MASKS IN THE IRAQI HELL: ON THE WORKS OF IRAQI WRITER ʿABD AL-SATTĀR NĀṢIR

Geula Elimelekh

Bar-Ilan University

ʿAbd al-Sattār Nāṣir (1947–2013) belonged to the group of Iraqi writers and intellectuals called *Jīl al-Sittināt* 'the Sixties Generation', which dominated the cultural scene at the time. This article examines Nāṣir as a driven writer, who initially wrote out of a morally induced reaction to expose the suffering and brutalization of all Iraqi peoples and ethnicities by a controlling totalitarian regime, and as a once-incarcerated author of brave novels he hoped would someday catalyze a popular overthrow of the lawless, abusive leaders, thereby ending the fears and violence possessing Iraq's body politic. Two themes – the destruction wreaked by those with extraordinary power and their use of lies and deception to control the people – are central to the three novels chosen as representative of Nāṣir's oeuvre: *Abū al-Rīsh* (2002), *Niṣf al-Aḥzān* 'Half of Sorrows' (2000) and *Qushūr al-Badhinjān* 'Eggplant Peels' (2007). In these three novels, Nāṣir exposes the unimaginable terror, violence and cruelty of Saddām Ḥusayn and his henchmen, as well as their propaganda, which consisted of lies and deception. Saddām is depicted as a ruler who presents himself as an inspiring revolutionary, but in fact is a tyrant who deceives the citizens, subjecting them to brutal control and leading them into deadly wars. Following George Orwell's *1984*, Nāṣir's literary corpus attempts to rip the masks from the faces of the dictator and his lackeys, who oppress the people, deny them any freedom of thought and keep them under constant surveillance.

INTRODUCTION

Modern Iraqi fiction arose in the late 1920s (ʿAbd al-Ilāh 1969: 92). The works produced during its earliest stage up to the outbreak of World War II are regarded as experimental. These inclined towards a reformist-didactic character and also incorporated aspects of the new Western literary genres that had spread to Syria, Lebanon and Egypt in the nineteenth century. The literary critic Salām Ibrāhīm writes that these early works in their themes, plot and/or characters were directly concerned with the violence and upheavals of Iraqi history and politics. Many of the pioneering authors were actively involved in political advocacy and social reform. Some were also journalists who wrote op-ed articles critical of their nation's government, military and business leaders.

The literary works of that age gravitated to a somewhat "propagandist" (*tabshīriyya*) bent, which further developed between the world wars to include the struggle for liberation from British imperialism. These overarching literary markers remain the prominent hallmark of Iraqi authors to this day. The continued emergence of the Iraqi novel was spurred on by the political upheavals

of the preceding decades with a later focus on an independent Iraq and the Baʿthist military coup of 1958, followed by additional coup attempts leading to endless bloodshed (Ibrāhīm 2012: 175–176).

Ghāʾib Ṭuʿma Farmān's 1966 novel *Al-Nakhla wa-l-Jīrān* 'The Palm Tree and the Neighbors', which describes several residents in a Baghdad neighborhood, is considered to be the first truly literary Iraqi novel. He and his colleagues ʿAbd al-Mālik Nūrī, Mahdī ʿĪsā al-Ṣaqr and Fūʾad al-Takarlī are considered to have laid the foundations for a distinctive Iraqi fiction (Caiani & Cobham 2013: 244).

In the background of Iraq's literary developmental processes, the Baʿth Party was ousted in 1964 but retook power in 1968. In 1979, the Baʿth leader Ṣaddām Ḥusayn consolidated his iron grip on the country by becoming both Iraq's President and Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council. From 1980 to 1988, he presided over the inconclusive war with Iran. He then invaded Kuwait in 1990, a move that resulted in the imposition of sweeping economic sanctions on Iraq that caused irreversible damage to the country's socio-economic stability, as did the political wreckage caused by the long years of Ṣaddām's dictatorial rule. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq under the pretext of ridding the country of weapons of mass destruction brought Ṣaddām's regime to an end, but did not end the years of bloodshed.

Salām Ibrāhīm observes that these circumstances gave rise to two types of Iraqi literary works: those written in Ṣaddām's Iraq and those composed in exile. The former include war novels brimming with effusive nationalist sentiment without any mention of the bitter realities in Iraq. Stories showing no literary merit glorified the Iran-Iraq War as "Ṣaddām's Qādisiyya" and described an imaginary reality where people are proud of the sacrifices, even unto death, of their loved ones.[1]

Other works dealt with history, myths and symbolism, concentrating on the crisis of the Iraqi citizen during the Ṣaddām era. Examples of these are Muḥammad Khudayyir's *Basrayata* (1996), Maḥmūd Jandarī's *Al-Ḥāfāt* 'Rims' (1989) and ʿAbd al-Khāliq al-Rukkābī's *Min Qabli an Yukhlaq al-Bāshiq* 'Before the Falcon Was Created' (1990). Finally, as oppression grew, it became difficult for writers to write openly and clearly, so we find descriptions of deliberately vague events and unclear figures, such as in Taha Ḥamīd al-Shabīb's novel *Aḥmad Khalaf* (Ibrāhīm 2012: 178–180). Unusual in candor among the works written in Iraq are Mahdī ʿĪsā al-Ṣaqr's *Bayt ʿalā Nahr al-Dijla* 'A House on the Tigris' (2006) and his earlier *Ṣurākh al-Nawāris* 'The Cry of the Seagulls' (1997). The latter dwells on the terrible effect of the war on individuals and society, but without explicitly criticizing politics.

Conversely, the fiction created outside the confines of Iraq from the 1970s and peaking in the early 2000s freely described the suffering, fears and resistance of Iraqi citizens facing death on a daily basis, as well as the crisis of identity suffered by the authors living in exile. Novels by Fāḍil al-ʿAzzāwī and Antoon Sinan, living and working in safety, include autobiographical elements such as descriptions of the authors' experiences in Ṣaddām's prisons or on the front lines. They provide insight into modern Iraqi lives and events beyond what is found in the history books (Ibrāhīm 2012: 180–182).

The literary critic Fāḍil Thāmir writes that the 1960s marked the emergence of new voices in Iraqi literature which did not appear in the 1950s. This literature promoted intense debate

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1 The Battle of Qādisiyya, fought in 637 CE between the Arab Muslims and the Sassanid Persians, resulted in the Muslim conquest of Persia and later the conquest and wresting of Iraq from the Persians. The Ṣaddām Ḥusayn regime applied the term to the Iran-Iraq War, thus casting it as a reenactment of a historic victory.

because it was not a direct continuation of the literature that preceded it. Rather, these works turned a corner towards innovative approaches, new techniques and new forms of expression. The new authors were mostly youthful; their artistic and political awareness took root only after the 1958 coup. Thāmir contends that their emergence was neither coincidental nor surprising, but linked to the events taking place in 1960s Iraq. The 1950s generation of authors, unable to describe the atmosphere after the 1958 coup, continued to write about the old monarchic regime and the struggles against it, even after its collapse. They treated literature as a means of social criticism, best expressed in the "social realism" style. The new generation, however, was imbued with revolutionary spirit and a fresh view of the future (Thāmir 1975: 9–12).

