In Search of the Iraqi Other:
Iraqi Fiction in Diaspora and the Discursive Reenactment of
Ethno-Religious Identities

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Abstract
The prerogative to narrate the experience of marginal identities, particularly ethno-religious ones, appeared only in the post-occupation era in Iraqi fiction. Traditionally, secular Iraqi discourse struggled to openly address "sectarianism" due to the prevalent notion that sectarian identities are mutually exclusive and oppositional to national identity. It is distinctly in post-2003 Iraq—more precisely, since the sectarian violence of 2006–2007 began to cut across class, civil society, and urban identities—that works which consciously refuse to depict normative Iraqi identities with their mainstream formulations become noticeable. We witness this development first in the Western diaspora, where Iraqi novels exhibit a fascination with the ethno-religious culture of the Iraqi margins or subalterns and impart a message of pluralistic secularism.

This paper investigates the origins of the taboo that proscribed articulations of ethno-religious subjectivities in 20th-century Iraqi fiction, and then culls examples of recent diasporic Iraqi novels in which these subjectivities are encoded and amplified in distinct ways. In the diasporic novel, I argue, modern Iraqi intellectuals attain the conceptual and political distance necessary for contending retrospectively with their formative socialization experiences in Iraq. Through a new medium of marginalization—the diasporic experience of the authors themselves—they are equipped with a newfound desire to unmask subcultures in Iraq and to write more effectively about marginal aspects of Iraqi identity inside and outside the country. These new diasporic writings showcase processes of ethnic and religious socialization in the Iraqi public sphere. The result is deconstruction of mainstream Iraqi identity narratives and instrumentalization of marginal identities in a nonviolent struggle against sectarian violence.

Keywords: post-2003 Iraq, fiction, Iraqi diaspora, sectarianism, secularism, Shīʿism, ethno-religious identity, alterity

 "In this land there is no Shiʿa and no Sunnis; there is one Iraqi people."
        --Saddam Hussein

"Let the Shiʿa be Shiʿa and the Sunnis be Sunni … but they all have to understand that we are all citizens of Iraq and that in this land we are all equal."
        --Nouri al-Maliki[1]

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[1] The quotes from Hussein and al-Maliki are both from Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 29, who is citing Ronen Zeidel, "Iraq 2009: Some Thoughts about the State of Sectarianism" (Centre for Iraq Studies, University of Haifa, 2009).

"Iraqi nationalism had many 'others.' However, the multiplicity of narratives concerning the nature of the nation's 'others' points to the fact that there was no consensus on the definition of Iraqi nationalism."
        --Orit Bashkin[2]

Introduction

 "The margin is no longer a margin, nor is the main text a main text anymore,"[3] Iraqi journalist and vernacular essayist Muḥammad Ghāzī al-Akhras proclaimed about Iraqi writing and society after 2003, adding that "[Iraqi] sectarianism is not a religion from which atheists and secularists can emancipate themselves," but rather "a vast imaginary that evolved with the Arabization of Iraq and progressed alongside its Sunnification."[4]

Like al-Akhras, I am less concerned with Iraqi sectarianism as the divisive ideological and physical clash whereby individuals and collectives are marked, alienated, or violated based on static notions of descent, religion, or ethnic belonging than with the historically shifting "vast imaginary" of Iraqi sectarianism and the ways in which it is manifested today as a literary site of negotiating identity. By the same measure, this paper is less concerned with the history of Iraqi secular formations and their political genealogies than with the ways in which the secular underpinnings of contemporary Iraqi literature are expanding the meaning of sectarian identities and complicating their definitions. Iraqi secularism is fostered as much by Iraqi nationalism as by a prolonged cumulative experience in the Western diaspora. Consequently, the literary output of secular Iraqi writers in the diaspora recasts Iraqi sectarianism and the ingredients of minority identities in ways that should be noted carefully as we assess sectarian formations in post-2003 Iraq.

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[2] Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 193.

[3] Muḥammad Ghāzī al-Akhras, *Kitāb al-mgārīd: ḥikāyāt min al-sirdāb al-ʿIrāqī* (loosely translated as The Book of the Iraqi Wretches: Tales from the Underground of Iraqi Society) (Beirut: al-Tanwīr, 2012), 9. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Arabic in this article are mine.

[4] al-Akhras, *Kitāb al-mgārīd*, 38. See also al-Akhras' sequel to this book, *Dafātir khurdat farrūsh* (Beirut: al-Tanwīr, 2013), in which he meditates on the predicaments of contemporary sectarianism by way of exploring the history of class distinction in Iraqi society.

Locating Iraqi sectarianism in and outside of fiction evokes a set of pivotal questions: What is sectarianism, and is it in a binary relationship with secularism? And if sectarianism, as Mylène Tisserant suggests,[5] must be applied sparingly as a term of analysis to describe the political manipulation of religious sentiments to construct imagined communities with strategic power, then how are the literary formulations of confessional identities in diasporic fiction reshaping the multiple scales of political and sectarian belonging in Iraq? How are these literary formulations themselves being reshaped along a sectarian/secular divide? In what capacity can nonviolent resistance through art combat sectarian violence on the ground?[6] Are we already witnessing, as Iraqi journalist ʿUmar al-Jaffāl predicted in 2012, the appearance of the religious protagonist of the Iraqi fiction that "will be written in the future"?[7] These are the interconnected inquiries that guide the present study, through which I approach literary Iraqi identity narratives as an integral part of a parallel discourse that is working to unsettle the dominant official pre-2003 narrative of "Iraqiness" as well as the sectarian essentializations of post-2003 Iraqi society.

Before proceeding further I must echo Fanar Haddad's concern that the label "post-2003" itself risks essentializing Iraqi experience insofar as it is "open-ended and forever contemporary."[8] The "post-2003" or "post-Saddam Hussein" labels that permeate most discussions of contemporary Iraq implicitly suggest a degree of continuity as well as of departure, when in fact the events that have ensued in Iraq since

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[5] Mylène Tisserant, *From Saddam to Maliki: the Power of Sectarian Politics, a history of a narrative*, 2012, 10. http://www.scribd.com/doc/109838989/From-Saddam-to-Maliki-the-power-of-sectarian-politics.

[6] In their anthology, *We Are Iraqis: Aesthetics and Politics in a Time of War*, Nadje al-Ali and Deborah al-Najjar present a collection of textual and visual works on Iraq with the view of reclaiming resistance to the war and occupation through nonviolent means. See Nadje al-Ali and Deborah al-Najjar's introduction, "Writing Trauma, Memory, and Materiality," *We Are Iraqis: Aesthetics and Politics in a Time of War* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2013), xxv–xl.

[7] ʿUmar al-Jaffāl, "al-Riwāyah al-ʿirāqiyyah al-jadīdah wa-al-tābū al-muqaddas: riwāʾiyyūn, al-shakhṣiyyah al-mutadayyinah sataẓhar fī mā sayuktab mustaqbalan" (The New Iraqi Novel and the Sacred Taboo: Novelists, the Religious Protagonist Will Appear in Future Writings), *al-ʿĀlam al-jadīd* 693, Nov. 8, 2012.

[8] Haddad, 143.

2003 might punctuate different developments and reflect overlapping geopolitical upheavals, such as the sectarian violence of the 2006–2008 period, the Arab Spring, and several waves of migration and displacement, both within and out of Iraq. Overemphasizing the role of the year 2003 may also undermine the importance of related prior transformations such as the one witnessed during the embargo years following the 1991 Gulf War. My aim, therefore, is to situate "post-2003" and "pre-2003" references within their specific spatio-temporal contexts, and to emphasize the retrospective and perceptual nature of their relevance, especially as the literary articulations in question were fostered in the diaspora.

Within the past decade, prominent scholars have theorized the religious and the secular, including Talal Asad, Charles Taylor, and Jürgen Habermas. Alongside these studies, scholarship by Orit Bashkin, Muhsin al-Musawi, Sami Zubaida, Peter Sluglett, Peter Wien, Peter Harling, and Fanar Haddad, among others,[9] began turning attention to Iraqi identity formation in light of the interplay between the religious and the secular. During this period, several Iraqi novels also appeared that thematically oriented their content to treat these concerns. What is lacking from these perspectives on the religious and the secular in Iraq is a cultural and literary critique that specifically takes up the emergence of ethno-religious identities in post-2003 Iraqi fiction. The intention of this study is to bridge this gap by examining what happens to these identities as they traverse from the political or religious contexts that cast them as Other to the literary medium that examines them as subjectivities.

