

Laetitia Nanquette's book to all readers interested in the sociology of modern literature in Iran. *Iranian Literature After the Islamic Revolution* is a must read in this field.

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## Pluralism in the Iraqi Novel After 2003: Literature and the Recovery of National Identity. Ronen Zeidel (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020). Pp. 209. \$95.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781498594622

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Iraqi literature has many beginnings within its different contexts of development in Iraq and its diverse languages of creative expressions: Arabic, Kurdish Sorani, and Turkmen to name just three. With the diversity of Iraq's many traditions, histories, and languages of storytelling in mind, I was drawn to the title of Ronen Zeidel's book, *Pluralism in the Iraqi Novel After 2003: Literature and the Recovery of National Identity*, asking which of the many pluralities of Iraqi society does this book seek to cover through the lens of literature and recovery, and from which critical perspectives? After all, as Linda Alcoff points out in the context of writing on transnational expressions of identity and representation, no person can assume "transcendence" of their perceived location. We judge and are all judged on the "location"—the social or political location or identity—from which we are perceived as speaking.<sup>1</sup> With this thought in mind, I was thus gripped by the critical premise of this book.

Zeidel's book is made up of six chapters, a preface, introduction, and conclusion. Each of the six chapters covers specific communities within Iraqi society that Zeidel reads as represented in novels by Iraqis published after 2003: Shi'i Muslim, Sunni Muslim, Kurdish, Christian, Gypsy, and Jewish communities. Five of the chapters have already been published in academic journals. In this book format, however, Zeidel clarifies in more detail from which critical position he experiences Iraqi novels and why he has researched Iraqi literature for decades: he cares deeply for Iraq and believes that representations of *al-ta'adduyya* (pluralism), alongside the varying manifestations of *al-tā'ifiyya* (sectarianism) in post-2003 Iraqi novels, have never been more urgent. He cites his admiration for the work of Iraqi scholar Sa'ad Salloum, who advocates the principle of diversity in Iraq and that of Salim Matar, who calls for "anthropological" approaches to Iraqi history-making (5). For Zeidel, "recovery" of national identity in the context of Iraq is a process whereby Iraqis come to terms with a pre-2003 past where public discourses about specific heterogeneities in Iraqi society were suppressed, including via *al-riwāya al-waṭaniyya* (the nationalist novel). According to Zeidel, reading how specific Iraqi communities are presented in such novels since 2003 can tell us something of how some Iraqi intellectuals negotiate their individual politics of location in a post-2003 Iraqi context.

In Chapter 1, Zeidel discusses representations of Shi'i Iraqis and cultures that he has read in more than 300 Iraqi novels and why such differing representations of Shi'i Iraqi cultures can shed light on the issue of sectarianism in Iraq and processes of change starting from the 1990s. Taking us from 1939 to 2007, Zeidel cites from 60 Iraqi novels that he reads as representing Shi'i identities, often alongside other groups in various ways. While Zeidel specifies individual writers in terms of their Iraqi sectarian identity—Sunni, Shi'a or secular in positionality—his line of argument is that the diverse scope of their novels often challenges readers to go beyond fixed conceptions of Iraqi national identity. These novels also help us consider the extent to how pluralism in Iraqi society can be understood and lived in truly egalitarian ways (48).

In Chapter 2, Zeidel moves the focus on to representations of Sunni Iraqi identity in 45 novels, and how Iraqi writers identifiable as Sunni have contributed to the development in the Iraqi novel since 2003.

<sup>1</sup>Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique*, no. 20 (1991): 5–32.

He again situates each writer according to their denominational background and reads how this may have influenced their representations of Sunni Muslim protagonists in their novels. As a more recent part of Zeidel's research, Chapter 2 details references to the Iraqi civil war of 2006–2007 and the deep impact of ISIS occupation of areas of Iraq associated with Sunni Iraqi identities, such as Mosul. These references thus provide valuable archival reference about writers less known outside Iraq in post-2007 times.

