



**Traumatic Experiences: A study in Selected
Plays of Iraqi Contemporary Protest Theatre**

by

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Abstract

As theatrical performances become part of the national heritage of any nation, contemporary performances play a vital role in framing people's mind, culture and actions.

Theatre in Iraq passed through very crucial moments in its contemporary time under authoritarian governments, a series of devastating wars, military occupation, civil strife and ongoing political corruption. These conditions left its tremendous echo on that theatre. Yet, some playwrights were able to develop a significant contemporary theatre to reflect important aspects of the Iraqi culture through communicating social, political and ideological messages on stage.

This paper responds to the significant theatrical performances that reflect people awareness of their crisis in Iraq through two plays (Al-Ameri's *Karouk (A Cradle)* 2001 and Alzaidi's *Summer Rain* 2011). In general, the two plays presented their themes as allegories.¹ Both show how powerful Iraqi theatre in providing a voice of protest against war even amidst continuous tragic circumstances of this long-suffering country. They also try to present a set of implications on the tragedy of war, and its impacts on ordinary people in Iraq through the protagonists of the two plays.

Keywords: Iraqi Theatre, Trauma of war, protest, contemporary Iraqi playwrights.

A Scope of Protest in Theater

The violent convictions of a human society as a result of political, economic, social and military crises generate stormy shifts that shake the various aspects of the society's life, leading to protest against these crises. Protest means the unconventional methods of trying to persuade or force the authorities to support the objectives of a particular challenge or rejection group.

Adopting the goal of social change is the key feature that distinguishes those activists who confront the task of expressing the views of all individuals. Theatrical performances, Popular songs and graphic posters are some kinds of methods of protest, which has already taken as an expression of condemnation of injustice and current social crises, as well as a means to draw attention to the demands of the protesters.² Historically, the concept of protest that dominated the art of theatre is part of the reaction of the world culture in general in the period following the World Wars. It is in fact a reflection of the political, economic and social conditions on one hand, and a revolution on the reality of theatre at the time, on the other hand. This leads to the appearance of protest and anger on the plight of the society caused by the catastrophic effects of war. The theatrical product was not far from these situations, in England, for example, a theatrical trend of protest appeared after the German aircraft destroyed more than 20% of the theaters of England during the war. This scale of destruction of those theaters greatly affected the mobility in the English theater after the war and the first performance was at the beginning of 1946. They called the theatrical movement that followed the war with "1946 Theater".

The remarkable turn of the representations of the various methods of protest on the world stage, was reflected in the emergence of the direction called the theater of "Anger and Protest", which produced several important names in the authorship and directing, perhaps most notably (John Arden), (Harold Pinter), (John Osborne) and his famous play "Look Back in Anger". The methods of protest in theater is known as the totality of methods, practices and societal tools available that highlight intellectual protest activity within the theater system. It is described as an effective social tool in the hands of the members of the community and a peaceful means of rejection of the reality of life for them to achieve their goals.

The world theatre, including the Arab world theatre, has known many representations of the methods of protest in its theatrical performances. The Arab countries are characterized by shrinking areas of freedom and democracy due to the pressures of the ruling regimes that harnessed everything available to them to ensure their continuity in power. Arab playwrights protest within the presentations that coincided with what has become known as the Arab Spring, which was affected by the heat of the street and the turbulent social conditions experienced by the Arab communities in which the spirit of protest prevailed over those situations. These performances reflect the tension and chaos experienced by members of the Arab society in the context of the steady political, social and intellectual movement, especially in prominent Arab countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Syria and Iraq. As such, the Iraqi theater was also affected by the overall social and political detours since the fall of the former Iraqi regime on 9/4/2003 and up to the present time.³

After the country has witnessed a deterioration in the security situation with the entry of the American occupation forces into Iraq, this occupation is used as a pretext by terrorist organizations to launch almost daily attacks on unarmed civilians and committing crimes against them. In addition to the worst living conditions and lack of services due to political fluctuations and deteriorating conditions specially after the Islamic State (IS) took control of the Iraqi province of Nineveh on 10/6/2014 with its control over large parts of the provinces of Kirkuk, Salah Al-Din and Anbar, the Iraqi society finds itself facing a great challenge, so the phenomenon of protest emerged as one of the most prominent contemporary Iraqi theater features.