Key examples of Iraqi fiction reveal the constructedness of Iraqi identity. Novels by Sinān Anṭūn, ʿAlī Badr, Inʿām Kachachchī, and others operate as sites of negotiation that complicate and unsettle the models of ethno-religious belonging available outside of fiction. These literary articulations of Iraqi alternative identities were produced in diaspora, a fact that aligns with the notion that the diaspora experience provides for a

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[9] For a sociological study of the constructedness of sectarian identities in post-2003 Iraq, see the aforementioned Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*; Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq*; and Mylène Tisserant's thesis, *From Saddam to Maliki.*

"literature of trespassing" cultural, geographic, and historic conditions.[10] According to literary critic ʿAbd Allah Ibrāhīm, this diaspora fiction is the product of the author's impression of belonging to two identities or more at once, and at the same time the impression of not belonging to any identity. The vision of this literature relies on the idea of deconstructing unified, absolute identities.[11] As a corollary to deconstructing a self that neither belongs in diaspora nor in a fragmented Iraq, the diasporic authors also deconstruct the properties customarily associated with ethno-religious identities in Iraq. In other words, their own experience of uprootedness enables them to unmask how the religious and the secular are socially and politically constructed and superimposed. Yet their projects are not primarily concerned with the secular or the post-secular. Instead of grappling with the "post-secular" condition of a "religiously mobilized world society" as theorized by Jürgen Habermas[12] or reflecting Charles Taylor's proposition of a mutually constitutive operation of the religious and the secular,[13] these works display a greater interest in exploring displacement and the diasporic condition. Their diasporic dimension brings the content of these works closer to Talal Asad's construal of religion and modernity in *Formations of the Secular.* Like Asad, these writers demonstrate that both secularism and religion in contemporary Iraq are spatio-temporal constructs that lend themselves to literary reconstruction and rectification. In these works, the literary does not merely reflect the political or historical but rather intervenes to complicate and recast it. Whereas certain identity components remain unmarked or marked in a damaging fashion during situations of civil strife, the literary output teases out these

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[10] ʿAbd Allah Ibrāhīm, "al-Riwāyah al-ʿirāqiyyah al-jadīdah: al-manfā, al-hawiyyah, al-ūtopyā," *Ghaymān* 8 (summer 2009), 8–31.
http://www.ghaiman.net/derasat/issue_08/alrewaya_al3raqia.htm.
[11] Ibid., 8–9.
[12] See Jürgen Habermas, "What Is Meant by a 'Post-Secular Society'? A Discussion on Islam in Europe," in Jürgen Habermas, *Europe: The Faltering Project*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009); and Jürgen Habermas, et al., *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010).
[13] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

aspects of identity and marks them in multivalent ways.[14] These works practically confirm that "the increasing fear of a general religious revivalism, the rise of religious extremism, especially Islamic fundamentalism, could be addressed only by recognizing its construction in the particular socio-political circumstances instead of mystifying religion as *essentially* dangerous."[15] As works that were written in diaspora but revert to settings, plots, and characters in the homeland, these novels generate a discursive relationship between the local and the global, the public and the private, and the individual and the collective. They do so through engaging the particulars of Iraqi ethnic and racial identities, in conjunction with the ways that gender roles and class divisions have played out in Iraqi society. As we shall see, this discursive relationship between the variables of identity contests and defies, but also unevenly accommodates and bolsters, aspects of the dominant versions of "who the Iraqis are."

Pre-2003 Backdrop: Centers and Margins of Iraqi Literature

The complex emergence of sectarian identities in the fiction of post-2003 Iraq in diaspora is historically tied to the inner workings of Iraqi intellectual circles and their literary production throughout the 20th century. The development of modern Iraqi fiction coincided with the birth of Iraq as a unified country and with the formation of its educated urban class. As one might expect, the early literary attempts that sprang from that class were thematically focused on national concerns that engaged a mainstream political agenda either by paralleling its discourse or opposing it. Questions of regional identities and minorities had to be eclipsed in this broader national unification debate. From the early 1920s to the 1958 Revolution, we find prominent works of fiction

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[14] Here, I am specifically referring to Fanar Haddad's compelling argument that the Sunni Iraqi identity under the homogenizing, asectarian pre-2003 national project was not marked as Sunni. Iraq's Sunnis only came to apprehend themselves as a distinct sectarian group when the Shīʿīs, formerly distinguished as a marginal "Other," ascended to political dominance after 2003. See Fanar Haddad, "A Sectarian Awakening: Reinventing Sunni Identity in Iraq After 2003," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 14 (Aug. 2014), 70. Retrieved from http://www.hudson.org/research/10544-a-sectarian-awakening-reinventing-sunni-identity-in-iraq-after-2003.

[15] Muhammad Golam Nabi Mozumder, *Interrogating Post-Secularism: Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor and Talal Asad* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2001). http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/6878/1/MohammadMozumder2011MAThesis.pdf.

identifying with an opposition sentiment that reflected the dissatisfaction of Iraq's intellectuals with colonialism, ruling elites, restrained elections, the controlled activity of political parties, and an inadequate democratic process.[16] These include seminal works such as Sulaymān Fayḍī's *al-Riwāyah al-iqāẓiyyah* (The Awakening Story, 1919), Maḥmūd Aḥmad al-Sayyid's *Jalāl Khālid* (1928), and Dhū al-Nūn Ayyūb's *al-Duktūr Ibrāhīm* (Dr. Ibrahim, 1939). For example, in *al-Duktūr Ibrāhīm*, Sunni and Shīʿī identities are explored, but precisely to satirize the conflict between the two sects and to demonstrate the politically constructed nature of their differences. Sectarian identities are characterized in this novel as the hallmark of bureaucrats who use them to discriminate against other groups when loyalty to the nation is brought into question.[17] No attention is paid to their particularities or positive differences.

These early examples of Iraqi fiction, in addition to the more mature realist fiction that followed in their wake, exhibit intellectuals' move toward the political left and their efforts to depict the new Iraq as a transforming society. They do not, however, seek to capture the ethno-religious complexity of this society or the unique subjectivities of its members. Ghāʾib Ṭuʿmah Farmān's masterpiece and possibly the "first mature Iraqi novel,"[18] *al-Nakhlah wa-al-jīrān* (The Palm Tree and the Neighbors, 1966),[19] fulfills many prerequisites of social realism in its portrayal of the underdog, the destitute, and the marginal in the poor outskirts of Baghdad during the Second World War, yet these individuals or classes are not ethno-religiously marked in Farmān's work. Although Iraqi Jews, Christians, Armenians, and colonial British are mentioned in *al-Nakhlah*, the novel's primary concern is with another, ethnically featureless margin of society.[20] Farmān's protagonists are acutely aware of their socioeconomic disparity with

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[16] Fabio Caiani and Catherine Cobham, *The Iraqi Novel: Key Writers, Key Texts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 2.

[17] See Bashkin, 157–193, for a fuller discussion of the "Othering" processes in the literature of the Hashemite period.

[18] Caiani and Cobham, 76.

[19] Ghāʾib Ṭuʿmah Farmān, *al-Nakhlah wa-al-jīrān* (Baghdad: Dār al-Fārabī/Dār Bābil, 1966. Beirut: Dār al-Madā lil-Thaqāfah wa-al-Nashr, 1988.

[20] Significantly, when the novel was adapted to the Iraqi stage by the young director Qāsim Muḥammad in 1969, shortly after the Baʿthists seized power, the script was stripped of the

the inhabitants of "dhāk al-ṣawb" (that side)—the affluent, modern, and Westernized Christian, Jewish, Armenian, and British denizens of the opposite side of the Tigris River—yet they do not speak of their own ethno-religious context. The novel avoids mention of its protagonists' ethno-religious filiations, although they are a decisive factor in constituting their class position in that socioeconomically segregated urban space, the marginal or Other space: "ha-l-ṣawb" (this side) of the Tigris, where the main events of the novel take place.[21]

Fuʾād al-Takarlī's novels, notably the early *Baṣqah fī wajh al-ḥayāh* (Spitting in the Face of Life, 1948) and the more mature *al-Masarrāt wa-al-awjāʿ* (Joys and Sorrows, 1998), likewise fall short of depicting the ethno-religious features of their characters. Despite their distinctive iconoclastic and subversive attitudes toward mainstream Iraqi society, alienation from tradition and conventions, and acute awareness of the dysfunctional relationships between the margins and centers of societal power, the characters in these social realist novels do not exhibit any defining ethno-religious features.[22]

By now it is common knowledge that the Saddam Hussein era with its focus on the Baʿthification and Arabization of the masses repressed ethnic and religious expressions of identity.[23] Yet the reasons for the sudden turn to tribal and confessional affiliations in the post-2003 era can be traced not only to this period but to a longer process of formal assimilation that entailed gradually muting the idiosyncrasies of Iraqi society's constituents over the course of decades. In other words, expression of these

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original ethnic and religious allusions, exerting an additional measure of cultural homogenization over the scene.

[21] For a detailed analysis of realism and space in *al-Nakhlah wa-al-jīrān*, see "Realism and Space in the First Iraqi Novel," in Caiani and Cobham, 73–114.

[22] For a discussion of the protagonists in al-Takarlī's two novels, see "Reading and Writing in al-*Masarrāt wa al-awjāʿ* by Fuʾād al-Takarlī," in Caiani and Cobham, 194–218.

[23] Several excellent studies have been written on this subject, among which are Amatzia Baram's *Culture and Ideology in the Making of Baʿthist Iraq, 1968–1989* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991); Eric Davis' *Memories of State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Muhsin al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq: Culture and Power in Conflict* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006); and Stephen Milich, Friederike Pannewick, and Leslie Tramontini's *Conflicting Narratives: War, Trauma, and Memory in Iraqi Culture* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag Wiesbaden, 2012).

"auxiliary" identities after 2003 was not as sudden as it seemed, but rather latent and then revived. That post-2003 Iraqi political institutions have been designed along sectarian lines and as a result are producing sectarian culture thus becomes not only an evident phenomenon but also a recurrent one. The sectarian divisions that have been undercutting previous structures and articulations of a unified Iraqi society for over a decade[24] suggest that the nearly century-long efforts to forge a secular, national Iraqi identity between 1920 and 2003 and to mute confessional identities are being thwarted.

Against this backdrop, among current Iraqi and Arab intellectuals reference to sectarian identities in most modes of articulation is considered taboo. For example, as late as 2012, ʿUmar al-Jaffāl's article on sectarian identities in fiction was rejected by *al-Safīr* and other prominent newspapers. When *al-ʿĀlam al-jadīd* finally agreed to publish it, the title had to be modified and the body of the article was considerably reduced in size, due to what the paper considered potentially inflammatory sectarian content.[25] The strategic avoidance of the subject in the public sphere is not entirely unjustified. Considering the potential repercussions during a century typified by colonialism,

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[24] For one eyewitness account of these newfound divisions, see Yara Badday's "Reframing Sunni and Shiʿi Discussions," in al-Ali and al-Najjar, 83–92.