The cultural scene at the time was dominated by a group of Iraqi writers and intellectuals known as the *Jīl al-Sittīnāt* 'The Sixties Generation', to which ʿAbd al-Sattār Nāṣir (1947–2013) belonged.[2] He began writing at an early age and authored novels, stories and critical essays. He also edited the Baghdad periodical *Majallat al-Turāth al-Shaʿbī* 'The Journal of Folkloric Heritage'. Nāṣir's works, written over several decades (from the 1960s until close to his death in 2013), indeed seem to reflect the trials and tribulations of Iraqi history and the desire to find a way to save society and Nāṣir himself from the endless chaos, a desire that led him to compose radical and uncompromising fiction.[3]

Born in 1947, Nāṣir grew up in the Tattran Quarter of Baghdad. When Saddām Ḥusayn first appeared on the political stage, Nāṣir believed him to be Iraq's best hope, but later he became disillusioned. He was jailed for one year for writing the short story *Sayyiduna al-Khalīfa* 'Our Lord, the Caliph', an allegory about the totalitarian rule of an imaginary dictator.[4] In 1999, when his brother's body was sent home in a sealed coffin, he immediately fled Iraq for Amman, Jordan, and ten years later he emigrated to Canada, where he died in 2013.[5] During his final years spent in exile, he wrote vehemently for the sake of peace and stability in Iraq.

This article examines the works of Nāṣir, a driven writer who initially wrote due to a morally induced reaction to expose the suffering and brutalization of all Iraqi peoples and ethnicities at the hands of a controlling totalitarian regime. Alternatively, he was a once incarcerated author of brave novels that he hoped would someday manage to exorcise that regime through a popular overthrow of its lawless, abusive leaders, thus bringing to an end the fears and violence that had possessed Iraq's body politic. Two themes – the destruction wreaked by those with extraordinary power and their use of lies and deception to control the masses – are central to the three

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2 The Iraqi writer Faḍīl al-ʿAzzāwī (b. 1940) claims that the 1960s were a unique decade in modern Iraqi history, when new literary styles emerged within a "complete transformation" of intellectual, political and social consciousness. This generation had a "unique spirit" expressed in its art and poetry that was manifest not so much in formal aspects but in its content and values. The movement, born on 15 July 1958, when the revolution overthrew the Hashemite monarchy and established the Iraqi Republic, did not represent a single artistic school or literary trend, for the Sixties' climate affected the work of writers and artists in remarkably different ways. The Sixties broke down conservative outlooks and literary dogmas, giving priority to creativity and to simplicity of style (al-ʿAzzāwī 1997: 8–10).

3 Salih Altoma's article "Postwar Iraqi Literature: Agonies of Rebirth" states, "What compounds [the Iraqi writer's] search for a solution that would rescue him and his society from a chaotic situation is the fact that, with the disintegration of traditional institutions and values, uncompromising political ideologies emerged (Nasserism, the pan-Arab socialist movement of the Baʿth Party, communism), each aspiring to seize or maintain power at the expense of other important forces. Hence, the intense atmosphere and radical uncompromising spirit that characterizes much of the postwar literature, particularly, poetry" (Altoma 1972: 211–212).

4 See Moosavi 2015: 8.

5 See Zeidel 2010: 164.

novels chosen as representative of Nāṣir's oeuvre: *Abū al-Rīsh* (2002), *Niṣf al-Aḥzān* 'Half Sorrows' (2000) and *Qushūr al-Badhinjān* 'Eggplant Peelings' (2007).

In these three novels, Nāṣir exposes the unimaginable terror, violence and cruelty of Ṣaddām Ḥusayn and his henchmen, as well as their propaganda, which consisted of lies and deception. The analysis of these novels presented here reflects the conclusions of the New Historicist approach, which constructs intellectual history based on fiction. New Historicism has adopted French philosopher Michel Foucault's (1926–1984) theories of socio-political manipulation of power and knowledge as the means of controlling public speech and actions. Foucault argued that the norms and discourse accepted in a given society are tools of oppression wielded by the powerful. New Historicism interprets history in terms of forms of oppression whereby people are forced to act out an ideology whether they agree with it or not, because the powers are able to use fear and constant surveillance as means of control. Literary theorist Peter Barry (1995: 175–176) notes that Foucault's

> pervasive image of the State is that of 'panoptic' (meaning 'all-seeing') surveillance. The Panopticon was a design for a circular prison conceived by the eighteenth-century utilitarian Jeremy Bentham: the design consisted of tiered ranks of cells which could all be surveyed by a single warder positioned at the centre of the circle. The panoptic state, however, maintains its surveillance not by physical force and intimidation, but by the power of its 'discursive practices' (to use Foucault's terminology – 'discursive' is the adjective derived from the noun 'discourse') which circulates its ideology throughout the body politic […] On the whole, new historicism seems to emphasise the extent of this kind of 'thought control', with the implication that 'deviant' thinking may become literally 'unthinkable' (or *only* thinkable), so that the state is seen as a monolithic structure and change becomes almost impossible. Foucault's work looks at the institutions [schools, hospitals, police, government, army] which enable this power to be maintained.

Ṣaddām is depicted as a ruler who presents himself as an inspiring revolutionary, but in fact is a tyrant who deceives Iraq's citizens, subjecting them to brutal control and leading them into deadly wars. Like the Party in George Orwell's *1984*, he cultivates an enemy that poses a constant existential threat to the state and thus serves as a receptacle for the people's hatred. In *1984*, the state's principal enemy is Emmanuel Goldstein, whose manifesto would seem to aptly describe Saddām's party and power politics: "A Party member is expected to have no private emotions and no respites from enthusiasm. He is supposed to live in a continuous frenzy of hatred of foreign enemies and internal traitors, triumph over victories, and self-abasement before the power and wisdom of the Party" (Orwell 1949: 213).

The Baʿth regime, too, encouraged its citizens to hate the enemy, and it led them to believe that their country was winning even when the opposite was true, that being of course another reflection of the propagandist deception and concealment. American-Iraqi author Sinan Antoon, who was born in Iraq in 1967 and emigrated to the US in 1991, also commented on the leadership's perception of victory: "A watchword of the Baathist regime during Iraq's eight-year war with Iran was the 'spirit of victory'. Preserving this 'spirit' (*ruḥ al-naṣr*) was a major task of the regime's efficient propaganda machine throughout the fighting" (Antoon 2010: 29).

Following in Orwell's footsteps, Nāṣir's literary corpus attempts to rip the mask off the faces of the dictator and his lackeys who oppress the people, deny them any freedom of thought and keep them under constant surveillance.

THE NOVEL *ABŪ AL-RĪSH*

In the introduction to *Abū al-Rīsh*,[6] Nāṣir notes that before writing the novel he spent much time in cemeteries "in order to rid [himself] of vanity and the inclination to evil". He often visited the Baghdad cemetery where his family members rest, as does the well-known Sufi mystic, Maʿrūf al-Karkhī, for whom the cemetery is named.[7] This sheikh thus became a major inspiration for the novel. Nāṣir notes that al-Karkhī's tomb was neglected over the centuries and would have fallen into ruin if three caliphs – two Abbasids and an Ottoman sultan – had not maintained it and the adjoining mosque.

