

Iraqi Women Untold War Stories
A Comparative Study of Heather Raffo's Nine
Parts of Desire and Ali Abdul Nabi Al-Zaidi's
Summer Rain

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Abstract

Although they do not participate directly in military operations, Iraqi women suffer as much as Iraqi men from the devastating impact of wars and armed conflicts. The Iraqi women suffering takes many forms: emotional and economic deprivation, widowhood, and social and personal disarticulation. Bringing these narratives of women's home front suffering to light is still insufficient in comparison to male suffering narratives in the battlefields and elsewhere. As the main aim of the theatre of war is to fight back wars and raise awareness of its often tragic consequences, shedding light on the untold stories of misery and dispossession whose main characters are women become one of its priorities. It is argued that dealing with women stories will be more effective as a tool of raising anti-war consciousness. This paper is a comparative study of *Nine Parts of Desire* by the American-Iraqi dramatist Heather Raffo and *Summer Rain* by the Iraqi dramatist Ali Abdul Nabi Al-Zaidi. Both plays reveal many striking similarities in terms of characterization, symbols, and political message. Both are one-woman/performer show although *Nine* narrates the tragic stories of nine Iraqi women. The paper is proposed as a call to take the necessary actions that help in mitigating the distressing experiences of Iraqi women during and after war.

Key words: Raffo, Nine Parts of Desire, Al-Zaidi. Summer Rain, war, suffering.

I. Iraqi Women Under Threat in Real Life and Drama:

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The status and living conditions of Iraqi women gain in great significance during the last two decades especially in the post-2003 era. Countless studies, reports, conferences, books and articles were being produced to draw attention to the deteriorating circumstances under which Iraqi women are living. Almost all these studies emphasize specific characteristics: Iraqi women are invariably vulnerable, oppressed, marginalized, and excluded. In the words of Nadjé Al-Ali(2005): "Iraqi women might turn out to be the biggest losers in the current and future political and social map of Iraq"(p.739). This is quiet expected as they are living in a country ravished by a totalitarian political system, successive wars, and economic sanctions in which "not a single Iraqi family was left untouched," as Al-Athari (2008, p.3) maintains. In order to fully understand the various problems and challenges Iraqi women have been facing on a daily basis in the second half of the twentieth century onwards, one has to trace the vicissitudes of the Iraqi political power dynamics to which the fate of Iraqi women is unavoidably connected.

In modern history of Iraq, the year 1958 can be considered a dividing line after which Iraq slides deeper and deeper into the abyss of severe political and social unrests, internal and external power struggles and continual takeovers. Politics in Iraq, in fact, has been generally imbued with blood and bullets until it had "evolved into a Darwinian struggle to survive"(Anderson and Stanfield, 2004,p.49). Undoubtedly, many Iraqi parties fall victim in this blood-stained struggle; one of them, no doubt, is Iraqi women. Al-Ali, who specializes in gender studies, supplements this bleak picture by meticulously surveying the interconnections between the ups and downs of politics in modern Iraq and the ups-and-downs in the position of Iraqi women. She explains that "the period after the first Baath coup (1963) is generally associated with increased political violence, greater sectarianism, and a reversal of progressive laws and reforms" gained in the 1950s as far as women are concerned. She further illustrates that "the memories of those who were politically active in opposition to the regime are filled with accounts of political repression, mass arrests, torture, and

executions”(2005, p.28). The position of Iraqi women exacerbate as the political regime showed determination to impose its repressive policies on all aspects of life. Women in general and, by consequence, gender relations were negatively affected by succeeding wars, and the militarization of society and the absence of freedom of speech. This negative impact is made clear not only in “terms of the loss of loved ones, but also in terms of a deteriorating economy, changing government policies...and increasingly conservative values surrounding women and gender”(Ibid., p.29).

Cainkar concurs with Al-Ali on the devastating impact of wars on Iraqi women who “had already suffered in various ways from the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and the 1991 Gulf War, and the years of the economic boycott that followed” (1993, p.43). In these years, “resources were reduced, unemployment increased, families sold off goods and counted themselves lucky when they could provide a full meal at least once a day”(Ibid). Finishing education was a matter of concern and rate of dropout from school rocketed. This happened together with the disintegration of the basic aspects of the educational, social, and economic fabric of society. (for more information about the problems of Iraqi women such as domestic violence, minor girls marriage, violence due to armed, widowhood, disabilities, school dropout, gender discrimination, see chapters 5 and 10 of *Iraqi Women in Armed Conflict* (February 2014).