[25] When I presented an earlier version of this essay at the "Migration, Diaspora, Exile, Estrangement" conference on Arabic literature at Columbia University, prominent scholars of Iraq and the Middle East were dismayed by the content of my presentation, calling it "divisive" of Iraqi national unity and anti-nationalist, and labeling its claims false. Nor was this the first time that my work on ethno-religious identities in Iraq had elicited moral disapprobation. Two years after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, in 2005, when I embarked on writing my doctoral dissertation (*The Politics of Minority: Chaldeans between Iraq and America*, The University of Michigan, 2008) about the transformation of the collective identity of the modern Chaldeans (Catholic Iraqis, the largest Christian sect in Iraq, who experienced a mass exit from Iraq in the immediate aftermath of the invasion), I contacted several Iraqi literati and academics to ask if they knew of any specific texts about this community or if they could refer me to its literature. Most of these intellectuals, Chaldean and non-Chaldean alike, replied that my inquiry was divisive and separatist in nature, and advised against formulating my dissertation thesis in light of concepts that differentiate certain Iraqi groups against the backdrop of the overarching majority. "We were all Iraqis and that is what we need to remain," their various replies admonished.

sectarian tensions, wars, revolutions, embargo, invasion, and regime changes,[26] speaking of a person's Christian faith, Kurdish ethnicity, or Shīʿī madhhab during the 20th century was, and to some extent still is, considered a grand betrayal of the symbolic umbrella Iraqi identity that was created in the 1920s. That this is so is largely thanks to the efforts of the early nationalists to diffuse the ethno-religious identities within it.[27] The conflicting relationship between national and sectarian identities is all the more reason why texts and intellectual trends from the pre-2003 era must be revisited in order to show the contrast between the expression of identity during that period and the identitarian diasporic novels of the post-2003 era.

For more than one generation of intellectuals, especially since the 1950s when Iraqi writers turned to themes of secularism and the nation and the intellectual atmosphere became highly critical of the religious establishment,[28] sectarian conceptions of self and society came to represent a taboo diametrically opposed to the quest for secularism. Instead of invoking the ethnic and religious ingredients of individuals' identities, for instance, Arab and Iraqi poets more commonly promoted secularization by reaching backward in time to pre-Islamic mythologies to respond to the perceived failure of Muslim and Arab societies to secularize. Al-Sayyāb and Adūnīs are exemplars of this trend. They saw in myth an integral part of modernity and a necessary product of its correlate, the secular mind.[29] The quest to revive pre-Islamic tropes and frameworks of thought persisted for decades, becoming one of the defining features of literary *ḥadāthah* (Arab modernism). As late as 2009, in a reflection entitled

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[26] To consider the relatively brief Hashemite context alone, we can identify the following sectarian tensions: "In addition to revolts of Kurdish and Shiʿi tribes, several other groups were traumatized by sectarian strife … the discord between the Sunni minority and the Shiʿi majority and between Arabs and Kurds was an acute and often discussed problem. For example, the massacre of the Assyrians by the Iraqi army (1933) was depicted by the nationalists and the social democrats as the legitimate response of the state to a revolt by armed Assyrians." Bashkin, *The Other Iraq*, 169.

[27] For a fuller discussion of the formation of symbolic national identity in nascent Iraq, see al-Akhras, *Kitāb al-mgārīd*, 41; and Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq.*

[28] Bashkin, 176.

[29] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 54–55.

"Is there Sectarianism in Iraqi Literature?" prominent Iraqi intellectual Muḥsin al-Mūsawī warned that "subscribing to this kind of [sectarian] distribution [in literature] implies absence of cultural awareness. For intellectual compromise alone permits this kind of narrow hotbed of discriminatory suppositions to flourish during times of crisis and failure on the personal and societal levels."[30]

In contrast with the new diasporic literary constructions of sectarian identities and alterities discussed below, for solidarity- and unity-preserving purposes Iraqi and Arab intellectuals tacitly agreed on shunning reference to the sensitive topic of sectarian identities in the sphere of public discourse. The line separating pejorative articulations of sectarian identities from acceptable literary modalities is still so tenuous that even authors who have embarked on portraying and shaping these identities in their novels refuse to engage certain dimensions of identity discourse. For one, Sinān Anṭūn, whose markedly Shīʿī and Christian protagonists will be discussed below, disdainfully refused to write about Iraqi "Christian literature" when approached by the editor of an anthology on modern Iraqi literature. "I've never heard of something called 'Christian literature,'" he replied. According to Anṭūn, there are only Iraqi writers who are "Christian by accident and mostly atheists."[31]

In the course of constructing an Iraqi national identity, the fledgling Iraqi state of the 1920s and 1930s broke the sectarian isolation of the former Ottoman millets and initiated a cultural discourse that erased their particularity in a quest for a homogenous civil society. This civil society was envisioned as absorbing heterogeneous voices and enlisting them in the production of one unified cultural sphere. The result was the marginalization of local or regional cultural expression and the rise of "high" culture through the promotion of literature and journalism.[32] Rather than accentuating the merger of the multiple sectarian identities that gave it shape, the nascent national Iraqi identity thrived upon a symbolism that sought to subsume sectarian identities as

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[30] Muḥsin al-Mūsawī, "Hal min ṭāʾifiyyah fī adab al-ʿirāq?" (Is there Sectarianism in Iraqi Literature?), *al-Shuʿlah*, Nov. 17, 2009. https://iraqibeacon.wordpress.com/2009/12/05/.
[31] Sinān Anṭūn, "Barbarī fī rūmā" (Barbarian in Rome), *Jadaliyya*, April 9, 2013. http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/11129/.
[32] al-Akhras, *Kitāb al-mgārīd*, 24; Bashkin, 87–121.

auxiliary, folkloric, or anachronistic. In that sense, being so intrinsically linked to the secular formation of the Iraqi nation-state and its civil society, rather than being a local archaism of pre-modern times,[33] "sectarianism" in Iraq appears to be a thoroughly modern phenomenon.[34] Other readings, like Bashkin's, also support this view by explaining how the construction of the Iraqi "other" shaped and was shaped by modern national Iraqi discourses that produced "a multitude of 'others' based on their religious, ethnic, and national affiliations."[35] However, rather than seeing sectarianism as a physical or conceptual violence exercised to mute ethno-religious diversity as Haddad does, Bashkin views it as an amplifier of undesirable diversity. Both perspectives point us to the modern roots of sectarianism in Iraq. In certain respects, the statements of poet Maʿrūf al-Ruṣāfī (1875–1945) epitomize early intellectuals' conflicting perspectives on Iraqi sectarian and national identity during the period of nation-building. In his *al-Risālah al-ʿirāqiyyah fī al-siyāsah wa-al-dīn wa-al-ijtimāʿ* (Iraqi Treatise on Politics, Religion, and Society, [1940] 2007*)*, he wrote,

> If the Iraqi government was free to run all of its affairs it would have considered all of the people in Iraq Iraqis and nothing else. Only then would it be an Iraqi government indeed, as it is in the habit of calling itself.[36]

Ethnic and religious filiations should make way for an umbrella national identity, yet shockingly, al-Ruṣāfī elaborates his views on Arab versus Shīʿī identities thus:

> The strangest thing I have ever witnessed in this life is a Shīʿī claiming to be an Arab because between Shīʿism and Arabism lies a contradiction the most feeble of minds would not possibly overlook. For if the Shīʿī was a veritable Arab as he claims, then he must have morphed through Shīʿism to

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[33] Some recent speculations on the dynamics of sectarianism in modern Iraq date its origins to the 7th-century thinker al-Jāḥiẓ's notion of *aṣālah* (authenticity) and *shuʿūbiyyah* (pro-Persian sectarianism) in deferring the charges from the present.

[34] Haddad, 3.

[35] Bashkin, 158.

[36] Maʿrūf al-Ruṣāfī, *al-Risālah al-ʿirāqiyyah fī al-siyāsah wa-al-dīn wa-al-ijtimāʿ* (Cologne: Manshūrāt al-Jamal, (1940) 2007), 6.

the point of resembling the foreign (aʿjam) animal who is unaware of his state.[37]

It is telling that al-Ruṣāfī's 1940s treatise on Iraqi society was published posthumously no sooner than 2007, and in the diaspora, where a hybrid sense of simultaneously belonging to the homeland and repudiating it commonly takes form.[38] The public national discourse of the 1940s in Iraq offered no space for such articulations, even as they were rife in the private sphere. Although al-Ruṣāfī had purportedly liberated himself from religion in his commitment to national identity, his polarized attitudes toward sectarian and national identities[39] lingered, and remind us of the multiple modes of their recurrence among subsequent generations of Iraqi intellectuals. Among those is Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb who, more than a decade later, readily conflated his disillusionment with the Iraqi Communist Party with his misgivings toward the ICP's "shuʿūbī" members—namely, Shīʿīs who expressed confessional loyalty to Iran.[40] (Also tellingly, al-Sayyāb's inflammatory "confessions" that were serialized in the Baghdadi newspaper *al-Ḥuriyyah* in 1959 were not compiled into a book format until 2007; when they were, it was thanks to the efforts of a diasporic printing press whose Iraqi owner and chief editor, poet and essayist Khālid al-Maʿālī, has taken an interest since the early 2000s in bringing to cultural light hitherto disremembered records from the historical archive of modern Iraq.) Bashkin succinctly sums up al-Sayyāb's views on affiliation: "Badr Shakir al-Sayyab equated *shuʿūbiyya* with local Iraqi patriotism *(iqlīmiyya)*, which he thought was often disguised by such terms as *communism* and *cosmopolitanism*."[41]

