literary history where obesity is openly discussed and reflected upon, particularly as a symptom of post-traumatic disorder or as a graphic visualization of the accumulation of pain stacked in the body.

Another important aspect of this novel, and this leads us to the following representational question, is that it is the masculine body which brings up a critique by which to question notions of normative bodies and conceptions of beauty as articulated by traditional heritage and colonial representation. Female characters in the novel —the protagonist's lovers— seem to have complete autonomy and are in full possession of their bodies; they express their sexual selfhood as ideological positioning independently of their partners. Even when telling stories of rape, their narrative decentralizes the phallus and emphasizes the reinscription of subjectivity. This shows that 'Āliyah Mamdūḥ deals with sexuality out of recurrent dynamics of domination in order to empower female voices and at the same time give us the chance to hear an unheard masculine voice. On the other hand, Sarmad does not express shame at his sexual impotence as expected; his concern is more related to his finding love and compassion, rather than a masculine anxiety for penetration and procreation. Sarmad is more anguished by social stigma than he is preoccupied with being apologetic about his disability: "I am a weak hesitant man, perhaps a bit submissively shy, but I am captivated by my fat chubby body. Stop looking at yourself, Sarmad! How much do you weigh today? A hundred? Two hundred? Can't a fat guy be fearless hero?!" (125) What Mamdūḥ is offering us, as far as the body is concerned, is a

group of young characters, male and female, whose sexuality is equally repressed by sociopolitical stigma. Women are repressed and used by political power for being women; non-heteronormative sexualities, like Sarmad's friend Yūsuf, are repressed because of social stigma; and Sarmad is repressed and used by local political power and colonial history.

In *The Corpse Washer* and *The Baghdad Eucharist*, illness, and sexuality cross ways again. Both Reem and Maha perceive illness as an impairment of their sexual lives. After a miscarriage, Maha becomes unable to enjoy sex, while Reem distances herself from her lover and fiancé, Jawad, after her mastectomy, because she has started to hate her cancerous body and she does not want her future husband "to live with a woman who has a ticking bomb in her body" (114). Jawad dreams about it: "when I reach her and hug her, the left pomegranate falls to the ground. When I bend down to pick it up, I see red stains bathing my arm. I turn back and see Reem crying as she tries to stop the fountain of blood gushing from the wound" (123). For both Reem and Jawad, illness becomes a cancelation of erotic life just as cancer is life-threatening, or just as bombs are peace-devastating.

Unlike in the modern period, contemporary fiction displays a political, corporeal awareness that manifests intellectual gender dissidence. If authors of the modern period have instrumentalized the female body to express anti-colonial political anxieties and aesthetic concerns for modernity (Bahoora, 2015), contemporary authors are dealing with sexuality as a stage on which to redefine the economy of sexual politics. This becomes clear as contemporary Iraqi texts continuously offer "formulations of masculinities [and femininities] which are more equalitarian and inclusive. These new formulations employ sexuality to empower subaltern voices in an anti-colonial globalized context, and to establish forms of resistance against the stigmatization of the Iraqi self" (Jasim Khammas, 2018). There seems to be a consensus on challenging traditional representation of gender in contemporary Arabic fiction in general, not exclusively for Iraqi authors, by engaging in representations of corporeality which defy traditional gender-based aesthetics. The sexualities in the examined works and in others which employ similar strategies, challenge the traditional representations of sexuality, and this challenge is more transgressive in the early years after the war and invasion of Iraq in 2003. Today, challenging patriarchy and gender binaries has proved to be the key way for contemporary authors not only to transgress traditional taboos, because transgressing these issues has become a trend of social and public debate among the younger generations. A quick survey on social media —particularly on Clubhouse, where people can directly and audibly speak to each other— will show that writing and rewriting gender has become an imperative in contemporary literary writing, particularly in Iraq, where government legislation and law are still questionable.

<4> All citations from this novel are my translation. So far published only in Arabic as *Ma'raḡ al-Juthath*.