The situation of women becomes worse in post 2003 Iraq as the country plunged into baths of blood and violence. In “Accepting Realities in Iraq”, Stanfield concisely describes the situation. He states:

Iraq has fractured into regional power bases. Political, security and economic power has devolved to local sectarian, ethnic or tribal political groupings. The Iraqi government is only one of several ‘state-like’ actors. The regionalization of Iraqi political life needs to be recognized as a defining feature of Iraq’s political structure...The conflicts have become internalized between Iraqis as the polarization of sectarian and ethnic identities reaches ever deeper into Iraqi society and causes the breakdown of social cohesion(May 2007).

This portentous situation is further consolidated in the description Messing of many Iraqis who keep communicating a sense of

resentment, loss of hope, and fear in post-2003 Iraq. He eloquently avows:

The overwhelming sense is that of a society undergoing a catastrophic breakdown from the never-ending waves of violence, criminality, and brutality inflicted on it by insurgents, militias, jihadis, terrorists, soldiers, policemen, bodyguards, mercenaries, armed gangs, warlords, kidnappers and everyday thugs. 'Inside Iraq' [the name of the Iraqi blog he is describing] suggests how the relentless and cumulative effects of these various vicious crimes have degraded virtually every aspect of the nation's social, economic, professional, and personal life. (qtd in Adelman, 2008, p.184)

In relation to women, the UN Commission on the Status of Women in its report to the Secretary-General points out: "international humanitarian law...is at times systematically ignored, and human rights are often violated in armed conflict, affecting the civilian population, especially women, children, the elderly and the disabled". It further explains that "women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society and their sex"(Lindsey, 2001: pp.14-15).

Armed conflicts unquestionably engender considerable changes in the roles played by women within their families and societies. They often produce "large numbers of female-headed households where the men have been conscripted, detained, displaced, have disappeared or are dead". This situation often heightens the insecurity and danger for the women and accelerates the breakdown of the traditional protection and support mechanisms upon which the community - especially women - have previously relied (Ibid, p.30).

These horrible conditions undoubtedly occasion various responses from the Western and Iraqi dramatists. Since the first Gulf War (1980-1988), plays that takes Iraq as a pivotal or starting point proliferate on stage. Although these plays grapple with various social, psychological, personal or domestic issues, almost all of them do express a "political outlook" the purpose of which is to

comment on the role played by politics in the suffering of human beings (see Macdonald in Greene 2006: pp.104-115).

The plays written and produced under the rubric of ‘war’ can be roughly divided into ‘front-line plays,’ ‘home-front plays’ and ‘the return of the soldier plays’ (for detailed information, see Kosok 2007; Colleran 2012; Stevens 2016; Al-Azraki & Al-Shamma 2017). In *Contemporary Plays from Iraq*(2017), A. Al-Azraki and Al-Shamma point out that Iraqi plays of war is roughly divided into three main types: firstly the ideology-informed plays during the 1980s which mainly glorified the war as a just cause and demonize the enemy; secondly, the commercial theatre which flourish as a result of the deterioration of the social and economic conditions; and thirdly the academic theatre which depends mostly on experimentation in techniques and outlook(p.xvi).

This paper suggests that the two plays under study belong to ‘home front’ category which aims at portraying the hardships and miseries of people under wartime situations: military attacks, displacement, injuries, stress, and the constant anxiety about sons, husbands, brothers who either participate in actual fighting, disappear, or are imprisoned and detained. These plays are “predominantly concerned with individual cases either of suffering or of misdemeanor and leave little room for a discussion of general issues such as the causes of the War, its possible outcome or the moral principles underlying individual behavior”(Kosok 2007, p.29). As the next two sections will demonstrate, although *Nine* and *Summer Rain* engage with individual cases of suffering, they do express a deep political outlook that delves into the real causes of man’s tragedies.