These sentiments and the infamous battle between Saṭiʿ al-Ḥuṣarī and the poet Muḥammad Mahdī al-Jawāhirī harken back to the cultural duality and salience of

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[37] Ibid., 123.
[38] Ibrāhīm, 11.
[39] al-Ruṣāfī's confessional sentiments, which were only rarely voiced, were possibly colored by the views he gleaned during his twelve years of apprenticeship under Maḥmūd Shukrī al-Ālūsī (1856–1924), who had assumed a more definite stance within the Shīʿī–Sunni debate.
[40] Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, *Kuntu shuyūʿiyyan* (Cologne: Manshūrāt al-Jamal, 2007), 17, 20–22.
[41] Bashkin, 171.

sectarian identities among Iraq's nascent intelligentsia despite their self-assessment as heralds of a new, cosmopolitan, national "high culture." The clash was instigated by al-Jawāhirī's refusal, upon al-Ḥuṣarī's request, to relinquish his Iranian citizenship for an Iraqi one in order to be employed as a teacher in Iraq. He eventually forwent his Iranian citizenship for employment purposes, but soon after published a poem in which he expressed his resentment toward Iraq and love for Persia (Fāris). Al-Ḥuṣarī became indignant upon reading the poem and consulted al-Ruṣāfī, who readily pointed out al-Jawāhirī's *shuʿūbiyyah* (pro-Persia sectarianism). Al-Jawāhirī was consequently threatened with dismissal from his job. From his point of view, of course, the details and motives of the incident differed, reflective of al-Ḥuṣarī's sectarian intolerance and unjustness in questioning al-Jawāhirī's Arab identity. The argument eventually turned to nationalism and language ideology, as al-Jawāhirī was a far more proficient user of the Arabic language than al-Ḥuṣarī, and from there to the question of who is more Arab: the one who speaks the Arabic language or the one who holds citizenship from an Arab country?[42] Although, as Bashkin argues, Iraqi "nationalism's 'other' was extremely elusive" in the early nation-building period,[43] as this example and others reveal, the premises underlying cultural polarities and political conflicts often belied semi-silenced sectarian disjunctions that mutually sought to scorn and marginalize this "other."[44]

Another anecdotal reference clues us in to the nascent Iraqi public's inability to reconcile itself to the notion of hyphenated identities: in this case, that of the Jewish Iraqi poet and journalist Anwar Shāʾūl, who was involved in editing two of the nation's leading Arabic journals, *al-Ḥāṣid* and *al-Miṣbāḥ*, indicating his keen interest in Islamic and Arabic literature.[45] As the story goes, Shāʾūl overhears a conversation between two passersby on his way to present a eulogy at Prime Minister ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Saʿdūn's funeral in 1929. In this conversation the passersby express their doubts about Shāʾūl's

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[42] For the different perspectives on this debate, see Sāṭiʿ al-Ḥuṣarī, *Mudhakkarātī fī al-ʿirāq*, part 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Wiḥdah al-ʿArabiyyah, 1967), 232; Bashkin, 170–171; and al-Jawāhirī, *Dhikrayātī*, vol. 1, 141–172.

[43] Bashkin, 193.

[44] More examples are found in al-Akhras, *Kitāb al-mgārīd*, 35.

[45] Bashkin, 186.

ability to compose well in Arabic, wondering if it were indeed possible for someone who spoke another language and held different confessional views to excel in Arabic and fully assimilate its literary legacy.[46]

Whether or not this anecdote reflects an actual occurrence, the fact that it was recounted by an Iraqi Jew who was a contemporary of Shāʾūl's suggests that it was difficult for the urban public of the early 20th century to accept the coexistence of someone's mainstream identity as an Iraqi poet with good command of the Arabic language while simultaneously acknowledging his affiliation with an ethno-religious identity that did not align with the center's discourse on national belonging. It is true, as Bashkin has demonstrated, that the Iraqi "public sphere … tolerated and at times encouraged a variety of diverse, hyphenated identities,"[47] yet it is those other times when Iraqi hyphenated identities were discouraged rather than tolerated, or consigned out of sight to the private sphere, that clue us in to the discursive dynamics of the present. Harkening to the "chatter" on the margins of the official national narrative of belonging throughout the 20th century expands our understanding of how these distinct sectarian identities resurfaced in post-2003 Iraq with the collapse of the nation-state. They resurfaced to be politically deployed in the service of sectarian violence on the ground, but also—significantly—to resist this very same sectarian violence. Such resistance is currently emanating from a body of literature that has ceased to lend credibility to the idea of an umbrella national identity, as the latter is no longer able to sustain the narrative of congruent communal belonging.

Contrary to the prevalent official as well as literary discourses on heterogeneous "Iraqi" identity, for the greater part of the 20th century, geopolitical identities merged with religious ones, and at some point the two intersected with particular intellectual and ideological currents. One way to chart these dynamics is to consider how for Shīʿī intellectuals of the 1940s to the 1970s, it was their investment in Communist or Socialist filiations that superseded religious and ethnic belonging. On the other hand, in the

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[46] From Ḥisqayl Qojmān, "Ḥayātī fī al-sujūn al-ʿirāqiyyah," unpublished, cited in al-Akhras, *Kitāb al-mgārīd*, 25.

[47] Bashkin, 193.

1980s and early 1990s, the single-party Baʿthist state absorbed intellectuals into the production of a monolithic body of war literature, which eclipsed expression of sectarian belonging further and in a different way. The following era, by significant contrast, witnessed a return to a religious expression of identity, foregrounding southern, rural, geographical descent and the pre-modern sectarian imaginary with its vast symbolic collective memory. For instance, the 1940s–1960s' glorification of Che Guevara, Fahd,[48] and Salām ʿĀdil[49] gave way to the 1990s' adoration of the Ṣadrīs and other religious figures that had seemed forgotten during the brief secular upsurge.[50]

Until 1958, the banner of the state and "high culture" dominated the center, yet after the dissolution of the monarchic state and the rise of the nationalists to power, the dynamics of mainstream cultural production shifted due to two factors. The first was the urban resettlement of a large group of rural migrants from the southern marshes to the outskirts of Baghdad. Contrary to the expectations of the Communist regime of ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim, which enabled their resettlement, that they would assimilate, these southern migrants with their distinct cultural practices eventually came to represent a considerable segment of the social capital of the center, especially after the mass exit of the professional or "middle"[51] classes from Iraq in the aftermath of the 1991 and 2003 wars. The other reason was that the nationalist powers that usurped authority from 1963 until the fall of the Baʿthist regime, and sought to centralize cultural expression during the time, were themselves newcomers from the southwestern cultural margins (ʿĀna, Fallūjah, Rāwah, Tikrīt, Hīt, etc.).[52] Since that moment of encounter between the two social margins in the center, a new clash appeared. A conflict emerged between

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[48] Fahd, real name Yūsuf Salmān Yūsuf (1901–1949), was the first secretary of the Iraqi Communist Party from 1945–1949.

[49] Salām ʿĀdil, real name Ḥusayn Aḥmad al-Rāḍī (1924–1963), was a subsequent secretary of the Iraqi Communist Party from 1955–1963.

[50] al-Akhras, *Kitāb al-mgārīd*, 16.

[51] In recent years, it has become common among Iraqi intellectuals to question the existence of the Iraqi "middle class," with the claim that if it had indeed been there in the first place, the country's infrastructure would not have experienced the rapid disintegration witnessed immediately after the U.S. invasion in 2003. See, for instance, al-Akhras, *Dafātir khurdat farrūsh*, 13.

[52] al-Akhras, *Kitāb al-mgārīd*, 23.

two sources of regional "low culture:" one that tried to embrace, appropriate, and legislate the national culture handed down by the Ottoman and Monarchic legacies, and one that tried to contest the center and subsist despite its homogenizing currents. Within this binary, official national (high) and subsidiary ethno-religious (low) cultures overlapped, yet also fiercely contested each other. The delicate balance between intellectuals' national and sectarian affiliations was constantly threatened by the doubts surrounding the "truth" or "sincerity" or even "possibility" of the non-Arab (ʿajamī) or non-Sunni (shuʿūbī) Iraqi's commitment to his national identity.

Indeed, sectarian relations in modern Iraq, as Fanar Haddad argued in 2008, defy all formulaic generalizations and empirical accuracy.[53] As identities are constructed along the lines of the perceptual and the emotional, it is no wonder that the sphere of literature is also in constant need of recalibrating the perspectives it produces around sectarian identities, especially from a place of diasporic uprootedness and cultural liminality. In contrast with the present diasporic novel's interest in shifting, hybrid, and subaltern articulations of subjectivity, the Iraqi literati of the 1950s and 1960s were compelled to defend their national identity and to deter accusations of the presence of both foreign and local influences in what they presented as quintessentially Iraqi literature. In fact, with the exception of Farmān's early works, the reader of this literature often cannot detect the features of the place or cultural milieu the author is intent on depicting. The author had to neutralize or trivialize sectarian belonging in order to legitimize his work, as in Sargon Būluṣ' statements on the pioneers of free verse (ruwwād al-shiʿr al-ḥurr) when he identified Buland al-Ḥaydarī as "a Kurd, but that racial belonging did not influence his poetry."[54] Even while reminiscing about that period now, some literati of the 1960s seek to justify the placement of their literary production within the Iraqi canon by overemphasizing their Arabness and dismissing the influences of their religious or ethnic cultures as subsidiary. For instance, in his 1997 memoirs *al-*

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[53] Haddad, 4.