Therefore, defying patriarchy is gradually becoming the node from which to establish the critique that deconstructs legal and political corruption. To give an example, the representational mechanisms of sexuality and gender roles in the examined works challenges the representation of male heroes —the stereotypical Arab male— in the color of his skin, his social behavior, and the way in which he relates to his and others' bodies. This new hero figure represents a non-hegemonic masculinity that has often been silenced by the anxious intellectual male figure who is tormented by social taboos and sexual urgencies such as the male heroes in the works of al-Takarī, Jabra I. Jabra, or Abdul Raḥmān Majīd al-Rubāī, among others, who —as Bahooora explains— instrumentalized the female body to articulate a dialectic in which their sexuality reflected their political anxieties (2015: 42–62). One of the first authors who diagnosed this stereotyped masculine figure and criticized it was Ali Bader in *Papa Sartre* (2001), a novel in which he drew a caricature of that male intellectual hero and his social status. In doing so, Bader attacked an entire generation of authors who were the protagonists of the battle for renewal that Jabrā I. Jabrā referred to. Yet, in addition to the concern for aesthetic innovation, the contemporary battle for renewal does not see the body as an instrument of ideological enactment. It, rather, lives corporeality as a mechanism of expression and as the ultimate materialization of meaning. It should be mentioned, however, that it is not an innovation of the post-2003 period exclusively. Samira Aghacy spots different writings of non-normative masculine identity in Arabic fiction since 1967, which, again, links the rewriting of gender and sexuality to the epistemological violence caused by military and political conflicts.

Similarly, certain contemporary texts by female authors challenge the idea of the stereotypically helpless Arab woman, veiled, beaten, or sexually repressed. Examples of this trend include: 'Āliyah Mamdūḥ's *al-Ghulāmah* (The She Boy) and *al-Tashahhī*, *Massarāt al-Nisā'* (Women's Joys, 2015) by Luṭfiyah al-Dulaymī; or *al-Ḥayāt min Thuqb al-bāb* (Life from a Keyhole, 2018) and *Nescāfah ma'a al-Sharīf al-Raḍī* (Nescafé with al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, 2016) by Maīyadah Khalīl, and *Indamā Tastayqiz al-Rā'iḥah* (When The Scent Awakes, 2006) by Dunā Ghāli. These texts present educated women who are politically aware of their selfhood and the way in which they relate to their sexuality in their interpersonal and social relations. The female body in such texts is no longer a stage on which to exhibit male political and social anxieties; rather, it is itself a storyteller and a stage where the feminine and feminist agenda dictate political statements.

Nonetheless, some of the Iraqi women in the fiction of Hasan Blasim and Ḍiyā' Jibaīlī are empowered by being narrated in the extraordinary worlds in which they live and by the strangeness of the experiences they undergo. There is a particular focus on vulnerability in times of military and sectarian conflict, as in Blasim's story "Shams wa Jannah," and "Ali's Bag" in which he writes "[i]t would be easy to forget that

God exists if you could experience a single day in the life of an Iraqi mother” (2009: 825). However, the expression of vulnerability in the characterization of these women does not leave the matter merely at vulnerability and passivity: these women also express themselves in hysterical rage and even in evil. In “Shams wa Jannah,” the mother kills her daughter and commits suicide out of fear after she burns her daughter’s skin under the hot sun to darken her complexion so that she will not be raped—the mother had heard that armed men invade villages and rape fair-skinned virgins—. “The Goat’s Song” offers a depiction of a mother who is seen by her son as evil and hateful: “I used to shut my eyes and imagine the donkey’s penis, gross and black, going into my mother’s right ear and coming out of the left. She would scream for help because of the pain [...] her tongue was as poisonous as a viper [...] She had turned into a fat cow” (2013: 124–25). This pejorative representation of motherhood challenges the mystification of the mother figure who is typically depicted as kind, strong, and patient—an image which is interwoven traditionally with nationalist ideas—. This humanization of the mother figure is a testament to their resilience: it serves on the one hand to defy stereotyped gender roles regarding mothers and, on the other hand, dramatizes the ordeal of motherhood in wars and military conflict.