II. The World of Desires in Heather Raffo’s *Nine Parts of Desire*: Although the desires expressed in *Nine* are voiced by nine women from different, social, economic, and political backgrounds, those women collectively constitute an image of a destroyed and shattered society that is in desperate need of help and saving. *Nine* opens with a culture-specific character, Mullaya, who is “an Iraqi colloquialism for a female mullah [who] serves as the leader of women’s majlis.”(Cook &Lawrence, 2006, p.139). Majalis are usually cultural and social spaces that help to create a special form of

remembering, which Radley calls “grieving” (Ibid.). ‘Remembering’ and ‘grieving’ here are mainly related to the ‘dead’ who are lost in wars and life tragic accidents. The more Mullaya is able to “bring women to a crying frenzy with her improvised, heartbreaking verses about the dead,” the more she is considered successful in her job (Raffo, 2004, p.1). Majalis are usually held to commemorate and repetitively narrate the tragic story of the Family of Imam Hussain (PBUH) who was killed with most of his family members and companions in Al-Taff Battle near Karbala (see Szanto, 2013). In fact, Raffo’s choice to open *Nine* with this character is insightful as one of the functions of Mullaya is storytelling. Noteworthy, the stories narrated by the nine characters dribble with words, emotions, reactions typical of majalis like ‘injustice’, ‘pain’, ‘heartrending weeping,’ ‘oppression,’ and ‘unfairness’. This makes both ‘majalis’ and Raffo’s play a “space of an intensive group therapy that allows women...to share in a carefully constructed commemoration” of their life-long ordeals and disasters (Cook & Lawrence, 2006, p.143). In majalis, Women are usually clad in black as a form of grief and mourning. Likewise, in the opening stage direction, Raffo states that the ‘black abaya’ which is “a traditional black robe-like garment” (Ibid) will be worn by the female performer who is to alternately act the nine female characters in the play. This makes the ‘black abaya’ a very telling and suggestive symbol for a number of reasons: first, it moves the traumatic experiences of Iraqi women from the personal to the collective realm as the nine characters are sequentially: Mullaya, an artist, a Bedouin, an old woman, a doctor, a young girl, a mother, an exile, a street peddler; second, it enables Raffo to comment on the dire living circumstances under which Iraqi women- and by implication Iraqi people are writhing; third, ‘black’ here is not only a ‘color’; it is a state of being and living that conveys a strong sense of pessimism and distrust of any hope of change. As the play

reveals, 'blackness' infiltrates every nook and cranny of life in Iraq: its past, present and future.

The Mullaya begins her incantatory storytelling by contrasting two images of life: morning and death. Morning in Mulaya's story is no longer a symbol of new beginning and life as it is inextricably connected with death. Equally, the river is no longer a symbol of life; it turns into a symbol of death whose desire for devouring the dead cannot be satisfied. Mullaya comes in the early morning to "throw dead shoes in the river". She surveys the history of the river since ancient times and focuses on those occurrences in history where rivers as a symbol of life were violated and despoiled. This implies a change in the color of rivers; from black as a result of burning and throwing of books in the Tigris river by the grandson of the Mongol Genghis Khan, to the: "color of old shoes/ the color of distances/ the color of soles torn and worn/ this river is the color of worn shoes"(Raffo, 2004, p.1).

In her article, "The Battlefield Cross", Golden (May 21, 2015) traces the history of handling the dead in the battlefields where Crosses usually stand for the dead military staff. Golden states that the latest version of the Cross, which appeared in the First Gulf War in 1991, and during Operations Iraqi Freedom in 2003 "has become a symbol of mourning and closure for the living." This Cross usually consists of rifle, helmet, boots (shoes), and dog tags. These components can have different interpretations and meanings. However, of special importance for the play is the boots (shoes) as they mean: "the soldier has marched the final march to battle, and he will never be forgotten"(Ibid.). Similarly, in *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle*, Richard Holmes comments on the significance of the battlefield Cross memorial as a "way to provide closure for the fallen soldier's comrades." He explains:

Proper burial of the dead, accompanied by a degree of formalized mourning, is as necessary for those who die in battle as it is for those who perish in more peaceful circumstances. Having some sort of focus for mourning is useful for the dead soldier's comrades.(Qtd. in Ibid)