Nāṣir adds that he decided to write the novel after the murder of ʿAbd al-Jabbār Nāṣir Jadūʿ al-Zawbāʿī by the regime. He was killed with five bullets to the head and buried immediately. The authorities billed his family for the bullets and refused to allow them to see the body or mourn him in public. Five months later, officials admitted he had actually been innocent.[8]

This incident prompted Nāṣir (2002:10) to expose the atrocities perpetrated in Iraq: "The world is not aware of the catastrophes and massacres occurring here, which have become more than absurd, almost inconceivable. […] and the word 'democracy' here is like an extinct beast whose smell, taste and essence we have no hope of reproducing".

The novel's protagonist, Khālid Munʿim Abū al-Rīsh, hails from a prestigious family but has lost his wealth during the Iran-Iraq War. His wife and one son have been murdered, his daughter has disappeared and his remaining son has fled for his life. Even the small hut where he has lived after losing his home has been leveled to make room for the new palace of the ruler ʿAzzām Jabbāra, who in the novel is a parody of Ṣaddām Ḥusayn. Abū al-Rīsh finds a new home in the Sheikh Maʿrūf al-Karkhī cemetery, in the basement of the undertaker's home located on the grounds. Abū al-Rīsh becomes an assistant to the undertaker, who tells him about the mutilated corpses that he often has to bury in the dead of night. The bodies are delivered in sealed coffins, but the undertaker has opened some up and seen horrors. At night, Abū al-Rīsh hears "the weeping of the dead" (Nāṣir 2002: 23).[9]

When the undertaker asks him to leave, Abū al-Rīsh is reduced to a life of homelessness on the streets of Baghdad. But when the undertaker is murdered, Abū al-Rīsh takes over his predecessor's duties and witnesses the government's covert crimes. In turn, Abū al-Rīsh hires an assistant, a beggar seeking work in the cemetery. When Abū al-Rish asks how long he has been wandering around the gravestones, he replies: "Since the dead asked you for water" (Nāṣir 2002: 42). Abū al-Rīsh is astonished because he has seen that scene in a dream. He understands from the comment that the beggar can see into his soul. They later discover that they both have the same name: Ibrahīm

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6 All page numbers refer to the edition listed in the References as Nāṣir 2002.

7 Abū Maḥfūẓ b. Fīrūz or Fīrūzān (d. 200/815–816) was one of the most celebrated early ascetics and mystics of the Baghdād School, remembered for his maxims such as "Love cannot be learned from men; it is God's gift and derives from His Grace." Always venerated as a saint, Maʿrūf's tomb in Baghdād on the Tigris's west bank remains a popular pilgrimage destination. See Nicholson & Austin, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, <referenceworks. brillonline.com.proxy1.athensams.net/browse/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2>.

8 In an interview published in the summer of 2015, two years after his death, Nāṣir indicated that ʿAbd al-Jabbār Nāṣir Jadūʿ al-Zawbāʿī was actually his brother. See "Writer ʿAbd al-Sattar Nāṣir: My Dream Is to Return to My Homeland", interview with Muḥammad Bakr, *Watanpress Arabic Newspaper*, <www.watanpressonline.com/archives/1783>, accessed 14 Sept. 2017 [in Arabic].

9 Interestingly, in Nāṣir's story "Rajul Ismuhu Aḥmad" 'A Man Named Aḥmad' in the collection *Zahra Wāḥida Takfī* 'One Flower Is Enough', the dead are said to suffer less than the living (ʿAbbūd 2002: 209).

al-ʿIryān. The novel implies that the two share a deep mystical bond and may in fact be one and the same person, reflecting an element of magical realism often seen in Iraqi literature.[10]

The beggar represents the opposite of concealment, for nothing is hidden from him, not even dreams. He is the antithesis of the tyrant al-Jabbāra, a kind of all-seeing "Big Brother", but one who, like the holy man al-Karkhī whose spirit permeates the cemetery, uses his power to gain insight into the truth rather than to create a web of lies and deceit. The cemetery itself is a juncture between two worlds: the physical and the spiritual. Here physical life not only ends in the ground; spirits walk the earth and thence enter the spirit world. Here is the ultimate abode of truth and, paradoxically, also the place where the regime hides the evidence of its atrocities.[11]

Abū al-Rīsh feels that the beggar is harboring a secret. One day he discovers his real identity – Maḥmūd Jābir al-Khamīs, the famous enemy of the leader ʿAzzām Jabbāra. False names characterize life in a dictatorship, the ultimate manifestation of Foucault's image of the "panoptic" state. It is not only the oppressors who hide behind masks, but also the oppressed who often must conceal their identity in order to survive.

Abū al-Rīsh and the beggar join forces to fight the regime: they acquire weapons and kill three men who come one night to deliver sealed coffins. They bury the three in a swamp, and another man is convicted for their crime. Encouraged, they kill more lackeys of the regime. Such deeds make them killers who are no less brutal than the regime itself. Thus, they become part of "Iraq's endless cycle of violence". Abū al-Rīsh is tormented by this. He weeps for his homeland, where everything has gone awry, even men's consciences, and where "God's creatures are spread over the earth and terror has settled in peaceful homes" (Nāṣir 2002: 42). Iraq, he says, has become a giant cemetery by submitting to madmen, murderers and riffraff, but nobody in the outside world realizes that the leader himself controls the crimes (Nāṣir 2002: 104). Ironically, the streets of Baghdad are full of huge portraits of the leader ʿAzzām Jabbāra with the slogan "Unity, Freedom, Social Equality", a literary allusion to the Zeitgeist of the 1789 French Revolution and the "Reign of Terror" that followed in its wake.

Maḥmūd al-Khamīs persuades Abū al-Rīsh to flee Iraq with him. After disguising themselves and assuming new names, the two reach Samarra, where they part ways in order to avoid detection. Maḥmūd heads for Basra, but before parting he gives Abū al-Rīsh some papers, with instructions to read them only in the event of his death.

The events that befall Abū al-Rīsh and Maḥmūd al-Khamīs reflect the terror that permeates the lives of Iraqis. Thus all conversations take place under a pall of fear. The protagonist says that even people sitting in coffee shops seem afraid: "I look at people's faces: they are afraid of something; their souls are locked away, frightened" (Nāṣir 2002: 91). He continues: "Before me is a city writhing in hunger and fear" (Nāṣir 2002: 114). People are like objects deprived of the freedom to speak or feel. They laugh and applaud when told to do so. "We walk like a herd of sheep in front of the stick held by women who laugh at our degraded manhood […] All the ministers are but pawns moving according to the will of ʿAzzām Jabbāra" (Nāṣir 2002: 115). Eventually Abū al-Rīsh arrives in Basra, where he learns that Maḥmūd has been arrested and apparently executed. He remembers

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10 See n. 21 below.