In Chapter 3, titled, "The Iraqi Novel and the Kurds," Zeidel covers 15 novels in Arabic written by non-Kurdish Iraqis that feature Kurdish protagonists, and 3 novels in Arabic by Kurdish Iraqi writers. As in all chapters of *Pluralism in the Iraqi Novel After 2003*, Zeidel presents an initial overview of how this community has fared in the Iraqi public sphere and then frames how he reads the novels representing protagonists of this community. By differentiating between Kurdish Iraqis writing in Arabic about their community, and non-Kurdish Iraqis writing about Kurdish Iraqis, Zeidel also makes it clear that this multi-faceted and minoritised genre of Iraqi literature merits much more critical attention. By citing titles and authors in this way, this chapter provides valuable archival knowledge about Iraqi fiction that risks becoming lost and forgotten. One example of this is when Zeidel cites *Qasmat* (Fate) by Hawraa al-Nadawi as a rare novel about the Fayli Kurdish communities of Iraq.<sup>2</sup>

In Chapter 4, Zeidel covers differing representations of Iraqi Christian communities written by non-Christian Iraqi novelists, and novels about different Iraqi cultural groups by Christian Iraqi writers. He first summarizes key points of debates on the status of Christian Iraqis as articulated by Dahim Al-Azzawi and Sa'ad Salloum, two Iraqi thinkers who specialise in inter-faith relations in Iraq, and how this community specifically evokes questions on the strength of plurality in post-2003 Iraq. Scholars of interfaith and intercultural dialogue in the context of Iraq will find the summaries of these debates a useful point of critical reference. Covering 20 novels, 6 of which are written by Christian Iraqis, such as well-known writers Sinan Antoon and Inaam Kachachi, Zeidel continues to focus on broader themes and not on the aesthetics of how Iraqi writers represent Christian communities in Arabic. This chapter offers a very useful overview of representation of the diverse Christian communities of Iraq in an impressively concise way. The 'broad-brush' approach to Iraqi literature used by Zeidel however precludes a closer exploration of the innovative ways by which writers such as Kachachi and Antoon have made manifest the pluralities of Iraqi society via the stylistics of their writing. A 'close reading' can help us to appreciate how Kachachi embeds Christian Iraqi dialect, for example, into the fabric of her novels as one way of representing 'lived plurality' in Iraqi society. As Zeidel states in an earlier chapter, however, close literary analysis is not what he sets out to do in this book (15).

In Chapter 5, Zeidel focuses on Gypsy communities who refer to themselves as *Tiduha* in Iraqi Arabic, *Dūmarī* in Kurdish Sorani, and *Karaj* in Turkmen, all of whom suffered greatly in Iraq in the post-2003 context. Zeidel provides valuable historical context as to why no Iraqi intellectuals from this community write in the literary sphere. He then cites two novels, *Al-Harb fī Hay al-Tarab* (War in Al-Tarab District, 1994) by two non-Gypsy Iraqi writers Najm Wali and *Layālī Al-Kaka* (Nights of the Kaka, 2002) by Shakir al-Anbari and how these novels present Gypsy Iraqis as vulnerable yet not co-opted into Ba'athist ideology (155).<sup>3</sup> The chapter concludes on a tragic post-2003 note: "after 2003, the Gypsies disappeared from their [Wali and Anbari] novels as well as from novels by other writers" (156). For scholars of Roma Studies, alongside readers interested in marginalised groups not represented in post-2003 Iraqi fiction, Chapter 5 is not to be missed.

In the final chapter, Zeidel turns to representations of the Jewish community in Iraq and how two post-2003 novels portray the status of Iraqi Jews as an integral but disappearing part of Iraq's historical, cultural, and pluralistic fabric. The two novels are Ali Badr's *Hāris al-Tibgh* (The Tobacco Keeper, 2008) and Khidr al-Zaydi's *Atlas 'Azrān al-Baghdādī* (The Atlas of Azran Al-Baghdadi, 2015).<sup>4</sup> Stating that the few remaining Jewish communities in Iraq are recognised by international cultural organisations as "the guarantors of diversity and pluralism in Iraq" (166), Zeidel reads the representations of Jewish Iraqis –

<sup>2</sup>Hawraa Al-Nadawi, *Qasmat* (Fate) (Baghdad & Beirut: Al-Jamal, 2018).

<sup>3</sup>Shakir Al-Anbari, *Layālī Al-Kaka* (Nights of the Kaka), (Damascus: Al-Mada, 2002); Najm Wali, *Al-Harb fī Hay al-Tarab* (War in Al-Tarab District), (Budapest: Dar Al-Sahraa, 1993).