The Mullaya laments the inappropriate handling of the Iraqi dead soldiers in the successive wars which Iraq was involved in. Nothing remains of those soldiers except their shoes on which one can read their stories of suffering, pain, and desolation. These shoes are full of 'holes'; the holes move from the soles of the soldiers' shoes, to their feet, to their souls, to every aspect of life in their homeland!. This makes 'holes' one of the dominant images of the play that denotes misery, alienation, entrapment, and misfortune. The Mullaya's concluding statement that there is nothing but "a great dark sea of desire" which she will feed her "worn sole[/soul]" foreshadows the details of other female characters' stories: Iraq becomes a big deep hole which Iraqis fall into and from which there is no way out.

Besides Mullaya, 'death' as a dominant image, figures out in Layal's story. Layal, the plural of layal, i.e, night is an artist and curator of Saddam Art Centre; as such she enjoys a more privileged position than the Mullaya. In her monologue, Layal reveals a lot about the life in Iraq under the rule of Saddam Hussain and his regime. She comments on some of the severe problems Iraq was suffering as a result of wars and economic sanctions. One of these problems is Brain Drainage or Human capital Drainage(Dodani &Laporte, 2005). Artists as well as intellectuals were fleeing Iraq because of the absence of freedom of speech: "They cannot express themselves because always it is life and death"(p.5), and because people are not allowed to "open their mouth not even for the dentist"(p.6).

Layal chooses to stay in Iraq and rationalizes her decision by pointing out that she is allowed to paint things others are not allowed to: nude female bodies. Women, as Layal implies, are turned into objects of desire, to be consumed by gazing men. She, indeed, identifies herself with other Iraqi women. Other women stories "are living inside of [her]...she cannot separate [her]self from them"(p.6). Political oppression, rape, exploitation, and psychological dislocation thrive in this atmosphere. So do stories of suffering and misery like the story of Amal, the Bedouin.

Amal begins her story by declaring that she has 'no peace': "I have no peace/always I am looking for peace./Do you know peace? I think only mens have real peace/womens she cannot have peace"(pp.6-7). Amal comes from a big family: nine brothers and five sisters. The reason for the lack of peace in her life can be traced to the traumatized experiences she has in her life. She is betrayed by her first husband, the Saudi, in London. She was subject to close surveillance by her family and society after returning to Iraq. Her second marriage experience was as traumatizing as the first one as she is forced to take care of her husband's eight children from his first wife. Amal's second husband's false promises and jealousy compel her to ask for divorce for the second time. She is betrayed a third time by her friend who lets her down and leaves her after a year of talking on the phone. 'peace' seems unattainable in Iraq and London alike.

London is the place of exile where Huda chooses to live. Huda is a political activist who opposes Saddam's regime because "Saddam is the worst enemy to the people than anybody else"(p.13). Although she has her own doubts about American policy, she believes that Iraq won't be liberated from this bloody regime unless America intervenes. Reminiscent of Layal and Amal, Huda comments on the nature of political system in Iraq and sheds light on the consequences of absence of law, and the dangers of totalitarianism. This system worked for decades to create security apparatuses that train ordinary men to be killers; they forced them to "watch videos, to cut off a hand, a tongue. These men...cannot stop killing"(p.14). Romanska (2010) wrote that Huda "left Iraq a long time ago, and by now should have adjusted to her new life, but Huda lives in her past, reliving traumatic memories from the old country" (p.224).

For the 'Unnamed' Iraqi Doctor, the past is the present, and it is the future too. The Doctor's story tells of a dilapidated country that is being impoverished by continuous wars and internal turmoil. The miserable hygiene conditions in the hospital where she works and the disfigured babies she helps mothers to deliver betoken the abyss into which Iraqi society descend:

six babies no head, four abnormally large heads, now today another one with two heads. Such high levels of genetic damage does not

occur naturally... And the cancers, la, I've never seen them before in Iraq, girls of seven, eight years old with breast cancer...(p.14)

These lethally health conditions result from the heavy use of depleted uranium in the second Gulf War which the Iraqi government did nothing to handle.