11 A similar perception of life and death appears in Iraqi author Sinan Antoon's 2013 novel *Waḥdahā Shajarat al-Rumān* (English version, *The Corpse Washer*) where the protagonist says, "I had thought that life and death were two separate worlds with clearly marked boundaries, but now I know they are conjoined, sculpting each other" (Antoon 2013: 184; see also Elimelekh 2017: 251–254).

and reads the papers that his friend gave him. Maḥmūd's view of the Iraqi reality, "We live in absurd times that exceed all imagination," numbs him (Nāṣir 2002: 141).

This state of absurdity seems to be global, not just limited to Iraq. The major existentialists and some phenomenologists contended that human reason could discern no inherent purpose for humanity's existence and for the universe that they inhabit; therefore, the world seems absurd. Hence, the absence of meaning creates a sense of alienation that not only characterizes man's relationship with the natural world, but also his relationship with society, with other individuals and even with himself.[12]

This sense of the absurd and alienation is heightened under dictatorial regimes. The Syrian writer and philosopher Ḥalīm Barakāt explains that Arab governments control society, wear it down and neglect it. The people serve the state and not vice versa – so they need protection from the state. The regime severs the individual's control over his own fate and disallows popular determination of the government's structure or policies. Consequently, the Arab state does not belong to its citizens but is rather a sword at their necks. Arab society, Barakāt writes, is alienated, which is a result of social disintegration, erosion of values, loss of a sense of belonging, social stratification and a political system dominated by power struggles instead of coexistence and solidarity (Barakāt 2006: 31–32, 71, 96). Altoma notes that in the play *Tamūz Yaqraʿu al-Nāqūs* 'Tammuz Rings the Bell' (1968), the Iraqi communist playwright ʿĀdil Kāẓim (b. 1939) tries to capture the inner feelings and thoughts of his rebel hero in existentialist terms redolent of Sartre and Camus (Altoma 1972: 213). Also, the literary critic Fāḍil Thāmir notes that, in Nāṣir's early stories, the emphasis is on the tangible world of the senses. His shift to the philosophical or metaphysical becomes apparent in his later writing, which includes the works discussed here (Thāmir 1975: 25).

Despite the all-pervasive gloom of Abū al-Rīsh's mad and absurd reality, some glimmers of light crop up in Basra. A coffee shop owner, Abū Salmān, treats him with warmth and kindness and employs him as a guard. Abū Salmān represents Iraq's benign past. "He is an intangible figure from days gone by. Growing up amid bitterness and terror, [he bore] the load of our illustrious history. The germs of a world full of whipping rods, gallows and informers were absent from his life" (Nāṣir 2002: 177–178).

But even this kind man falls victim to the corruption of a greedy security force that one day demands legal proof of ownership of his coffee shop. Eventually he is forced to sell the business, or else. As a witness, Abū al-Rīsh falls into a frenzy of anxiety and paranoia. This near-psychotic state is reflected in his nightmares: "Ants crawl on my clothes and in my very veins [...] I see a man dragging me to a house high up on a volcano that has split open. There, an enormous emperor orders a group of devils to roast me in the fire of the terrible volcano" (Nāṣir 2002: 154).

Abū Salmān tries to reassure the protagonist, promising him a new identity and a new job: "Relax, tomorrow we can get you the most beautiful name you could wish for. You only have to choose the mask you want to wear for them" (Nāṣir 2002: 168). But Abū al-Rīsh is not convinced, because the next day he spots a notice in the newspaper offering a reward for information about his whereabouts. His nightmares increase, yet he decides to form an underground cell with four other men.

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12 Among the thinkers who were preoccupied with the concept of the absurd were Søren Kierkegaard, whose *Either/Or* (1987) addressed it, and Albert Camus, who treated it in his philosophical *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger" (Camus 1964: 6).

In exile in the later part of his life, Nāṣir became deeply concerned about the issues of living abroad. Caiani and Cobham (2013: 242–243) write,

> Since the creation of Iraq almost a century ago, its citizens have suffered from actual physical exile (like Yūsuf Ibn Hilāl) or various forms of internal exile (such as isolation, including banishment to a remote area of the country, alienation and marginalisation).[13] […] In Farman's second novel, *Khamsat Aswāt* 'Five Voices', ʿAbd al-Khāliq (the fictional Nūrī)[14] says: […] 'I feel like a foreigner [*uḥiss bi-l-ghurba*] in my own house' (Farmān 2008: 68).

Exile was not only the lot of several writers of the 1950s generation. In the following decades as well, the number of writers in exile steadily grew. As stated above, two separate literatures emerged: works produced within and outside Iraq. Nāṣir, belonging to the Sixties Generation, uses the character of Abū al-Rīsh to describe a situation of physical exile within the homeland itself, as well as spiritual exile abroad. As previously noted, he had experienced this himself, as well as the emotional distress he suffered in spite of no longer having to constantly look over his shoulder in fear.

Abū al-Rīsh continues his restless wandering throughout Iraq, homeless and exiled in his own land, both physically and spiritually. Like other intellectuals, he finds solace in writing; he recollects and records his experiences at the Maʿrūf al-Karkhī cemetery. Many other exiled Arab authors, including ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Munīf, Sinān Antoon and Faḍīl al-ʿAzzāwī, to name just three, have said that their art served as their lifeline in times of distress. In this novel, Abū al-Rīsh says, "Writing restored my sanity and helped me to expunge the repugnant malignant tumor from my skin and from my sinful veins" (Nāṣir 2002: 262). Writing is his kingdom, where "nobody can take away his crown" (Nāṣir 2002: 254). Seeing the fruit of his labors, he bursts into tears of joy. Writing is a catharsis as well as a record of his memories and the atrocities that he has witnessed. "I write like a brokenhearted man sentenced to death, who wishes to record everything at once, before the noose comes close and his last will and testimony remains orphaned upon his abandoned bed" (Nāṣir 2002: 253); "I have no other record of my life except these pages" (Nāṣir 2002: 265).[15]

ʿAbd al-Sattār Nāṣir thus joined a long line of authors who were exposed to modern Iraq's endless cycle of violence and sought to comprehend its reasons.[16] In *Thaqafāt al-ʿUnf fī al-ʿIrāq* 'The Culture of Violence in Iraq', the author and researcher Salām 'Abbūd (b. 1950) writes that unraveling his country's political reality and its reflection in literature requires an acquaintance with the Iraqi character. Iraqis, he notes, have been described as two-faced and quarrelsome; for example, the Iraqi social scientist ʿAlī al-Wardī says they suffer from a "split personality". Salām

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13 Yūsuf Ibn Hilāl is the protagonist of Mahdī ʿIsā al-Saqr's 1995 novel *Ashwāq Ṭaʾir al-Layl* 'Longings of the Night Bird', loosely based on the life of the renowned Iraqi poet Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, who died in a hospital in Kuwait in 1964. In one of the book's chapters titled *Dhikrayāt… Dhikrayāt* 'Memories… Memories', the poet Ibn Hilāl sits in a Paris café. The chapter alternates scenes from the café with memories from his life in his homeland of Iraq, conveying a sense of nostalgia, loneliness and the desperation of a man in exile (Caiani & Cobham 2013: 241–242).