[54] Sargon Būluṣ, "Baghdād markaz aḥlāmī" (Baghdad Is the Center of My Dreams), *Parnassos* 29 (2006). Cited in Fawzī Kāẓim, *al-Laḥẓa al-shiʿriyyah* 14 (2009). http://fawzikarim.com/poetry_moment/issue_14_2009/poetry_momentl_issue_14_8.htm.

Rūh al-ḥayyah, Fāḍil al-ʿAzzāwī of the Kirkūk Society labors to forefront his Arabness by pointing to how he began reading the Qurʾān even before reaching school age.[55] In fact, the name "Kirkūk Society" (Jamāʿat Kirkūk), according to one of its representatives, was coined by the Arab intellectuals of Baghdad in an attempt to tacitly single out the northern Turkoman, Kurdish, and Assyrian writers of this group as non-Arab.[56]

A closer look at the texts produced by intellectuals who embraced a symbolic Iraqi identity through nationalist ideology, however, reveals the potency of their sectarian subcultures and the immense effect of the latter on the aesthetic and intellectual positions they held with regard to seemingly apolitical literary issues. The debate between the proponents of the prose poem (al-qaṣīdah al-ḥurrah/qaṣīdat al-nathr) and the free poem (al-qaṣīdah al-ḥurrah/qaṣīdat al-tafʿīlah) is a case in point.[57] A new way of looking at the debate reveals that the founders of the Kirkūk Poets' Society—Assyrian, Turkoman, and Jewish writers, and to some extent southern writers of leftist political leanings—embraced free verse and innovative prose in an attempt to emancipate their texts from the established center; whereas those who were affiliated with the nationalist rhetoric of the time tried to preserve aspects of the traditional form of the Arabic poem by way of perpetuating the old cultural status quo.[58] According to al-Akhras, this poetic binary between metered verse/center vs. free verse/margins came to reflect in the 1960s old cultural dynamics that centered upon the idea that Arabic language and sensibilities imply *aṣālah* (authenticity). In the new Iraqi state, this *aṣālah*

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[55] Fāḍil al-ʿAzzāwī, *al-Rūḥ al-ḥayyah* (Damascus: Dār al-Madā, 1997), 282; al-Akhras, *Kitāb al-mgārīd*, 31. In Inʿām Kachachǐ's novel *Ṭashshārī*, the same sentiment is echoed through the Christian protagonist Sulaymān, who as a young man in 1940s Baghdad falls in love with the Arabic language and takes up the Qurʾān as a literary and cultural source in an attempt to "assert his belonging, he who is Assyrian, to the national identity in a state that was formed when he was less than ten years old" (63–65).

[56] al-Akhras, *Kitāb al-mgārīd*, 33; Būluṣ, 2009.

[57] There has been semantic confusion since the inception of these terms in the 1940s because both groups (the one advocating for liberation from all formal restraints and the other for modifying and modernizing the classical restraints) referred to their work as "free verse," *shiʿr ḥurr*, in reference to its liberation from traditional precepts of classical Arabic rhyme and meter. See: Nāzik al-Malāʾikah, *Qaḍāya al-shiʿr al-muʿāṣir* (Baghdad: Maktabat al-Nahḍah, 1962), 132–134.

[58] al-Akhras, *Kitāb al-mgārīd*, 28.

became once more susceptible to "intellectual invasion by the Other."[59] According to nationalist poet Nāzik al-Malāʾikah, these "Others" could be called out as *shuʿūbiyyīn* (sectarians) and *mughaffalīn* (simpletons). Nor did al-Malāʾikah speak abstractly or allegorically. She had in mind concrete examples to illustrate this "invasion" when she presented the topic in 1965 during the Arab Writers Union Convention. She faulted Iraqi-Assyrian poet Sargon Būluṣ, for one, for representing the tendency to imitate Western styles of writing because of his "innate readiness to be influenced."[60]

The underlying assumption of Nāzik al-Malāʾikah, among a host of other Iraqi intellectuals who ushered in the elitist expression of national or high Iraqi culture, was that modernity (*ḥadāthah*) is predicated on divestment from old, pre-modern identities that have become difficult to justify and which create obstacles in the face of intellectual liberation. An offshoot of this was the putative liberation of secularism from religious affiliation.[61] Sectarianism was nonetheless set free to survive under the surface of a tentative secular national identity, only to erupt as contextual factors allowed.

In short, in the public sphere the British-enabled "Iraqi" umbrella identity surpassed all other identifications after the 1920s. To the dismay of many segments of society, however, including the intelligentsia, it did not do away with the underlying sectarian sentiments of those who espoused it. Worse still, the national identity began to seriously falter after the sectarian strife in 1991, and was severely damaged by 2003. It failed to create the sect-neutral "Ummah" as envisioned by Saṭiʿ al-Ḥuṣarī, Sāmī Shawkat, and King Fayṣal. [62] That failure is today prompting both the Iraqi people and the new diasporic generation of Iraqi novelists to revert to confessional identities as a starting point for apprehending the self and rehabilitating the "Other."

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[59] Fuʾād al-Shāyib, "Dawr al-adab fī maʿrakat al-taḥrīr wa-al-bināʾ," 5th Arab Writers Union (Baghdad: Maktabat al-ʿĀnī, 1965), 372–375; cited in al-Akhras, *Kitāb al-mgārīd*, 29.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Let us not forget the earlier instances of this discourse. Throughout his oeuvre, Sulaymān Fayḍī (1885–1951) had advocated for a modern, secular Iraqi state and held that religion (Islam) can be part of an individual's subjective identity but need not be imposed on the collective identity of the new Iraqi nation. See: Fāṭimah al-Muḥsin, *Tamaththulāt al-nahḍah fī al-ʿirāq* (Cologne: al-Jamal, 2010), 76.
[62] al-Akhras, *Kitāb al-mgārīd*, 43.

Post-2003 Reenactments: Identity of Fiction/Fiction of Identity

The sample of diaspora Iraqi fiction I discuss in this section exhibits a near-obsession with the phenomenology and epistemology of sectarianism, in contrast with the literary texts of the 1950s and 1960s that were deliberately stripped of sectarian traces that might impart their authors' or protagonists' ethnic or religious affinities.

The idea that marginal Iraqi identities can legitimately narrate themselves or be narrated by an Iraqi Other in fiction is new. We should consider, for instance, how Arab and Iraqi media have repeatedly marveled at Sinān Anṭūn, an author of Christian background, for crafting a realistic Shīʿī protagonist and his traditional social milieu in *The Corpse Washer*;[63] or interrogated Najm Wālī, of Muslim background, for discussing the history and life of Jews and Mandaeans in *Malāʾikat al-janūb*.[64]

The self-imposed taboo that drove intellectuals to marginalize or deny the existence of sectarian identities until they were able to formulate them in the diaspora deprived Iraqi society of the ability to articulate its features and ethno-religious constituents with precision in the social realist literature it produced during the 20th century. Although some works have emerged in Iraq in recent years,[65] the bulk of the

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[63] ʿAlī al-Shok, "Waḥdahā shajarat al-rummān: riwāyat al-ʿirāq bi-ḥaqq" (The Pomegranate Alone: The True Novel of Iraq), *Jadaliyya*, Sept. 8, 2011. http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2582/.

[64] The examples are numerous, especially since Wālī's literary themes are repeatedly conflated with support of Zionism and the Israeli state. See for one instance, Zaynab ʿAlī ʿAbid, "Najm Wālī: al-baḥth ʿan al-nujūmiyyah fī aqbiyat al-taṭbīʿ al-thaqāfī" (Najm Wali: Searching for Stardom in the Vaults of Cultural Normalization), *al-Multaqā al-thaqāfī al-jāmiʿī* (2014). http://www.al-moultaqa.com/?p=143.

[65] The enchanted worlds that Southern Iraqi author Murtadhā Gzār weaves through his magical realist fiction usher us into the realms of black and homosexual subcultures in Basra in *Maknasat al-jannah* (Broom of Heaven) (Amman: Dār Azminah, 2009), and Shīʿī culture in Najaf in *al-Sayyid Aṣghar Akbar* (Sayyid Aṣghar Akbar) (Beirut: Dār al-Tanwīr, 2011)—social constructs and identities that have hardly been discussed before in a modern literary form. Equally uncustomary, Dhiyāʾ al-Jubaylī's *Bū Ghayz al-ʿajīb* (The Incredible Bū Ghayz) (Bahrain: Muʾassasat al-Dawsarī lil-Thaqāfah, 2011) negotiates class distinctions and the hegemonic processes of Othering as he situates his eunuch black slave protagonist within the Ottoman context of the historical Basra province. And most recently, Aḥmad Saʿdāwī's 2014 Booker Prize recipient, the phantasmagorical *Frānkishtāyn fī Baghdād* (Frankenstein in Baghdad) (Cologne: al-Jamal, 2013) skillfully depicts the personality, mannerisms, and Aramaic dialect of an aging Assyrian woman in her natural urban environment in a historically Christian neighborhood of old Baghdad.

examples of sectarian characterization in Iraqi fiction come from writers in the Western diaspora.