The 'Unnamed' 9-year old girl helps to complete the unwelcoming picture of Iraqi women as victims of war painted by the Doctor. The girl, in fact, can be considered a representative of what might be termed the Iraqi war generation as far as young girls and women are concerned. On the one hand, she falls victim to the pernicious aftermath of post-Saddam war period as her mother pulls her out of school after being visited by American troops. On the other hand, this very terrible situation contributes to reshaping her life orientations and preferences as: "we first catch her dancing with great abandon in her living room to a band like N'Sync on her new satellite TV"(p.15) The impact of unprecedented degree of openness of the country to the outside world and the overwhelming presence of social media was nowhere clearer than on the young Iraqi generation. Similar to many Iraqis, this girl becomes numb to what is going around her primarily because she gets used to the news of killing, suicide bombing, kidnapping which overspill from TV channels. The reason behind the girl's numbness can be further explained in the light of her father's tragic story. Her father was taken by the security forces few months before the 2003 war because he voiced his objection to Saddam's inscribing his name on the bricks of ancient Babylon. He never came back home. Saddam had stolen not only him, but her mother's three brothers also!.

The second Gulf War also stole the dreams, hopes and life-joys of Umm Ghada (the Mother of 'Tomorrow') who had lost nine members of her family in the bombing of Amiriyah Shelter. This incident was a life-changing experience for the mother who kept searching among charred bodies in vain. She is overwhelmed by a sense of guilt because she survives while her other family members died. She becomes a guardian of the Shelter because she cannot find herself outside it. In a series of ghastly and grisly images, she

recounts how people were burned, vaporized from heat, boiled in hot water; the huge room which is supposed to provide a ‘shelter’, became “an oven and [the people] pressed to the walls to escape from the flames.”(p.20)

From Amiriyah Shelter in Iraq, we move to a studio in New York city in which the ‘Unnamed’ American is living. As an Iraqi-American exile, she is torn between two loyalties; one to her place of birth and original homeland and the other to her host country and exile. The American’s ordeal exacerbates as the beginning of the assimilation and identification with American society coincides with the beginning of 2003 war. The dilemma of the American is typical of many exiles and expatriates as both parties to which she belongs demands a clear stance. This might account for the dispersal of her monologues throughout *Nine*. Everything around her tells that she is American, but what she is seeing on TV. Screen, to which she is “glued”, tells that she is also an Iraqi woman. Her sense that she is the ‘enemy’ for both sides; i.e, the America and Iraq, results in a strong feeling of alienation and suffocating entrapment from which there is no exit. As the American keeps watching the digging of “mass graves...the nighttime footage of bombs”, in the violence-ridden Iraq, she can do nothing but keeping reiterating the names of the people whom she knows in Iraq. For her, the “gap between what she sees as the narcissistic self-indulgence of the American talk-show ‘trauma circuit’ and the horrors of war-torn Iraq,” is unbridgeable.(Romanska, 2010, p.230) This makes Raffo’s *Nine* a play about “two countries”, a war-torn country and another country that destroys it(Russell, 2008, 112).

To bring the image of Iraq as a broken country full circle, Raffo chooses to conclude the list of her down-trodden characters with Nanna, “an old, old woman, scrappy and shrewd; she had seen it all”(p.27). She is a street peddler who supports herself with selling various things recovered from buildings that are destroyed by US. Marines. In a very emotionally-laden announcement, Nanna admits that everything she is to sell is stolen: her name, her accent, and by implication, her *country!* (emphasis mine). Nanna had been a witness to the upheavals and disturbances which Iraq has been going through for the last five decades. She has seen the ‘looting’,

'revolutions', 'burning of National Archives', and sectarian violence. She is finished just as Iraq's "history is finished"(p.29). This heartrending declaration by Nanny is reminiscent of Mulaya's expression of grief over the destruction of her country at the beginning of the play. This makes her, as Saal (in Ozieblo & Hernando-Real, 2012) puts it, "the shrewd secular counterpart to the ritualistic mourner Mulaya" (p.145). As the following section reveals, the Unnmaed woman/character in AlZaidi's *Summer Rain* gives further credence to the dilemma of women in modern Iraq.