The first Iraqi theatrical protest on the results of the recent war and its effects on a number of cultural buildings and theaters is (They Passed This Way), which was presented on 3/5/2003 on Al-Rasheed Theater, which was destroyed and vandalized by the war. Then a series of theatrical performances that took the nature of the protest against the crimes of terrorism, which has become a phenomenon that strikes the totality of the details of daily Iraqi life during the last decade, including the presentation of (A Thousand Years on The Gate of Forensic Medicine) on 14/12/2006. But the most prominent performances are The Iraqi protest took the title of the protest (Noon): written by: Majid Darandesh and directed by: Kazem Nassar, which was presented on 21/8/2014 at the Hall of the Oil Cultural Center in Baghdad. This was the first Iraqi theater performance to be presented as a condemnation of the crimes of terrorism committed The terrorist organization (IS) and a cry of protest against its practices.

The protest performances were followed as (Aziza) Directed by: Bassem El Tayeb, which was presented in the theater forum, and (Abayat and Games for the Dead) Written by: Ali Al-Khayat and directed by: Ali Al-Shujairi, which was presented on the stage of the Artists Guild of Babylon, and (Oh My Lord) by Ali Abdul Nabi Al-Zaidi, and directed by: Mustafa Sattar Al-Rikabi, presented at the National Theater in Baghdad and participated in the 8th Arab Theater Festival in Algeria in early 2017, and (Black and White) written and directed by: Karouk Ibrahim that was presented in the square opposite Erbil Citadel in downtown Erbil. But the experience of the writer and artist (Majid Drindash) is still unique in rooting and finding Protest in our Iraqi theater through a series of theatrical texts written by him namely (Noon) directed by Kazem al-Nassar and (Do You Hear Me Answer) Directed by: Khalid Alwan, (Eight Witnesses from My Country) directed by Majid Drindash himself, which was presented at the end of the second Iraqi theater festival against terrorism in October 2016.⁴

Iraqi Contemporary War Theatre

No doubt, the painful experience of war and violence has a devastating impact on nations. It may not appear abruptly, but its traumatized outcomes can be seen afterwards. Trauma as a psychological condition refers to a response of an experience that renders an individual unable to properly process that experience, which may result in symptoms such as flashbacks, nightmares, feelings of alienation, ...etc. Raymond C. Rosen et al point out that "Post-traumatic stress disorder is a common and potentially disabling psychiatric disorder that affects a large number of active duty military personnel and veterans."⁵ However, the concept of violence put forward identifies the substance of war and is comprised of three conceptual constellations: direct\physical violence, structural\economic violence and cultural\symbolic violence. The surge interest in trauma theory is viewed as a way to invest and comment on different psychological disturbances.

In Iraq, people suffer from bitter experiences and the horrible outcomes of wars, starting with the Iraqi Iranian war (1980-1988), the first Gulf War in (1991) to the invasion of Iraq in (2003) and finally the continuous "war on terror" that made people unable to discriminate between the innocent and the criminal. They are veiled by alleged news that Iraq represents "evil and terror". Among generations of those playwrights to name but very few of the most contemporary are Abdul-Kareem Al-Ameri, Abdel-Nabi Al-Zaidi, Rasha Fadhil, Awatif Naeem and Abdul Razaq Al-Rubai ... etc. For them, trauma and violence are represented by shedding light on the situation of Iraqi people before and after war through their protest theatre against war. For example, Rasha Fadhil's *Ishtar in Baghdad* (2003) is concerned with the horrible events that took place at Abu Ghraib prison and the violations committed by American soldiers which have left a black mark on the history of America. For this reason, "War and terrorism make powerful interventions into our social worlds via theatrical acts that seize the imagination of the public."⁶

Abdul-Kareem Al-Ameri's (*A Cradle*) (2001) depicts the instability that threatened the Iraqi people, the volcano in which we lived during that dangerous period under the circumstances of the 1980s war and the sanctions and the first Gulf war of the 1990s. In *Contemporary Plays from Iraq* (2017), translated and edited by A. Al-Azraki and James Al-Shamma, Iraqi theatre, during 1980-1988 is divided into three types: "[Firstly] the theatre with productions that glorified the war against Iran; they urged citizens to participate in defending their country against what the state called al-Furs al-majooos or "The Invasion of the Majooos;" [Secondly] the commercial theatre in the face of cultural oppression produced light comedies; and [finally] the academic theatre which is experimental in nature."⁷ The consequences of trauma are highlighted by investigating the relationship between those who affect and being affected by war. In such concern, Abdul Razaq Al-Rubai's *A Strange Bird on our Roof* (Not yet been produced) is preoccupied with a question about the relationship between victim and victimizer. All these plays witnessed the ongoing suffering of Iraqi people because of war and the social media which agitated it.