From his residence in Belgium and elsewhere in Europe, ʿAlī Badr's novels, most notably *al-Ṭarīq ilā Tall al-Muṭrān* (The Road to Tall al-Muṭrān, 2005),[66] and *Ḥāris al-tabgh* (*The Tobacco Keeper*, 2008),[67] confront us with one of the earliest and most assertive efforts to portray Christian and Jewish subcultures and sensibilities in Iraq. Juxtaposing disparate ethno-religious composites of Iraqi society is the central conceptual framework in most of Badr's novels. In *al-Ṭarīq ilā Tall al-Muṭrān*, Badr contrasts the life and thoughts of a secular Muslim protagonist from Baghdad with those of religious, Aramaic-speaking residents of Tall al-Muṭrān, a fictitious self-ruling northern Chaldean town where the Muslim newcomer is baffled by cultural difference. The protagonist-narrator is estranged there and shunned by the collective ethno-religious Other. His entry into the town is outlined in a scene of collective sensory consternation. As he walks into a local market, the eyes of a local street vendor meet his and,

> … she gasped and covered her mouth with her hand, then let out a loud cry …. This Syriac[68] young woman surprised me with her panic so I was flustered, and began to approach her to calm her down, but she sprang back and tripped over the rope … tipping the cage over, from which the chickens escaped in panic …. Whenever I approached someone to explain the situation he would scream and run away in panic …. They were looking at me in great consternation and whenever I moved toward them they retreated carrying whatever they could carry, leaving behind the terrified flight their tipped-over baskets, stray

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[66] ʿAlī Badr, *al-Ṭarīq ilā Tall al-Muṭrān* (Beirut: Riyāḍ al-Rayyis, 2005).

[67] ʿAlī Badr, *Ḥāris al-tabgh* (Beirut: al-Muʾassasah al-ʿArabiyyah lil-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr, 2009).

[68] In Arabic, "siryāniyyah." Badr interchangeably uses the designations Syriac, Assyrian, and Chaldean in this novel to refer to the inhabitants of Tall al-Muṭrān. Historically the descendants of the followers of the stigmatized Nestorian Church (Church of the East), these populations have experienced prolonged episodes of geographical and denominational segregation, leading to their development of distinct—sometimes mutually unintelligible—Aramaic dialects and their dispersal into enclaves in modern-day Iraq and greater northern Mesopotamia.

lambs, birdcages. On the ground, wheat, buckwheat, and lentil grains
scattered along with smashed wine bottles and deserted flip-flops.
From a distance, dogs barked in fear and confusion.[69]

"I was startled by the town that I startled,"[70] the urban protagonist reflects after
encounters with several townspeople who run away upon meeting him and stigmatize
him as "nakhrāya," the Aramaic equivalent of "stranger."[71] "All Chaldeans fear
strangers, the way they fear death,"[72] the local priest explains to him subsequently,
stressing the xenophobic character of this homogenous Christian enclave; later on in the
novel, the imagination of the priest himself also turns out to be rife with bigotry,
fanaticism, and melancholy.

Crucially, Tall al-Muṭrān is depicted as a fictitious place, a figment of the urban
secular protagonist's imagination, a surreal projection of his fear of a culturally
homogenous Iraq and a reverse microcosm of it. There, in the realm of fiction, minority
identities whimsically assume power as the national majority, and the national majority
is minoritized and eclipsed by this inverse ethno-religious hegemony.

It is not uncommon for minority life to be depicted in microcosmic proportions in
diasporic Iraqi novels. London-based Ṣāmuʾel Shamʿūn's autobiographical novel *ʾIrāqī fī
bārīs* (An Iraqi in Paris, 2005) also depicts Assyrian life through a microcosmic
reconstruction of the town of Habbānīyyah, albeit with more emphasis on a nostalgic
image of a bygone pluralistic Iraq, where Arabs and non-Arabs coexisted side by side
during the 20th century. In Shamʿūn's novel Assyrians are depicted as non-Arabs, most
directly through the protagonist's declaration, "I am Iraqi but not Arab."[73] Badr's *al-
Ṭarīq ilā Tall al-Muṭrān*, by contrast, is interested in laying bare not only alterity but the
very constructedness of this alterity. Even after the protagonist of *Tall al-Muṭrān*
realizes toward the end of the novel that the place and its people are a product of his

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[69] Badr, *al-Ṭarīq*, 50–51.
[70] Ibid., 52.
[71] Ibid., 51, 63.
[72] Ibid., 63.
[73] Ṣāmuʾel Shamʿūn, *ʾIrāqī fī bārīs* (Cologne: Dār al-Jamal, 2005), 142.

dreams, he encounters another narrative through which he simultaneously deconstructs the secular high culture of the 1960s as well as the ethno-religious intolerance belying that secularism of the intellectual class. When he meets a Christian priest, the self-proclaimed "greatest poet on Earth," from the northern city of Mosul, this man explains to him how the Iraqi intellectuals of the seemingly secular 1960s generation were victims of a misunderstanding. This misunderstanding came via a "translated modernism" that did not prevent this generation from being "the same as the society that they condemned." The 1960s generation of intellectuals, according to the poet-priest, "held wounded and dejected sectarian and minoritizing sentiments." None of them had a clear notion of the homeland, and they "backstabbed and hated each other."[74]

In addition to staging ethno-religious alterity in his novels, Badr also explores social identities as situational. The multiple ethno-religious identities (Jewish, Shīʿī, and Sunni) that the Iraqi protagonist of *Ḥāris al-tabgh* assumes during different periods of his life point to the situational dimension of identity, and its co-dependence on historic conditions and political legitimization. Badr's work accentuates the interplay not only between Christian, Jewish, and Muslim identities, but also between national, Shīʿī, and Sunni politics of belonging to the Iraqi mainstream. Much as *al-Ṭarīq ilā Tall al-Muṭrān* constructs the ethno-religious profile of a fictitious Iraqi town, *Ḥāris al-tabgh* belabors the ethno-religious biography of a fictitious Iraqi man who assumes different identities, belongs to different social milieus, and takes up different lovers during distinct phases of his life. The shifting personalities of the main protagonist are punctuated by political events that necessitate adapting to ethno-religious alternatives. A single protagonist transforms from the Jewish musician Yūsuf Ṣāliḥ, who is forced to migrate to Israel in the 1950s, to the Shīʿī Ḥaydar Salmān, who flees back to Baghdad and is later deported to Iran in the late 1970s, to Kamāl Midḥat, a famous composer who reenters Baghdad under the guise of a Sunni identity to finally be kidnapped and murdered there in 2006.

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[74] Badr, *Tall al-Muṭrān*, 381–382.

To drive home the notion that identities are situational and political in nature, the main protagonist leaves behind three sons who each reflect one of the ethno-religious identities of their fathers. The sons also embody the distinct political ideologies within social contexts typically associated with these ethno-religious identities. For instance, the Israeli-American son arrives in Iraq with the invading U.S. forces, bringing American-inspired ideas of democracy and regime change. The offspring of the protagonist's Shīʿī marriage comes from Tehran with an extremist Islamic movement. Finally, the Sunni son who arrives from Egypt is spiteful and bitter about the disenfranchisement of the former government of the Sunni Baʿth Party.[75] The three sons all arrive in Iraq after the U.S. invasion in 2003, firmly grounded in unequivocal religious identities and stereotypical political orientations.

Beyond this reductive caricaturing of the sons' identities, the novel makes it clear that "the father alone was the Tobacco Keeper … he alone gave the true representation of the image of the peripheral, the outsider, and the marginalized—the image of someone against all forms of authority and outside all ideologies …."[76] The novel announces from the outset, "not only was his personality a mask-changing and name-borrowing game like [Fernando] Pessoa's poetry," from which the novel takes its title and thematic arrangement, "but life [as an Iraqi] as a whole was a game of stolen identities and changing masks."[77] ʿAbd Allah Ibrāhīm reads Badr's changing masks in terms of an "internal exile" that characterizes diasporic subjectivities. Unable to either belong to or annul their belonging to the homeland, diasporic characters such as the protagonist of *Ḥāris al-tabgh* are at once pulled back to the homeland as a birthplace and initial point of self-reference and expelled from it as a locale where living has become impossible. As such, the diasporic self loses the ability to identify with stable or static notions of selfhood, prompting the need for an ongoing shedding and renewal of

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[75] Badr, Ḥāris al-tabgh, 326.

[76] Badr, *Ḥāris al-tabgh*, 328. Compare to these lines from Fernando Pessoa's (penname: Alvaro de Campos) "Tabacaria" (The Tobacco Shop), trans. Miguel Peres dos Santos:
"I'm nothing./I'll always be nothing./I can't want to be something./But I have in me all the dreams of the world."

[77] Badr, *Ḥāris al-tabgh*, back cover.

identity in transient spatio-temporal settings.[78] Because they are not diasporic subjects like their father, the sons do not share their father's condition of situational identity and are able to maintain stable affiliations with religion, ethnicity, and political ideology.

In addition to Badr's experimentations with Iraqi ethno-religious alterities and situated identities, we encounter a notably different approach to ethno-religious identities in a separate body of Iraqi novels by New York-based author Sinān Anṭūn. In *Iʿjām* (Diacritics, 2004),[79] Anṭūn's first novel, the young Chaldean Christian protagonist rejects his grandmother's outmoded and prejudiced ethno-religious affiliations to align his identity with the neutralizing Iraqi discourse of the 1980s, during which the events of the novel take place. He narrates his perspective:

> She always cherished our Chaldean origins and got angry when I tried to convince her that we are, at least culturally, Arab, or Arabized, and not a separate nationality like the Assyrians or the Armenians, and that all that remains of the Chaldean [identity] is the language that is used liturgically, or that was used by the previous generation, or that she uses with relatives from her own generation or with me when she gets angry … even this [identity component] began dying among the new generation. But she refused to discuss the subject and accused me of repudiating my origins.[80]

Shifting perspective in the wake of the sectarian violence in Iraq, Anṭūn's novels begin to turn to the minutiae of ethnic and religious identities in Iraq. In *Yā Maryam* (Hail Mary, 2012),[81] he outlines a specifically "Christian" socio-political experience in contemporary Iraq. Anṭūn also explores the highly religion- and sect-specific private sphere of the Shīʿī community in Iraq in *Waḥdahā shajarat al-rummān* (The Pomegranate Tree Alone,

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[78] Ibrāhīm, 11.