14 ʿAbd al-Khāliq, the protagonist of this novel, is based on the Iraqi author ʿAbd al-Khāliq Nūrī.

15 In ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Munīf's (2001: 149) novel *al-Ān Hunā, aw Sharq al-Mutawassiṭ Marratan Ukhra* 'Here and Now, or East of the Mediterranean Revisited', the protagonist writes, "I, Taliʿ al-Arīfī, was among the prisoners at Mūrān prison for over a decade. […] I am a political prisoner and was imprisoned without due process. […] All the prisoners, some of whom have been imprisoned much longer than I, even twice as long, are incarcerated without knowing how long they will spend behind bars and what their future holds".

16 Other notable examples include Fādhil al-Azzāwī, Yāsīn Ḥusayn, Burhān al-Khaṭīb, Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Majīd, Ghāʾib Tuʿma Farmān and Sinān Antūn.

ʿAbbūd points to the non-uniformity of Iraqi society, composed of many different ethnicities and religious sects. Such diversity can be either a blessing or a curse, but Ṣaddām Ḥusayn chose the latter, exploiting it through a policy of divide and rule. He cultivated the hostility between groups to consolidate his own grip on power (Abbūd 2002: 156–161). ʿAbbūd believes that Iraqi violence and strife stem from the "divide and rule" methods of the power-hungry.

Fādhil al-ʿAzzāwī (1997: 24) takes a somewhat different approach in his book *Al-Rūḥ al-Ḥayya: Jīl al-Sittīnāt fī al-ʿIrāq* 'The Living Spirit': "The victim does not become a victim unless he believes that he is shedding his blood for the truth, and the hangman does not become a hangman unless he believes that his whip drives the mules pulling the cart of history." No matter which faction rules Iraq, he adds, it never contemplates the promotion of a culture of reconciliation, tolerance or dialogue, for none of the ruling elites recognize any option other than a policy of eliminating the other (*ijtithāth*).

In the introduction to *Abū al-Rīsh*, Nāṣir, whose outlook corresponds to al-ʿAzzāwī's views, urges people to read the novel and then visit Baghdad to "take pictures" of its ruins and its orphans' tears. These pictures, he says,

> will be damning evidence of the human rights violations in this country that is tormented by butchers, madmen and lunatics [...]. We will witness the magnitude of the shock that has befallen Iraq and the depth of the chasm dividing rulers and people. We will also see the bodies of the butchered, their bellies torn, their limbs severed, their teeth broken and their eyes gouged out – and this for no reason other than the fact that they opposed the slavery and the crimes." (Nāṣir 2002: 12)[17]

He also laments the world's silence in the face of the crimes in Iraq and the mass exodus of Iraqi intellectuals. And though Nāṣir promises to present the reader with facts, he states that even they are merely a reproduction of reality, for the original – the complete truth – is known only to the criminals themselves.

In 1969, when he was a young soldier in the Iraqi army, the author once saw the Iraqi leader in the flesh. Like many other Iraqis, he believed that Ṣaddām held "the keys to Paradise" and would save the country. Only later did he discover that it was all a ruse, a false mask, and that the man was actually a cold-blooded murderer who threw his opponents into torture chambers and took over Iraq's oil resources and historical sites without batting an eye. He adds that the leader ʿAzzām Jabbāra appears in the novel "just as ghosts, bacteria and nightmares that appear in it" (Nāṣir 2002: 14). The introduction ends by saying that fiction is the optimal medium for exposing historical events "in our burned-out era".

THE NOVEL *NIṢF AL-AḤZĀN*

Niṣf al-Aḥzān,[18] a work of prison fiction inspired by the author's own experience as a political prisoner, makes extensive use of introspective stream-of-consciousness narration. As a book belonging

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17 Likewise, Iraqi author Aḥmad Saʿdāwī's (b. 1973) novel *Frānkinshtāyn fī Baghdād* 'Frankenstein in Baghdad' (2013) exposes the surreal reality, the terror and the insanity in Iraq, the country whose glorious history had become a cesspit of division and bloodshed, which continued even after Saddām Ḥusayn's fall. The story set in 2005 tells of a used furniture scavenger who collects the severed body parts of terror victims and creates from them a kind of Frankenstein's monster. The creature avenges the people whose body parts comprise it, but it also begins killing innocent people, thus adding another twist to the cycle of violence entrapping Iraq.

18 All page numbers refer to the edition listed in the References as Nāṣir 2000.

to the prison novel genre, it is replete with characteristic existential motifs ranging from anxiety, loneliness, persecution and the absurd to freedom as both an aspiration and a burden.[19]

In the story, a 37-year-old civil servant, Salmān Yaʿqūb, together with a colleague, ʿAbd al-Bārī, is arrested for suspected ties to a dissident named Hasūn al-Bazz. He is imprisoned for nine years. In prison, Salmān and ʿAbd al-Bārī become very close. ʿAbd al-Bārī talks about his wife, whose photo hangs on the filthy, blood-spattered wall of their cell. The prison authorities ignore and never even interrogate Salmān, but ʿAbd al-Bārī is brutally tortured and almost paralyzed. Surmising that he will eventually be killed, he asks Salmān to take care of his family, especially his daughter, should he die. After some years, ʿAbd al-Bārī is carried away from his prison cell for the last time. On the way out, his strangled voice whispers, "Salmān, is it conceivable? Can this be the fate of people whose only crime is that they loved their country? […] the country is lost…" (Nāṣir 2000: 18). Alone now, Salmān thinks, "How sad to leave life without having realized a dream or a hope in this foolish world which is filled with landmines in the form of people and cruel rulers" (Nāṣir 2000: 21).

Here too the theme of concealment is apparent: the prison authorities do not divulge ʿAbd al-Bārī's fate, and Salmān does not dare to ask. Ultimately, he accepts that his friend has been executed and clandestinely buried.

Five days after ʿAbd al-Bari's disappearance, Salmān is finally hustled out of his dark basement cell for interrogation. The interrogator wears dark glasses (another act of concealment); Salmān yearns to see his face. He asks himself why the torturer is never afraid of the victim.[20] The interrogator is surprised to discover that Salmān has never been questioned throughout his nine years in prison. Salmān relates the circumstances of his arrest, when policemen burst into his office and grabbed him in front of his co-workers, declaring that he was the "third man" in Hasūn al-Bazz's house. Salmān tried then to explain that he was not involved in politics and that his presence in al-Bazz's home had been incidental.

After his interrogation, Salmān is locked in a cell on the ground floor without any explanation for his improved conditions. Eventually he is released, but he remains overwhelmed with grief for his lost time in prison. Unable to celebrate his release, he feels isolated from the world, physically and emotionally: "They returned me to my home at four in the morning […] I remained there, hiding from the whole world. I locked my door, my skin crawling, and decided that sleep was the best cure for the shivers that gripped me and would never let me go" (Nāṣir 2000: 7).