However, unlike other Iraqi playwrights, Abdul-Kareem Al-Ameri, who was born in 1958 in Basrah, heralds the role of theatre in documenting and attacking the evil of war in society earlier. Though he worked under authoritarian regime, he tried hard to transmit his message. *A Cradle* is written in a form of symbols because of the nature of the ruling political party at that time. Perhaps it is the only play that registered the years during Saddam Hussein's regime. It dramatizes the turbulence that threatened Iraqi people during that period before 2003. These events paved the way for the dark years lived by Iraqi people later.

What is significant about this play is the fact that it is not limited to a specific time. Though Hussein's regime was overthrown in 2003 with the assistance of the Americans and their allies, the bad situation in Iraq has not changed significantly. In spite of this bitter fact, Al-Ameri chooses "A Cradle" a title for his play. Symbolically, it refers to the hope that still sweeps in Iraqi life though adverse circumstances. The new life which is represented by the cradle is embodied by the new generation who will come and save Iraq from misery.

Although the characters in this play are fictional, they are from everyday life: the downtrodden woman who dreams of having a child; the carpenter who devotes his life building cradles instead of coffins; the soldier who returns from war impotent and is abandoned by his wife; the madman who lost his daughter because of war; and the teacher who enforced by poverty to sell cigarettes in the street. Although all of these characters suffer under intolerable conditions, they don't lose faith in a better future. Each one represents a cry of protest against war and its aftermath.

A Cradle opens with Marwan (the son) who feels disappointed. The horizon becomes blacker in his mind. Like invocation of the spirit in Greek drama, Marwan addresses the wood which is a symbol of life and death. It is a life in the form of a cradle which carries new babies. At the same time, it is a death because coffins are made of wood. So, life and death become indispensable in Marwan's mind: Oh, what a life! We enter with a heart-shattering wail and exit with the cry of one stabbed through the heart. What a life! It has never granted peace, not since Adam's fall from everlasting Heaven. (He seizes the cradle.) Tell me! What does tomorrow hide? We cling to life while death awaits. ... We chase the days, which are coffins, not knowing that the dust of the passing years is as thick as the dust of war.⁸

Marwan's feeling of bitterness are shared by all Iraqi people lived under the war. Here, time is meaningless since there is no hope at the end of the tunnel. Marwan returns from the war to find his beloved married to another man, thinking that he is dead. Even though the carpenter wants to mitigate Marwan's feeling of loss by saying, "My son, I thought you left the war behind you. Why do you bring it up?", Marwan feels the traumatic traces which cannot be healed, "Had it left no trace, I would not mention it."

Marwan's beloved, Yasa has left an unforgettable pain which cannot be healed easily. So, in the play, he waits for another war "to settle what has been left unsettled between us ... revenge on ourselves, revenge on the dust that has buried us up to the neck". The carpenter ascribes all these circumstances to the fate we have no control over. It is a pretext which is highly contradicted by Marwan: "Is it fate that keeps one running away all his life, afraid of a shadow or a cry of despair? Is it fate that makes us open accounts in the bank of death? Ah! The entrance to hell has not yet been sealed!"

Death becomes a new agent of war which takes all beautiful things. Sometimes death is a wish since life is not worth living during war. This is clearly shown by the madman who lost his mind because of

his daughter's death, Noor, "Oh death, this is my body! Let it die! No need for it anymore! No need for this wretched body! Take it! Take what you want and put out the fire in my chest! Take my soul but let my daughter come back home. (Silence.) Was I destined to carry the burden of the world?!"

Another character who experiences the violence of war is Saeed who "enters in a wheelchair." The atrocities of war are visibly manifested in the case of Saeed. He not only lost his legs but also deserted by his wife. Saeed bewails:

What could she do with a man who came back from the war without legs? What could she do with me? (Silence.) In the beginning she was kind and loving, taking me outside and sharing her thoughts with me. Days were passing slowly ... very slowly until the heartbeat slowed down and she started to move away from me. Love was like salt dissolved as if in water by my disability, then I started spending my nights alone. I knew that failure had covered us with its black cloak.

No one is safe in a country devoured by war. Again Marwan, the son talks about his mother death: "They killed her ... the uranium melted in her body like fire ... We send our dead to where the huris⁹ and rivers of wine are... we send them to a point of no return. No one told us about Heaven but we, know for sure what Hell looks like."