[79] Sinān Anṭūn, *Iʿjām* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 2004). For the English translation, see *Ijaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody*, trans. Sinan Antoon (New York: City Lights, 2007).

[80] Anṭūn, *Iʿjām*, 78.

[81] Sinān Anṭūn, *Yā Maryam* (Cologne: al-Jamal, 2012).

2010).[82] The three novels employ the vernacular Arabic specific to each ethno-religious community when rendering dialogue among the characters to foreground cultural specificity. The narratives of Anṭūn's last two novels also make room for the details of the rituals of each group and accentuate internal diversity by voicing the conflicting individual perspectives on Iraq's society, politics, and future held by different members of the same ethno-religious group. The narrative of *Yā Maryam*, for instance, revolves around the oppositional perspectives of two Christian relatives: a young woman who believes that Christians have no future in Iraq in light of the sectarian violence her community is witnessing at present, and an elderly man who clings to the conviction that the sectarian violence of the present is an aberration that does not reflect the pluralism of Iraq's modern history.

Similarly, *Waḥdahā shajarat al-rummān* sets the protagonist's narrative of identity against the contrastive backdrop of his Shīʿī community's conventions and mainstream views, as well as those of the overarching Iraqi society. The existential tragedy of Jawād, the novel's protagonist, is his "non-sectarianism in a country that is drowning in sectarianism, and his humanity in dreary times that estrange him in his own homeland and amongst his own people."[83] Jawād's "non-sectarianism" is not synonymous with an absence of ethno-religious identity, despite his skepticism of religious doctrines. His ethno-religious identity still holds, notwithstanding his non-sectarian, non-religious outlook, because it is part and parcel of Jawād's Qurʾān-inflected upbringing, recollections, and dreams; his sect-specific profession and rituals; and his socio-cultural placement within the Shīʿī context of post-2003 Baghdad. Rather than compromising any of this, his non-sectarianism is the simple acceptance of the sectarian identity of the Iraqi Other—the non-Shīʿī—and his refusal to assert a single, fixed, monolithic identity for himself because his is a multi-faceted identity (he is a lover, a thinker, and an artist, among other things), much like the identities of all Iraqi victims

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[82] Sinān Anṭūn, *Waḥdahā shajarat al-rummān* (Beirut: al-Muʾassasah al-ʿArabiyyah lil-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr, 2010). The English translation bears the title *The Corpse Washer*, trans. Sinan Antoon (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2013).

[83] Sinān Anṭūn in ʿUmar al-Jaffāl's "al-Riwāyah al-ʿirāqiyyah al-jadīdah," *al-ʿĀlam al-jadīd* 693, Nov. 8, 2012.

of the sectarian violence of the post-2003 era that has turned his daily experience into a living hell.

As the discourse on sectarian violence in post-2003 Iraq becomes more commonplace, other diasporic voices have joined in to accentuate the Iraqi Other in fiction. While the protagonists of Anṭūn's and Badr's pioneering works mostly navigate an experience of alterity inside Iraq, the novels of Paris-based Inʿām Kachachchī take the reader to the diasporic dimension of Iraqi minority life and identity abroad in recent decades. In *Sawāqī al-qulūb* (Heart Streams, 2005),[84] she attempts to reconstruct the life of the Iraqi community in the European diaspora by painting a pluralistic, multi-ethnic picture of Iraqi identity through the character of an Armenian survivor of the 1915 massacre who is all at once non-Arab, Christian, and Muslim-raised.[85] Despite her multiple identifications, the character of Kāshāniyyah here serves as a paradigm of an imagined national unity, because ultimately, the novel tells us, she is more Iraqi than Armenian, Christian, or French.

In her second novel, *al-Ḥafīdah al-amīrkiyyah* (The American Granddaughter, 2008),[86] written following the escalation of sectarian violence and the rapid displacement of Iraqi Christians from Iraq, Kachachchī's characterization of Iraqi society's pluralism considerably shifts. Ambivalence seeps into her portrayal of the different ethno-religious segments, and her characters' thoughts and beliefs become more nuanced. Notably, Kachachchī illustrates how diasporic identities become more uncertain and confused as individuals become preoccupied with defining their belonging and delineating their identities. The novel follows the life of Zīna, a first-generation Christian Iraqi-American in search of her identity, and the social history of her parents and grandparents. In this work Kachachchī shapes her young protagonists along the binary of culturally "liberal" but internally conflicted Christian Iraqis abroad versus culturally "conservative" Muslim Iraqis at home. It also explores another binary between

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[84] Inʿām Kachachchī, *Sawāqī al-qulūb* (Beirut: al-Muʾassasah al-ʿArabiyyah lil-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr, 2005).
[85] Ibid., 21–22.
[86] Inʿām Kachachchī, *al-Ḥafīdah al-amīrkiyyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Jadīd, 2008).

an ideologically polarized young generation of Iraqis who are trapped within specific post-2003 sectarian identifications and an older generation of Iraqis who are more equipped to coexist despite ethno-religious differences and sectarian violence.

The novel is framed by the American occupier's hegemonic discourse, as voiced by Zīna, positioned against the resistance discourse of occupied Iraq that foregrounds the character of an Islamic extremist, Muhaymin, who joins the Shīʿī Mahdī Army to fight against the U.S. occupation. The hegemonic discourse of the invading forces mobilizes the diasporic Christian character and prompts her to go back to Iraq as a "liberator:" "I am joining a patriotic mission, a soldier who is going to help her government, people, and army, our American army that will work to take down Saddam and liberate a people who have suffered greatly."[87] The reader quickly discovers that this identification is unstable and made in bad faith (motivated by a $186,000 salary— the price of her rare language, "even her blood," as a U.S. army translator). Zīna's American patriotism is also quickly dislodged when she meets Muhaymin in Iraq. Muhaymin's name (English translation: Dominator) tellingly reflects his character. Zīna is at once sexually drawn to him and fearful that he will kill her. Muhaymin, on the other hand, psychologically dominates Zīna and sexually rejects her.[88] This dynamic between the two ideologically, religiously, and patriotically opposed characters unsettles the antecedent power configuration (American occupier/Iraqi resistance). It renders the oppressor fearful of the oppressed. It also undermines the former ethno-religious identity of the diasporic protagonist, who in the end returns from Iraq to Detroit not the Chaldean/Assyrian American she formerly was before her trip, but uncertain of her hybrid Iraqi-American belonging, referring to herself as "a dog with two homes."[89]

Finally, Kachachchī's latest novel, *Ṭashshārī* (Dispersed, 2013),[90] takes up the theme of minority groups' mass exit from post-2003 Iraq by mapping the life of a multi-generational Christian family, both in Iraq and in diaspora. Kachachchī here charts the

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[87] Ibid., 18.
[88] Ibid., 136, 139.
[89] Ibid., 191.
[90] Inʿām Kachachchī, *Ṭashshārī* (Beirut: Dār al-Jadīd, 2013).

contingent nature of ethno-religious belonging by juxtaposing the significance of the Arabic language and national belonging in Iraq of the 1940s and 1950s to the importance of attending the ethnic church, asserting one's Christianity, and conversing in Aramaic in the French and Canadian diasporas.

In contrast with the 1950s and 1960s discourse of "high" Iraqi national culture where all literary protagonists become simply "Iraqi," in the emergent diasporic narratives, sectarian identities are reified and are sometimes at risk of essentialization. Most of these "identity" novels teem with peripheral characters who are defined primarily by their ethnic or religious belonging, such as Badr's Liliān, the Christian girlfriend of the protagonist in *al-Ṭarīq*, who is first described as a "Chaldean with the appearance of an astrologer."[91] There are also the "[Iraqi-]Armenian woman with the short skirt," the market's "Kurdish pickle makers," "Christian sculptors," and the "Shīʿī beggars" with their green headbands.[92] Zīna, Kachachchī's main protagonist in *al-Ḥafīdah al-amīrkiyyah*, is the offspring of an Assyrian-Iraqi man and a Chaldean-Iraqi woman, while one of her grandmothers is of Kurdish origins. [93]

Iraqi Fiction in Diaspora: Which Way Home?

In 2013, the Iraqi Ministry of Culture celebrated Baghdad as "the Capital of Arab Culture" under the slogan, "Baghdad's face is Arab, her heart Islamic, and her soul humanitarian."[94] The digital billboard that lit up once a minute to promote the slogan stood above the National Theater in the Karrādah neighborhood, an area in Baghdad that until the late 1990s was home to one of the heaviest concentrations of Iraq's urban Christian population. The official discourse of a country that is ravaged by sectarian wars publicly designates the heart of its capital as Islamic and her face as Arab. The new national hegemony of the majority seemed to be reenacting the erasure of ethno-

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[91] Badr, Tall al-Mutrān, 7.

[92] Ibid., 37.

[93] Kachachchī, *Ṭashshārī*, 35.