He roams the streets of his native city, castigating it for abandoning him and letting him rot in jail: "I stepped out into Baghdad, weeping and complaining to it for betraying and forgetting me" (Nāṣir 2000: 28). Evoking the motif of masks once again, Salmān bemoans the discrepancy between the city's innocuous outer appearance and the horrors that it conceals: "Who can believe that your inner dungeons hold such horror? Your outer shell, oh Baghdad, which I now behold, is nothing like the slow gnawing, amputation and perdition that go on down there, beneath your swollen buttocks." (Nāṣir 2000: 28–29) Later he adds, "This is not the capital of

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19 In *Existentialism and Humanism*, Jean-Paul Sartre (1965: 34) says that man's anxiety stems from the fact that he is free and therefore responsible for his actions: "There is no determinism – man is free, man *is* freedom. […] We are left alone, without excuse". Since man is alone in the world without God to serve as an external source of values, he is free to choose his own way, and this choice is a heavy burden.

20 In Munīf's novel *al-Ān Hunā, aw Sharq al-Mutawassiṭ Marratan Ukhra* 'Here and Now, or East of the Mediterranean Revisited', the chief torturer, named al-Shahīrī, also masks his face.

Hārūn al-Rashīd, nor is it *Dār al-Salām* [the Abode of Peace] or the loving home in which we grew up" (Nāṣir 2000: 237).

He laments his friends murdered in prison, whose bodies the earth now shrouds in anonymity. He asks, "How many crimes were committed while I was away and how many battles were fought that I never heard about? How many people were murdered, their bodies never returned to their families? […] Everything is done in deadly silence, for it is weapons that speak…" (Nāṣir 2000: 61).

During his imprisonment, Salmān suffered from nightmares and hallucinations, and they have continued after his release. In prison, the interrogator had warned Salmān, "We know all about you: where you go, where you sleep, and at which coffee shop you drink your tea" (Nāṣir 2000: 56). He tells Salmān that if he receives information about the dissident al-Bazz, he must immediately inform the authorities. In fact, he instructs him to seek out information as soon as possible, a demand that fills Salmān with dread.

Even when Salmān has gained physical freedom, he does not feel free. Once he is released, the normalcy so long yearned for in prison seems completely out of reach, and it drowns him in a deep, dark sea of depression. His family has fallen apart, leaving him trapped in loneliness. Moreover, the constant surveillance of the regime's goons – "fat, course rhinoceroses armed with guns" (Nāṣir 2000: 54) – shadows his every step, victimizing and persecuting him, putting him in a paranoid funk. Salmān urges the people to rise up as one and crush these rhinos, before the latter sentence them all to death. The rhinoceroses clearly allude to Eugène Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros*, an exemplum of the Theatre of the Absurd, which was written as a response to Nazism and other totalitarian, fascist regimes. Ionesco's play portrays those who grapple with the absurdity of existence in their search for the meaning and purpose of life, even as they face the danger of becoming a rhinoceros, someone who willingly surrenders his or her individual identity and moral compass. Similarly, Nāṣir's novel exposes the unimaginable brutality of the despotic Iraqi reality and criticizes society for enabling it and allowing it to emerge and continue.

Nāṣir unremittingly underscores the absurdity of topsy-turvy life in Iraq, especially the murderous persecution that takes place around the clock in its prisons, which Salmān calls "slaughterhouses" (Nāṣir 2000: 37). Salmān's nightmares and hallucinations strengthen the overwhelming cognizance of a world gone mad. In fact, at some point after his release Salmān winds up in a mental hospital. In his addled state, he asks, "Who is that idiot inside my skull?" (Nāṣir 2000: 85). The protagonist's insanity is another facet of the eerie atmosphere that pervades Nāṣir's novels.

Ferial J. Ghazoul observes that a profound strangeness at odds with normalcy permeates much of Iraq's modern literary fiction. It is both the outcome of the horrific actualities of Iraq and one of the techniques used to depict it, as "such a complex reality affects the techniques of fictional writing and how diverse and frequent are the "fantastic" and the "strange" in the fictional discourse – both serving to depict an extraordinary reality as well as a strategy of revealing through concealing" (Ghazoul 2004: 2). Ghazoul associates this sense of strangeness with the Freudian notion of the *unheimlich* (translated as 'unhomely' or 'uncanny'), noting that the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha transferred this term from psychoanalysis to the psychopolitical domain.

Nāṣir's novels often comprise "uncanny" episodes and merge realism with fantasy in ways that are tantamount to "magical realism".[21] In some cases it is unclear whether the depictions are real or only figments of the imagination of Salmān, who has lost his sanity due to torture and long incarceration. The insanity has both mental and physical symptoms. He says, "My madness takes precedence over everything else in my body" (Nāṣir 2000: 75). Salmān's confusion is reflected in Nāṣir's writing style. The critic Saʿdaʾ al-Daʿas chides Nāṣir's narrative voice for oscillating between past and present and between first person and third person in a way that makes it difficult for the reader to follow.[22] However, these grammatical inconsistencies are deliberate, reflecting the protagonist's inner turmoil as well as his chaotic environment.

In the hospital, his physical condition deteriorates to the point where his life is in danger. Salmān is afraid that, although his body has survived, the torture has disturbed his mind and left him without kindness or a conscience. His moral confusion leads him to hatch the idea of visiting ʿAwātif, the wife of his late friend ʿAbd al-Bārī, and pretending to be her husband.

ʿAdnān Ḥusayn Aḥmad writes that the novel *Niṣf al-Aḥzān* exposes the methods of the Baʿth regime, which undermined its citizens' human dignity and freedom, and whose foundations were "nothing but a diseased edifice born of a mad mind contaminated by hostility mixed with both rigidity and stupidity" (Nāṣir 2000: 26). The regime picked apart people's minds and conscience, seeking some loose thread that could form the basis for accusing them, arresting them and imposing harsh penalties on them (Aḥmad 2014: 179).

THE NOVEL *QUSHŪR AL-BADHINJĀN*

Qushūr al-Badhinjān narrates the relationship between the protagonist, a released prisoner named Yāsir ʿAbd al-Wāḥid, and his torturer, Dūhān Maʿrūf.[23] Yāsir is an intellectual who after his imprisonment is forced to sustain himself by working as a carpenter. The story begins many years after Yāsir's release, when Dūhān comes to Yāsir's house to ask for forgiveness. "He came to me some seven months before April 9, 2003,[24] repeating words I could not understand. 'I am sorry about what I did to you. My apology is not enough, and no compensation can compensate for my crime. I beg you to forgive me. God bless you. You may do to me as you please, even kill me'" (Nāṣir 2007: 9). Yāsir, who does not recognize Dūhān, thinks the man is mistaking him for someone else. Nevertheless, the incident shocks him, because it evokes memories of twenty years earlier when he was arrested and accused of being a Communist Party member, even though he was not, and then suffered severe torture in prison before eventually being released. Dūhān is relentless and returns four days later. This time, Yāsir remembers him as the prison torturer who had been "both God and Satan" (Nāṣir 2007: 14). Dūhān offers to give him a large

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21 Amaryll Beatrice Chanady (1985: 16–21) argues that magical realism, like fantasy, is a literary mode rather than a literary genre. In the 1940s, Central and South American authors used it as a means to express the authentic Latin American spirit and to develop an independent style. Its most salient characteristic is the presence of the supernatural and of elements that are at odds with our conventional view of reality. Theo D'haen (1997: 194–195) writes that magical realism aims to "create an alternative world correcting so-called existing reality, and thus to right the wrongs this 'reality' depends upon".