Different kinds of traumatic experiences are communicated in the play. Al-Ameri wants to say that the effect of war touches everyone in society. Because of war, social values have drastically changed. The poverty and needs made people work in miserable jobs for food supply. So, we see all characters in the play are rebellious against the corruption in their society. Even those who are intellect enforced to leave their mission of knowledge because they are in need. The teacher seems indignant, "What a tax I am paying for my age! My feet are tired from wandering the streets. I used to oppose those who smoke, now I sell cigarettes to everyone. (Silence.)" He further explains that he feels miserable because of the contradictions in his society which values materialism more than spirituality. The teacher bitterly says, "One of my students was lazy and I used to rebuke him, hoping he would change, but instead he dropped out. Yesterday I saw him driving a luxurious car. He stopped and said, "Do you remember me? I am the lazy one!" He threw a coin in my face as if I were a dog. I became a dog. What use is an old dog?"

The painful experience of the madman increases the horrible tension in the play. War has no mercy. It is blind. There is no discrimination between sinful and innocent. The madman cries:

Close the doors! Do not look at the ceiling! Death comes from above. Watch out! Close all your windows and doors! Noor! Oh Noor! They told me that children come during the Eid.¹⁰ To whom shall I give the Eid gift! Who will take it from me? Oh, people of the earth! Who will take the Eid gift from me?! (Silence.) The missile has stolen her last childhood dream. The roof collapsed and the house turned into dust ...

Though Al-Ameri returns again and again to the pessimistic view of war, hope is there. The word "Eid" in the above extract denotes the cycle of life. It is an occasion which takes place every year. Moreover, *A Cradle* ends by a very beautiful image of the Christ who is a symbol of hope. When the carpenter talks with the mother saying "Have you seen the infant's tears? Have you ever seen a light die? (Silence.) Oh Maryam, your son died!", the mother reacts "No, he did not, for his cradle is shining like the wings of an angel."

Iraqi theater lived decades of cultural confusion because of wars that absolutely denied the existence of bright and honorable names of writers, directors, actors ...etc. but when change took place in Iraq in 2003, the climates differed widely and new discourses began to emerge. Most of them carried good intentions, but they were emotional with quick reaction to the culture of power. These voices demolished with time and fell silent in front of the extinguished and real projects of certain playwrights who keep on trying to shine on the Iraqi and Arab world theatre. On his side, Abdel-Nabi Al-Zaidi's *Summer Rain* (2011) depicts the negative impact of different fake copies of political projects presented to save Iraq after 2003. *Summer Rain* presents a protest against war too but with social show.

Al-Zaidi, who was born in Nasiriyah in 1966, won the award for the best integrated theatrical work at the International Theatrical Festival in Jordan 2012, said in one of his press interviews, he was afraid about how the Arab public will receive the theme of (*Summer Rain*) "specially those who identified Iraq through media only. They believed that culture in general and the theater in particular has been stopped in Iraq."¹¹ The award confirmed that Iraqi culture and theatre are still alive with creativity, notable names and experiences.

Summer Rain seems to be based on a social theme, but it is only a framework to engage the audience to be shocked later. What is happening on stage is a reflection to the Iraqi situation after 2003. It is an extension of the disastrous policies that governed the country. The text wanted to provoke the audience to protest against what is happening in front of them. The play did not have much to do with the subject of waiting of a wife for her husband for thirty years. "I am a woman who can't remember she's a woman; a wife who can't forget she once slept in a warm bed, and a mother whose breast has dried up waiting for you to give her a baby, to bring spring back into this house."¹² The subject is something beyond that; it is a political target framed with the subject of waiting. It excites anyone to transfer the negative concept of waiting into a positive action and ultimately revolutionary for better decision as the wife did at the end of the play.

The play tackles a question that most of Iraqi people are after: who is real and who is fake? This question arose after 2003, when a group of politicians came from different countries with heroic tales of resistance against the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein. Ultimately, they seized the power dishonestly. Who is real and who is fake among those who have flooded Iraq with patriotic and religious slogans. They have disguised themselves in new discourse in order to promote their failing and bloody policies. Al-Zaidi states "I attempt to answer the above question by stripping the phony political scene from its essentials."¹³

The play mimics with a poetic symbolism the political projections of a woman through waiting for her husband, who emigrated thirty years ago. "how I need to cry on his chest, to cry with all my heart. My tears will speak for me."¹⁴ The theme focused on the playwright's condemnation of the return of parties and Iraqi politicians competing for power, who were coded as non-husbands real clones:

GET OUT! ALL OF YOU! GET OUT OF MY HOUSE, NOW! My heart no longer need you, clones! My soul no longer need your words, memories, dreams, lies, and your misshapen faces. My heart holds no place for your love. Never! ... I was waiting for the truth. Only the truth! I will be waiting for it here, alone alone, alone! It will come! Truth must come one day. As for you have to leave my house right now. Leave...leave...leave.¹⁵

Symbolically, the wife represents the country tired of wars. Her husbands returned to her as cloned couples. The director Kazem Al-Nassar explains that "it is necessary to enter politics through art boldly, and this play is an attempt to condemn the current situation, and a demand for a real national project that saves the country from the utilitarian policies of those clones, who returned to the (woman) waiting and dreaming with patience the faithful or true husband."¹⁶

"Oh strangers\cloned fade away from my face." this cry said by the heroine of at the end of the play to reject this conflict of these husbands (parties) who are united in their intentions of power and did not appreciate the brutality and cruelty of her waiting for real change. As such, the play ends with hope too. This presented with the last cry of the woman "truth must come one day." People have to be patient and keep on protesting and looking for hope of a real truth.

Conclusion

The Iraqi contemporary theater reveals the depth of people's tragedy. It has its tools to fuel the insurgency deep within the recipients' minds. In both plays, the authors try to present a set of implications, through their reflections on the tragedy of war, and its impacts on ordinary people. In general, the theme presented within symbolic frameworks in the two plays as allegories. The selected local models of characters carried the calamities and disaster of war on their shoulders. These plays expose the psychological reality of that generation of playwrights and diagnose with its dramatic elements the imbalance in frustration and despair that prevented harmony between their reality and what they hold as beliefs.

In any case, Iraqi dramatists will no doubt continue to respond to the changing political landscape in their country and to contextualize it within the deep history of a culture that traces its origins to the cradle of civilization. Hope is the last message out of the two plays. Tomorrow is a new day, the slogan that people must believe in and the lesson we should keep in mind is going on protesting loudly on stage whenever needed.

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¹ Allegory is a story with two levels of meaning: the surface of the characters and plot and all that obvious stuff and the symbolic level, or the deeper meaning. It is used to illustrate a moral or spiritual truth, or political or historical situation.

² Sayed Fares, *Industry of Protest and Revolution - Movement of 6 April as a Model*, (Cairo: Rawafed Publishing and Distribution, 2016).

³ Abdullah Abdul Rahman Bakeer, *John Arden's Concept of Anger and Protest*, (Baghdad: Freedom House for Printing, 1985).

⁴ George Woolworth, *Theater of protest and contradiction*, see: Abdel Moneim Ismail, (Beirut: Arab Center for Culture and Science).

⁵ Raymond C. Rosen et al, "Project VALOR: design and methods of a longitudinal registry of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in combat-exposed Veterans in the Afghanistan and Iraqi military theaters of operations", *International Journal of Methods in Psychiatric Research*, v. 21, n. 1 (2012): 5-16.

⁶ Jenny Hughes, "Theatre, Performance and the 'War on Terror': Ethical and Political Questions arising from British Theatrical Responses to War and Terrorism," *Contemporary Theatre Review*, v. 17, n. 2 (2007): 149-164.

⁷ A. Al-Azraki and James Al-Shamma, *Contemporary Plays from Iraq* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017), p. xvi.

⁸ Abdul-Kareem Al-Ameri, *A Cradle* in A. Al-Azraki and James Al-Shamma, *Contemporary Plays from Iraq* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017), p. 23. All subsequent quotations will be to this edition.

⁹ *Huris* are beautiful companions in Heaven according to Islamic doctrine.

¹⁰ There are two *Eids*, or religious festivals, in the Muslim calendar. The *Eid al-Fitr* is the celebratory feast that occurs at the end of *Ramadan*, the holy month of fasting. The *Eid al-Adha* commemorates the willingness of Ibrahim (Abraham) to sacrifice his son Ismael (Ishmael) in submission to God.

¹¹ An interview with Al-Zaidi retrieved on 10th, Oct. 2019

file:///C:/Users/HiTech/Downloads/Documents/doc_25723_2.pdf

¹² *Summer Rain* in A. Al-Azraki and James Al-Shamma, *Contemporary Plays from Iraq* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017), p.64. All subsequent quotations will be to this edition.

¹³ p.54.

¹⁴ P. 55

¹⁵ P.69

¹⁶ Imad Jasim in on line Article, 2012, retrieved on 10th, Oct. 2019.

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