<sup>4</sup>Ali Badr, *Hāris al-Tibgh* (The Tobacco Keeper), (Beirut: Al-Mu'asasa Al-'Arabiya, 2008); Khidr Al-Zaydi, *Atlas 'Azrān al-Baghdādī* (The Atlas of Azran Al-Baghdadi) (Baghdad: Mesopotamia, 2015).

and their disappearance - by these two non-Jewish Iraqi writers as reflecting something of the unease that some Iraqis feel about minority groups, and the contributions they have made, rapidly disappearing from Iraq in current times. This final chapter thus provides a succinct, detailed background to the politics of Jewish exile and the precarity of belonging in Iraq.

What, then, is the politics of this book's location? It is first and foremost an archive and homage to the writers with whom Zeidel has interacted with over the years. His interactions have taken place in many forms, the first of which is via his corpus of Iraqi literature. His corpus is the 330 novels he has read in Arabic. He also dedicates *Pluralism in the Iraqi Novel After 2003* to the Iraqi writers he has been interacting with, many of whose opinions and contributions to his work have been kept anonymous by Zeidel for their own safety (xi). This is why many statements on Iraqi literature which Zeidel attributes to Iraqi writers themselves, are not referenced to individual Iraqi writers. What Zeidel does state, however, is that much of his opinions on developments on Iraqi literature are very much informed by his "interactions" (xi) with Iraqi "activists, writers, publishers, journalists, poets, exiles, students and others", most of which were only possible post-2003 due to political changes in Iraq and what he terms as "the technical revolution" in Iraq. Zeidel makes it explicit that he sourced much of the primary materials for his research from the University of Haifa (xi), which is why it is not surprising that other books may not have come to his attention due this specific location. Zeidel puts forward, for example, *al-Dil'* (*The Rib*, 2006), by Hamid al-Iqabi, as the sole example of a non-Kurdish Iraqi writer showing what Zeidel terms as "real empathy" (112) towards the tragedy of Kurdish Iraqis in Iraq.<sup>5</sup> Other examples by non-Kurdish Iraqi writers showing similar empathy with Kurdish Iraqis within post-2003 context do exist, such as Hadiya Husayn's novel *Mā Sayā'tī* (*What Will Come*, 2017) as one example.<sup>6</sup> I refer to this point not as a critique of Zeidel's analysis but to highlight how the 'politics of location' impacts on all scholars' archival literary research.

Zeidel holds a view of Iraq as a country needing to embrace societal plurality and diversity as part of its recovery from the Iraqi Ba'athist era and the prevalence of hegemonic discourses of national identity. He thus reads examples of how the nationalist novel has "become pluralistic" (1) by tracking how explicitly Iraqi writers have shown representations of Iraqi identities in their novels. He takes the community identity of each Iraqi writer as an equally explicit instrument of analysis. Zeidel also clarifies the literary perspectives from which he reads, noting that "as an historian, I consider the literary text primarily as a source and not a text...Indeed, the literary text should be analysed in depth by specialists" (15). Such an approach, as noted earlier, precludes exploring the aesthetics by which many Iraqi novelists have expressed their visions of Iraqi society. For this reason, Zeidel's broad-stroke "non-literary" approach alongside a "identity-framing" lens of analysis may initially come across as an unfamiliar methodology to scholars of literature accustomed to close readings of texts. Introduced by Zeidel with such openness, candor and clarity, *Pluralism in the Iraqi Novel After 2003* however makes very compelling reading and must be recognised as a great archival resource of Iraqi literature from beginning to end. In particular, the book's bibliography listing Iraqi authors and their novels showcases the range of Zeidel's research to great effect while furnishing us with much inspiration for further work on Iraq's diverse literatures.

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## The Arabic Prose Poem: Poetic Theory and Practice. Huda J. Fakhreddine (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021). Pp. 288. \$105.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781474474962

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<sup>5</sup>Hamid Al-Iqabi, *al-Dil'* (*The Rib*), (Cologne: Al-Jamal, 2006).

<sup>6</sup>Hadiya Husayn, *Mā Sayā'tī* (*What Will Come*), (Beirut: Al-Mu'asasa Al-'Arabiya, 2017).