22 See <www.diwanalarab.com/spip.php?page=article&id_article=3835>, accessed 6 Sept. 2017 [in Arabic].

23 All page numbers refer to the edition listed in the References as Nāṣir 2007.

24 9 April 2003 is the entry date of US ground forces into Baghdad.

sum of money in compensation for his crimes, but Yāsir cannot forgive him. Nonetheless, throughout the novel Yāsir remains conflicted, torn between forgiving the torturer or not.[25]

His encounters with Dūhān trouble Yāsir with disquieting thoughts about the dismal state of Iraq, and especially of its people. "It takes only three letters to say 'no' [*k-l-a* in Arabic] and save ourselves, our descendants and our land from the ogre of corruption [… but] how can we say 'no' when they have erased that word from all encyclopedias, sources and dictionaries?" (Nāṣir 2007: 24). This statement recalls Erich Fromm's idea that recognizing truth does not involve accepting some entrenched and sanctified ideology or religious creed but rather deciding for oneself what to accept and what to reject, and having the courage to say no, defy authority and fight for one's beliefs.

> I believe that to recognize the truth is not primarily a matter of intelligence, but a matter of character. The most important element is the courage to say 'no,' to disobey the commands of power and of public opinion; […] 'no' to all those who want to enslave, exploit and stultify him. I believe in freedom, in man's right to be himself, to assert himself and to fight all those who try to prevent him from being himself. But freedom is more than the absence of violent oppression. It is more than 'freedom from.' It is 'freedom to' —the freedom to become independent; the freedom to *be* much, rather than to *have* much or to *use* things and people. (Fromm 1980: 170–171)

Yāsir harbors profound doubts about religious tenets and beliefs. Like other characters in Nāṣir's novels, he experiences life and the world as absurdities, and he ponders the purpose of man's creation. He questions the stories about the founders and prophets of the monotheistic religions, as well as such basic tenets as Heaven and Hell and the resurrection of the dead. He argues that accepted religious beliefs make God seem no less tyrannical than the Iraqi government. "Why would God frighten us with harsh punishments? The Iraqi government operates in the same manner: those who praise it live a life of ease, while those who oppose it are cast into Hell. What [then] is the difference between the Government and God?" (Nāṣir 2007: 87). He later repents, however, saying that this comparison is ill-founded.

Nāṣir presents tyranny and oppression as not only characteristic of Iraq but of the entire Arab world. Like Munīf, he presents this region as uniformly harsh and violent. "The police are the same in every corner of our Arab world, which is molded from fire and shame. Fear is a seed that does not thrive if the soil is not Arab soil. […] It does not develop in Paris, Stockholm or Austria. Fear is Arab" (Nāṣir 2007: 61).[26]

In *Qushūr al-Badhinjān*, the torturer Dūhān ironically represents this fear. In his last encounter with Yāsir, Dūhān hands him a diary of his recorded crimes. On the first page, Dūhān quotes the Qurʾān: "And if you speak aloud – then He knows the secret and what is more hidden" (Sūra *Ṭā-Hā* 20:7).

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25 Munīf's novel *al-Ān Hunā, aw Sharq al-Mutawassiṭ Marratan Ukhra* 'Here and Now, or East of the Mediterranean Revisited' contains a similar scene. One of the main characters, the forgiving ʿAdil al-Khālidī, meets his former torturer Abū Muhannad. The latter expresses remorse for his crimes. ʿAdel says to him, "Abū Muhannad, forget [it…] we were […in] prison, one of us a torturer and the other a victim […]. You too must forget!" Abū Muhannad replies, "I was dirt, I was a dog. I am unworthy [of your forgiveness…] By Allah, […] I've become a corpse" (Munīf 2001: 529). In the end, the former victim is the only one who helps him.

26 Also, in *al-Ān Hunā, aw Sharq al-Mutawassiṭ Marratan Ukhra*, the protagonist Rajab exclaims, "Oh people of Paris, had you brought your books to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, you would have spent the rest of your lives in jail […]. [If you visit the East,] be careful not to even think of political parties, because every word you utter will be heard by someone who will turn it into a conspiracy against the regime. [And] you will [spend] the rest of your lives in a desert prison, where you will end up dead […]" (Munīf 2001: 155).

Dūhān writes that he did not start out as a ruthless torturer. Being from Tikrit, he was related to Ṣaddām Ḥusayn, who hired him as a bodyguard. Later Dūhān was transferred to the General Security Directorate (secret police), where he was tasked with interrogating prisoners. Initially, however, he was ill-suited to the job; his fellow interrogators mocked his gentle demeanor towards the detainees. When forced to watch their methods, Dūhān wished that the "earth would open and swallow them up" (Nāṣir 2007: 104). His superiors demanded that he use harsher tactics to frighten the prisoners, stating, "fear is the first condition for the stability and the might of the regime" (Nāṣir 2007: 101). In time, Dūhān relented and eventually lost his compassion entirely, becoming one of the cruelest torturers and so brutal that he was nicknamed Shammām al-Dam 'Smeller of Blood'.

Yet, however heartless he was towards the prisoners, Dūhān never gained his superiors' respect and was denied privileges that others enjoyed. His fellow torturers persecuted him, and he feared them, knowing that if he left they would have his daughters killed and his house destroyed. Thus, the torturer was also a victim. Afterwards, he realized the magnitude of his crimes and repented:

> We [torturers] are the only ones who deserve to disappear from the world, for we abandoned compassion […] We are the insects of the world. Even dogs are better than us […] Our [Iraqi] history is one big lie […] We have no history except massacres, corruption and wantonness. Our history is like putty in the hands [of Dūhān's fellow torturers…]. Sheep, sheep, sheep. The people are herded like sheep, and the president writes our distorted history. (Nāṣir 2007: 106)

These words recall Erich Fromm's observations in *The Heart of Man*. Wondering whether humans are more like "sheep" or "wolves," he writes,

> Should we assume that the simple answer is that there is a minority of wolves living side by side with a majority of sheep? The wolves want to kill; the sheep want to follow. Hence the wolves get the sheep to kill, to murder and to strangle, and the sheep comply not because they enjoy it, but because they want to follow. (Fromm 2010: 13)

Dūhān's diary shows that he was not really a wolf but rather a sheep who merely followed. The secret police, he writes, are largely "sheep-trained to play the part of wild beasts or hyenas until they came to believe they really were [such beasts]. They became even harsher and more dedicated when they were transferred to a job where they wore a mask and were proud of it" (Nāṣir 2007: 108).[27]

Dūhān wonders if his victims will ever forgive him and if he will be forgiven on Judgment Day. His diary mentions Yāsir, saying that he felt especially sorry for him because he was very young, did not even know the meaning of the word "communist," and was indeed innocent. After reading the diary, Yāsir decides that Dūhān deserves his forgiveness, as well as that of all the others he tortured, because he was but a small cog in a monstrous machine, and he probably followed orders out of fear.[28] He adds that "there is no doubt he believes in Allah, in Paradise, in Hell and in the Resurrection". Yāsir speculates, "Perhaps he has tried persuading dozens of torture victims to forgive him, and I am the only one left […] Am I to prevent him from entering

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27 In *You Shall Be as Gods*, Fromm (1966: 101) writes, "Every evil act tends to harden man's heart, that is, to deaden it. […] The more man's heart hardens, the less freedom does he have to change."

