

BOOK REVIEWS

IKRAM MASMOUDI, *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction*, Edinburgh Studies in Modern Arabic Literature (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015). Pp. 256. \$120.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780748696550

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Ikram Masmoudi's *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction* provides a timely and informed analysis of recently written Iraqi fiction, treating much of the past thirty-six years of war and violence that the country has endured. Masmoudi takes a thematic approach to Iraqi novels written since the fall of Saddam Husayn's Ba'athist government and the US-led invasion and occupation of the country. She surveys a number of works published between 2006 and 2012 that deal directly with war and occupation, two subjects that have dominated Iraqi literature since 1980. To date, it is the most comprehensive study to examine post-2003 Iraqi fiction, which has garnered considerable interest in the Arab world and through translation into English and other European languages.

In her approach to these contemporary Iraqi novels, Masmoudi persuasively argues that Giorgio Agamben's notions of bare life, the state of exception, and "the key concept of the *homo sacer* prove useful and illuminating for analyzing Iraqi novels and the thanatopolitics that they reflect" (p. 7). Undoubtedly, this will be the book's most important contribution to future studies of Iraqi literature and culture dealing with the past three and a half decades of violence, which, unfortunately, shows no sign of abating. In the book's four chapters, which focus on the figures of the Iraqi soldier, war deserter, suicide bomber, and camp detainee, Masmoudi demonstrates that Agamben's theories work well as a lens through which to view the literary representation of modern Iraqis, caught between the terror of dictatorship and the horrors of war and occupation. Although we might consider the character types that Masmoudi uses as case studies as extraordinary, within modern Iraqi literary production they have proven to be anything but exceptional.

The chapters of the book unfold chronologically, from the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88) to the US-led invasion and occupation of the country. Chapters 1 and 2 are focused on current writing that examines the wars that took place prior to 2003, when violence was unleashed. Here, the author discusses the continued interest of Iraqi writers in trying to wrest away the narrative of previous conflicts from Ba'athist historiography and its representation in Iraqi literature produced in the late 1970s and 1980s. The Iran–Iraq War is the best example of this, as it produced a plethora of wartime fiction, poetry, and criticism that largely reflected the aims of the state during the conflict. While some examples of dissenting narratives exist, nearly all of those were written in the postwar period and mostly by writers living abroad. The partly autobiographic novels by 'Ali Badr, Nasif Falak, and Muhammad Hasan that Masmoudi examines in Chapter 1 give voice to buried narratives of desertion. These are nowhere to be found in the official literature written during the war and are emblematic of postwar novels and short stories that seek to rewrite the narrative of that war.

Although Masmoudi's critical treatment of these relatively new novels on the Iran–Iraq War is innovative, she is far from the first critic to deal with the literature of that war. Far fewer have examined Iraqi efforts to put the experience of the 1990–91 Gulf War into literary form, as she does in Chapter 2. Here, Masmoudi sheds light on novels that tear down the concurrent myths of a "bloodless war" that was produced and promoted in the United States and Saddam Husayn's

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framing of the war as the “Mother of All Battles” (*umm al-ma‘ārik*). Through the use of novels by ‘Abd al-Karim al-‘Ubaydi, Hadiya Husayn, Nasif Falak, and Najm Wali, Masmoudi reveals how depictions of the Iraqi soldier continually reflect Agamben’s notion of *homo sacer*. The novels’ antiheroes emerge as victims, easily slaughtered on the ground by forces loyal to the Iraqi government or from the air by US forces.

Chapters 3 and 4, on novelistic depictions of life in Iraq in the shadow of war and occupation since 2003, are the most wide-ranging studies to date of post-2003 Iraqi fiction and its treatment of the violence the country continues to endure. Masmoudi reveals how novelists such as Nasif Falak, Jasim Rasif, Shakir Nuri, Ina‘am Kachachi, and Najm Wali have sought to make sense of the violence affecting their country. Their novels repeatedly reach pessimistic conclusions that end in death for the protagonist or his eventual departure from the country to live a life of exile, with no other option available. Indeed, the image that emerges of the new Iraq is dark, dominated by all-around helplessness and death.

The publication of Masmoudi’s book is an important contribution to the study of modern Iraqi fiction, although it also raises some questions that remain unanswered for readers, particularly concerning the reception and readership of the works she has chosen to analyze. Who is reading these novels and how have critics writing in Arabic engaged with them in journals, newspapers, and online forums? In addition, while the book surveys a large number of novels, it ignores short fiction and relies heavily on works written by men who for the most part reside abroad. Masmoudi acknowledges this in the introduction (only two of the authors whose works she examines reside in and write from Iraq—Nasif Falak and ‘Abd al-Karim al-‘Ubaydi), but nowhere else is the idea addressed. This gives the impression that the strong division between literature written inside Iraq and that written abroad (*adab al-dākhil* and *adab al-khārij*), is no longer as important a category of analysis as it was, particularly during the years of Ba‘thist rule. Perhaps this is true, but it leads me to wonder if Iraqi writers and critics also see this division as obsolete. If so, are the aesthetics of “inside” and “outside” literature now the same? Does the “testimony” (a word used frequently throughout the study) of the writer addressing the violence of post-2003 Iraq from the relative comfort of, say, Western Europe, carry the same weight for critics and readers as that of the writer who has witnessed the carnage firsthand in Baghdad?

War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction is a welcome addition to scholarship on Iraqi fiction published in recent years. The book performs the difficult task of not only providing a critical appraisal of some notable works of recent Iraqi literature, but also introducing those works to an English-speaking audience for the first time. In many ways, Masmoudi’s study picks up where Fabio Caiani and Catherine Cobham’s *The Iraqi Novel: Key Writers, Key Texts* (also published with Edinburgh Studies in Modern Arabic Literature, 2013) and Stephan Milich, Frederike Pannewick and Leslie Tramontini’s *Conflicting Narratives: War, Violence and Memory in Iraqi Culture* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2012) leave off. It gives readers a clear sense of how violence has shaped the direction of the Iraqi novel in the past decade. I have no doubt that *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction* will lead to more scholarly engagement with modern Iraqi literature, as well as further encourage its translation.

HANADI AL-SAMMAN, *Anxiety of Erasure: Trauma, Authorship, and the Diaspora in Arab Women’s Writings* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2015). Pp. 294. \$39.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780815634027

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Anxiety of Erasure is a groundbreaking monograph on Arab fiction by women, intertwining issues of gender, trauma, politics, and war. At a time when the Arab Middle East suffers the grievous