Obviously, there is a turn towards skepticism and a need for introspection vis-à-vis history and the grand narratives which constitute our identities and the way we relate to the world, as this overview of innovative tendencies in contemporary Iraqi fiction tries to show. Corporeality is the major theme and technical aspect in which innovation resides in contemporary Iraqi narratives. It creates a dialectical space for experimentation and the introduction of new genres which might not be new *per se*, but which are new for Iraqi literary production. It is a space for rewriting and expressing epistemological violence in order to question and redefine concepts like gender, self, beauty, or pain. It certainly shows an embrace of postmodern aesthetics as defined by Jean-François Lyotard, namely as “[i]ncredulity toward metanarrative” (1984: xxiv). Innovation in narrative genres and style depends to a great extent on the visual effect and the materiality of the body. This is so for a number of different reasons: the visual effect is the predominant element of literary and artistic creation in this contemporary era, especially after the expansion of social media in which pictures and imageries prevail over the written word. The visual effect of war propaganda was in fact part of the 2003 military and political operations, as Judith Butler shows in *Frames of War* (2009): “The operation of cameras, not only in the recording and distribution of images of torture, but as part of the very apparatus of bombing, make it clear that media representations have already become modes of military conduct” (29). Therefore, the visibility of the body is the site where the epistemological shifts that the war and occupation have imposed are embodied. Consequently, corporeality

and the materiality of the flesh have become central to aesthetic responses in contemporary fiction since they focus on narrating these stories about the horrors of war, displacement, and pain.

#### 4. Conclusion

The body of the text and the representation of corporeality entwine in contemporary Iraqi fiction in a struggle for expression and reconstruction on two levels. On the one hand, in addition to being a major aesthetic preoccupation, the fragmented body of the text problematizes the writing of trauma and memory. As Rebecca Varley-Winter notes, phenomenologically, “literary fragmentation is a matter of embodiment” (4), and the annihilation caused by wars and occupation on the actual streets and in the households of Iraq, as well as the assault on Iraqi lives and bodies and their transformation into what Agamben describes as “bare life,” shatters the very conceptualization of corporeality. Thus, the question to raise here is of how to write what happened in coherent textual bodies when the very notion of corporeality has become indefinite? On the other hand, the act of writing the experience of extreme corporeal violence itself represents two areas of interest: the common one is the documentation of and testimony to a historical collective experience which is expressed in multiple creative forms and genres. The second, and less common, is to consider the ways in which contemporary Iraqi fiction or in which writing contemporary Iraq can be considered a writing through the body. As Elizabeth Grosz writes:

Writing instruments confine and constitute corporeal capacities, both stimulating and stilling social conformity (the acting out of these narratives as “live theater” and a corporeal resistance to the processes of social inscription). The consequences of this are twofold: the “intextuation of bodies,” which transforms the discursive apparatus of regimes of social fiction or knowledge, “correcting” or updating them, rendering them more “truthful” and ensuring their increasingly microscopic focus on the details of psychical and corporeal life; and the incarnation of social laws in the movements, actions, behaviors, and desires of bodies—a movement of the text into the body and the body outside of itself and into sociocultural life. (119)

For the time being this “intextuation of the body” has already transformed the discourse of corporeality in contemporary Iraqi fiction from a place from which to stage ideological endeavors into a recourse for rewriting the history of selfhood and dissent. The movement of this new corporeality “outside of itself and into sociocultural life” is yet to come. Nevertheless, corporeality in contemporary Iraqi fiction reveals that the “turn to the body” —Hamdar’s term, cited above— is a re-evaluation of the mind-body dualism, and a re-situation of the body into an unfamiliar perspective, where it is not only gazed upon or written about, but also returns the gaze and participates in ethical dialectics. Rethinking the body, Grosz affirms, “implies major epistemological upheavals not only for the humanities, which have tended toward idealism, but equally for the natural and social scien-

ces, which have at least aspired to materialism” (x). Therefore, the examination of corporeality implies the imperative necessity to think contemporary Iraqi fiction in philosophical, social, psychological, and psychoanalytical terms, so that the body can move “outside of itself and into sociocultural life.” Tracing the representation of the body from the early twentieth century to today’s fiction will show that these emerging bodies and body-imageries in the most material sense suggest that corporeality has moved from being a private to being a public concern, which marks a development in the perceptions of the body as a cultural sign. This writing of the body sets corporeality up as a border of the semiotic space of Iraqi culture, which opens it up to external associations and identifications, revealing its chains of signification, and placing the Iraqi subject at the heart of human experience.

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