28 A torturer may justify his acts with the argument that he is an official carrying out his superiors' orders. Submission to an all-powerful ruler leads to a disregard of ethical and religious principles, because such principles subvert tyranny; in other words, the ability to distinguish between good and evil is incongruous with corrupt dictatorships (see Elimelekh 2014: 72–73).

Paradise and cause him to go to Hell?” (Nāṣir 2007: 50). In the Iraqi miasma of violence and limitless corruption, few people manage to maintain their decency and integrity and to escape the cycle of evil in which victims become victimizers, or vice versa.

Even Yāsir, like Salmān in *Niṣf al-Aḥzān*, becomes corrupted by letting himself be seduced by his best friend Ḥirān’s wife. He feels lost, bereft of his moral compass. “I looked for the Yāsir I knew, the boy who had learned the Qurʾān by heart and the man who had refrained from taking stolen money. […] How can I believe I have become a dirty villain?” (Nāṣir 2007: 124) He realizes that anyone can potentially be corrupted and now understands how Dūhān turned into the Smeller of Blood.[29]

To convey the enormity of the Baʿth regime’s insidious power, Nāṣir freely makes reference to *1984* by borrowing Orwell’s euphemistic misnomers, such as the “Ministry of Peace” (which deals with war), the “Ministry of Truth” (which spreads propaganda) and the “Thought Police” (who monitor and intimidate the populace). However, Nāṣir believes that the imagined dystopia of *1984* pales by comparison to Iraq’s putrid reality. Yāsir says,

> My nightmares are different from the ones in *1984*, the nightmares Orwell imagined about the lives we actually live, about Big Brother who watches you wherever you go. […] Had Orwell lived here, he would have probably laughed at the novel he wrote, for this is where the cruelest crimes take place. [Yet, he says] the novel *1984* should be in every home, so that people understand the meaning of a rotten dictatorship that kills everything.[30] (Nāṣir 2007: 31–32)

Describing Baghdad after the American invasion, Yāsir notes that although Iraq was liberated from the tyrant, the situation did not improve. “Life did not go back to normal after 9 April 2003, nor was it normal before this date” (Nāṣir 2007: 159). Under US occupation, Baghdad knew explosions, suicide bombings, kidnappings, murders, arson and armed robbery on a daily basis. Sunni and Shi’ite militias fought in the streets, and chaos reigned. The cemeteries overflowed, and the wounded and crippled were everywhere. Yāsir has no doubt Iraq was cursed, but this time the curse was different and more terrible. He stresses that the Baghdad that he knew is dead. He says, “Impatience filled the people in every corner of Iraq, impatience, despair, defeat and sighs. Only miracles can bring mercy upon us now, but this is not a time of miracles, for the Prophets have fled and left this world. […] Even if [they] return, they will not be able to benefit this world” (Nāṣir 2007: 160). Clarifying the title of the novel, he says, “Our lives have become eggplant peels: black, dark and tattered” (Nāṣir 2007: 133), and “life has become nothing but eggplant peelings: rotten, black and worthless, but we continue to live by force of habit” (Nāṣir 2007: 152).

During Dūhān’s last visit with Yāsir, he begs to know if he has been forgiven. Weeping, he asks for his diary back. Yāsir hands it over, blesses Dūhān, and kisses him on the head. Yāsir has copied its pages, something that he keeps from Dūhān, who eventually is brutally murdered. Shocked by this news, Yāsir fearfully repents his betrayal of his friend Ḥirān and feels as wicked as Dūhān, if not worse. He sobs uncontrollably. “I weep for man’s humanity, which is lost and buried deep. I weep for those whose compassion has been excised from their

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29 In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt intuits that to achieve absolute power, totalitarian regimes require total control over all citizens’ lives. But such complete control can be achieved only over dolls or beasts without emotion, and hence totalitarian regimes seek to reduce all citizens to such a state (Arendt 1958: 456).
30 Totalitarian regimes invariably indulge in indoctrination, for which Orwell (1949: 215–216) coined the term “doublethink”, that is, “the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them. […] Even in using the word *doublethink* it is necessary to exercise doublethink. For by using the word one admits that one is tampering with reality […] with the lie always one step ahead of the truth”.

hearts and for compassion [itself], which has emigrated far from Iraq. I weep for Iraq, beset with mayhem and brutality. I weep because brutality has become a school of thought, a sect and a tribe" (Nāṣir 2007: 167).

After an abortive stay in Amman, Jordan (also Nāṣir's first destination on fleeing Iraq), Yāsir decides to return to Baghdad and write his memoirs. The novel's ending echoes its beginning, with an allusion to Dūhān's first appearance on Yāsir's doorstep begging for forgiveness.

CONCLUSION

In the epilogue of their book *The Iraqi Novel: Key Writers, Key Texts*, Caiani and Cobham (2013: 244) summarize Iraqi writers, both those who wrote in exile and those who wrote in Iraq:

> The imaginative powers of these writers allowed them to give compelling expression to, and at the same time transcend, the material and spiritual hardships of exile, war and violence through art. The triumph of their art over those disasters was incomplete as far as the authors themselves were concerned, limited as it was by the circumstances of life, the constraints of time and, ultimately, mortality.

In the same spirit, Ghazoul (2009: 233–234) notes that "literature and the arts continue to be of relevance in Iraqi culture despite the series of catastrophes that have beset Iraq in the last half-century. […] Who is to hold the concept or the idea of Iraq but its artists and writers? Political regimes come and go but literature remains and is read and reread."

ʿAbd al-Sattār Nāṣir was one of those authors who devoted much of his life's literary output to exposing the harrowing catastrophes that befell Iraq. He fought the reality of despotism, hatred and violence by leaving his people a lasting, aesthetic representation of evil in the form of his novels. Nāṣir's goal was not only to overcome the reality of strife and terror in Iraq, but also to challenge with his fiction the deception and fraud that characterize dictatorial and totalitarian regimes whose leaders, as well as their henchmen, wear ugly, frightening masks – both literally and figuratively – and use an endless array of ploys to conceal their crimes.

The greatest tragedy of all is that into this vortex of bloodletting and power-driven greed are pulled many innocent citizens, both those deluded into obeying the leader (and do his bidding by arresting, jailing and torturing) and their victims, who are forced to endure crimes against humanity. All of them – both victimizers and victims – are locked into a seemingly endless cycle of brutality at the price of their morality and conscience, and thus they become one huge, gruesome carnival of masks.

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