[94] "Baghdād ʿarabiyyat al-wajh, islāmiyyat al-qalb, insāniyyat al-rūḥ;" see
http://www.darculture.com/index.php/الثقافة-عاصمة-بغداد-مشروع-في-الثقافية-الشؤون-دار-1346/الاخبار
html.العربية-2013.

religious identities. For many Iraqi intellectuals, this declaration came as a form of anti-minority terrorism.[95] It stood out as a provocation to a counter-discourse in defense, protection, and reification of marginalized identities. In response to such politicized public marginalization, the new diasporic literary narrative is insisting on unveiling a different dimension of social reality. The new literature, through its diasporic voices, is communicating an alternative message: while acutely aware of the political factors effecting the marginalization of ethno-religious identities, it does not portray them as regressive, rebellious, or irrelevant as they were depicted for decades. The counter-narrative also admonishes, through its multiple plots and protagonists, that "the city [Baghdad] in its entirety is in an existential predicament … and the streets are divided according to the sects that occupy them."[96]

Since the sectarian civil war of 2006–2007 that cut across previously unified official articulations of self and society, distinct works have begun to emerge, like the ones discussed above, which consciously refuse to depict normative Iraqi identities with their former mainstream formulations. While earlier works of fiction tended to dogmatically conceal the sectarian identities of their protagonists beneath a veneer of ecumenical national harmony and universal intellectuality, an escalating number of post-2003 works have begun to exhibit, for the first time in Iraqi fiction, an open fascination with the ethno-religious cultures of the Iraqi margins, including the marginal Other. Like *Ḥāris al-tabgh*, these works show how, in certain respects, secular and religious identities overlap. Some of these works also navigate a sensitive space between alarmist Western accounts and reductionist Iraqi accounts of sectarian identities. As such, they deconstruct the common conception in both, in a process that Fanar Haddad compellingly outlines, that sectarian identity is the mutually antagonistic Other of national identity.[97] They also vividly demonstrate Talal Asad's contention that, rather than being prior to the secular, continuous with it, or mutually exclusive of it, the

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[95] ʿUmar al-Jaffāl, "al-ʿirāq: badaʾat ḥarb al-shiʿārāt ʿalā al-aqalliyyāt" (Iraq: Slogan Wars Against Minorities Have Begun), *al-Safīr*, April 17, 2013.
http://arabi.assafir.com/article.asp?aid=823&refsite=arabi&reftype=articles&refzone=articles.
[96] Kachachchī, *Ṭashshārī*, 20.
[97] Haddad, 2.

religious overlaps with the secular in ways that render identity contingent and situational.[98] The general message of these new novels is one of pluralistic, shifting belonging, where ethno-religious identities are emotive, socially situational, temporal, compelled to politically mobilize, and historically contextualized. As seen with Yūsuf Şāliḥ in *Ḥāris al-tabgh* or Zīna in *al-Ḥafīdah al-amīrkiyyah*, there is nothing *essentially* religious or secular about them.

Crafted in diaspora, the identity novel revises not only current official discourse but also the old nationality novel, by showing how subcultures did not invade the cosmopolitan centers from the rural margins in order to offset their proportional cultural balance and stump the intellectual quest for modernity. They have always existed in Baghdad, contrary to the misleading message of the new motto. And they are not the "pimples that appeared suddenly on Baghdad's beautiful face" as they were often portrayed in canonical or elitist Iraqi literature, as in Farmān's acclaimed *al-Nakhlah wa-al-jīrān*[99] and other works.[100] These marginalized social groups with their chronically muffled ethnic, tribal, religious, or linguistic distinctions, according to the new narrative, were all along the subtext of the same reductionist account that sought to construct the culturally featureless Iraqi protagonist in fiction and the national Iraqi subject in real life as devoid of ethnic and religious idiosyncrasies.

The notion that sectarian identities are taboo subjects for intellectual and creative discourse is precisely what these new novels are striving to subvert, in the shadow of a taboo-perpetuating official Iraqi discourse. The authors work on their own terms. Some, like Sinān Anṭūn, are conscious that their treatment of the sectarianism of the Other is a subversive one. "The act of creative writing is the antithesis of erasure in every sense of the word."[101]Anṭūn elaborates on his subversive efforts:

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[98] Asad, 25.

[99] Farmān, 26–28.

[100] For examples of portrayals of Baghdad society in 1950s and 1960s Iraqi novels, see Caiani and Cobham, *The Iraqi Novel*.

[101] Sinān Anṭūn, "ʿAn al-dīn wa-al-ṭāʾifiyyah fī al-riwāyah" (On Religion and Sectarianism in the Novel" *Jadaliyya*, Jan. 31, 2013. http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/9914/.

I am generally concerned in what I read and write with the marginal, the marginalized, and the forbidden. "No Entry" signs attract me immensely and generate a strong desire within me to delve in because I am concerned with the boundaries of the real and the symbolic, the hierarchies they produce, and what they impart.[102]

The common quest that animates Anṭūn's novels is to deconstruct the narrative of mainstream identity and renegotiate the re-secularization of sectarian identities by divesting them from both dominant religiously sacred discourses and politically denigrating ones.

Against the backdrop of conventional depictions of Iraq in canonical works of Iraqi and Arab poetry as an essential, sentimentalized lyrical object, Mara Naaman examines the emergence of a new "embrace of the very constructedness of notions of nation, national belonging, allies/enemies, and cultural identity more broadly"[103] in post-2003 poetic representations of Iraq. A similar trajectory is witnessed in these works of fiction that eschew notions of essential Iraqi identity for something more multivalent. According to the emergent collective narrative that these authors, among other contemporary ones,[104] are weaving through their works, sectarian identities are alive and inescapable. They permeate the reality of every Iraqi. Yet while their Christian, Jewish, Shīʿī, or other religiously or ethnically marked protagonists are constructed and situated strategically, none of the post-2003 works of fiction deal with religion or ethnicity in their doctrinal or metaphysical formulations. Nor do their writers align themselves with agendas of minority self-rule or geopolitical independence advocated

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[102] Ibid.

[103] Mara Naaman, "Landscapes of Iraqi Poetry: Reconfiguring the Image of Iraq in the Arabic (and American) Lyric Canon," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43 (2012), 371.

[104] Further examples include the character of Yūsuf Karmalī in Najm Wālī's *Sūrat Yūsuf* (The Verse of Yusuf, 2005); another protagonist named Yūsuf in ʿAbd al-Khāliq al-Rikabī's *Sifr al-sarmadiyyah* (Book of Eternity, 2005); and Abū Maxim, the British-based ICP leader in ʿAlyāʾ Mamdūḥ's *al-Tashshahhī* (Cravings, 2007), among others.

by nationalist minority discourses at home or in diaspora.[105] Rather, the novels depict the lives and environments of the representatives of these sectarian identities by situating them within their specific socio-historical contexts.

Finally, like Kachachchī's elderly Iraqi Christian protagonist Dr. Wardiyyah Iskandar, who comes into personal contact with the Roman Catholic Pope in France and is prompted by this unusual event to question her identity as well as his ("She felt pity for him, as if she were the Pope and he was the woman refugee"[106]), Iraqi literature that is preoccupied with representations of religion and ethnicity could be seen as one effective site of a posited "pervasive multicultural contact."[107] We should not overlook the fact that the diasporic writer is engaging in a dialogue with the master narrative of Iraqi identity while also entertaining the possibility of entering the established Western literary canon. Diasporic writers inch closer to this canon as their protagonists and events become encoded in a traditional literary model where certain components of identity prevail over others.[108] Therefore, although these novels evidently build on notions of social heterogeneity and identity difference, it does not serve to ground our

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[105] These are many. To enumerate but a few, consider the separatist discourses that have emerged in the wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq from the Europe-based Assyrian Universal Alliance, the U.S.-based Chaldean National Congress, and Emanuel Dallī, the Chaldean Patriarch of Babylonia, who in a 2006 address stated that "any Chaldean who calls himself Assyrian is a traitor, and any Assyrian who calls himself Chaldean is a traitor." See: "Chaldean National Congress Demands Inclusion of Chaldeans in Iraq's Leadership Council," http://www.chaldeansonline.net/chaldeanews/iraq_council.html; "Chaldean Groups Protest Lack of Chaldean Representation in Iraqi Ruling Council," July 13, 2003, http://www.chaldeansonline.org/chaldeanews/cnc_cdu.html; "Chaldean Bishops' Letter Undermines National Unity," June 10, 2003, http://www.aina.org/releases/iraqbishops.html.
[106] Kachachchī, *Ṭashshārī*, 16.
[107] Anthropologist Andrew Shryock makes a crucial point in his discussion of public and private spheres of ethnic belonging: "It is precisely the cultural materials that cannot be easily displayed in public formats [e.g., distinctive models of time and space, ways of holding the body, methods of sexual approach, ideas about authority, reckonings of kinship, styles of talking, notions of clean and unclean] that take on exaggerated significance in situations of pervasive multicultural contact." See: Andrew Shryock, *Off Stage/On Display*: *Intimacy and Ethnography in the Age of Public Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 14.
[108] Generally the politics of religious difference play a noticeable role in Europe while the politics of racial and ethnic difference stand out as more significant in the U.S. See: Evelyn Alsultany and Ella Shohat, eds., *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013).

reading of post-2003 Iraqi diasporic fiction too deeply in static notions of descent and plurality. To avoid overemphasizing and exaggerating the ethnic or religious particularity of the new protagonists, the next step would be to look at the literary texts in which they emerge as "codes for a socialization" into the realm of ethnicity and into the new diasporic homes of their authors.[109] In some cases, these Iraqi works aspire to reach Western audiences as much as they aim to be read in the Arab world.[110] In order to understand the interest of readers in the authors' new host country in diasporic literature we must assume that these readers are acquainted or desire to be acquainted with the ethno-religious particularities of these works. More importantly, however, it is the diasporic writers who must have a solid grasp of the politics of religion, race, and ethnicity in their host societies in order to be heard. To appraise their contexts more fully, we would need to situate these diasporic Iraqi authors and their works in a transitional stage between native literary marginality and the thresholds of Western ethnic literature.

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[109] Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 11.

[110] Sometimes Iraqi novels in the diaspora are written in a Western language or appear in translation before the original Arabic is published.