III. The World of False Promises in AlZaidi's *Summer Rain*

Similar to *Nine* which begins with the Mulaya chanting 'Che Mali Wali'(i.e., because I have no protector), Alzaidi's *Summer Rain* begins with a woman addressing the picture of an 'absent Wali/husband', as a result of war. *Summer*, in fact, succinctly depicts the impact of war on women as represented by the 'nameless' female character 'X'. The impact figures out in the title, decor, action, and theme. *Summer* tells the story of a woman who does not remember that she was a woman; of a wife who forgets that she once had a warm bed; of a mother whose breast milk dried up while waiting for a child to come with the forever postponed Spring of her husband(2011: p.217). The impact also figures out in the title which, as AlShattri, (25 October 2012) affirms has a deep symbolic connotation as it refers to collective memory of Iraqi people. It is mentioned in a poem by Nadhim AlSamawi which tells: "Your speech is just like summer rain; it does not dabble people who are walking." It actually stands for false promises that will never materialize. As such, it applies to the situation in post-2003 Iraq especially in regard to women.

The play opens with a description of a humbly-furnished house which is distinguished by nothing except a 'picture' on the wall of a nameless man, 'Y'. 'X', who is in her mid-forties, is seen busy performing activities typical of females: combing her hair, pondering over her facial expression in a small mirror, and having a quick glance at the street. Her husband is absent and she does not know his whereabouts: is he lost in a battle, detained in a cell,

buried in a mass grave?. Expectedly, he becomes a ghost-like figure that haunts her life and prevents her from having inner peace. This results in a strong feeling of frustration that is translated into a frenzied acts of combing her hair, dying the white parts, and endlessly searching for him. This feeling of frustration compels her to do anything for regaining the lost husband; even if this requires her to order his cloning (Alubaidi, 2014, pp.1160-1161).

In her moving monologues, ‘X’ sheds light on what it means to be a woman in a war-torn society. First, she exposes the traditional roles assigned to women: she is a wife, a mother, sister, etc., whose life turns upside down as a result of the Wali/man’s absence; second, man often occupies a center stage position in the public sphere, i.e., battlefronts, as well as private sphere, i.e., home fronts/houses; third, she expounds the concomitant damages typical of war on women: the loss of support, a sense of insecurity and alienation, and the increase of vulnerability to the pressures and hazards of life.

‘X’ begins her first monologue with delineating the time: it is “Now”. In an action reminiscent of Samuel Beckett’s waiting for Godot, it seems that this woman has been waiting for the ‘Wali’ for about thirty years. As she describes him, he is “the most endearing person, the protector, and the candle of the house...he is the most admirable, handsome man, and the laughter of her yet to be born baby” (AlZaidi, 2011, p.195). The act of waiting, in fact, puts the wife squarely in the center of the incongruity as a quality of life in Iraq, and turns ‘X’ into a narrator and commentator on the distressing living conditions that take the form of incessant hallucinations about what is real and/or unreal)(AlTimimi, 2016, pp.115-116).

‘X’s’ monologue reveals another aspect of her daily existence. She is caught in an existential limbo: she can neither live in the present, nor look forward to the future. She is stuck in a past that keeps recurring in all its details. Resorting to the past helps ‘X’ to temporarily and psychologically regain a sense of ‘lost’ inner security and peace. Abdelhameed maintains that as AlZaidi’s characters are framed by this sense of perpetual instability and

insecurity, they reflect Iraqi people waiting for the end of this war, yearning for days of peace and stability once again(2016, p.3). In the play, 'X' is repetitively engaged in doing the same chore: washing her absent husband's clothes, cooking his favorite meal, using the perfume he prefers, chanting his favorite song which says: "Oh! Heart, what has you said and decided? Oh, heart! Have you decided to forsake us? To leave us to our loneliness? Oh, heart! Rain erases the trail...Neither way nor track is left. Oh, heart!"(p.197).

Noteworthy in the monologue is the repetition of some words that betoken the psychological state of 'X'. For example, in talking with her absent husband, she repeats 'fire', 'house', and 'hair' several times:

your favorite meal is on fire, fire, fire, fire, fire, boiling since you left me, and I am boiling with it ever since...My hair turns grey, becomes something else...but I dye it for you, for you my darling...for years and years, I have been dying it, dying, dying, dying, hoping that you will come back...(p.196)

These three words are significant as they in turn stands for emotional turmoil, lack of warmth, flames of war; collapse of 'house' as a place of warmth and protection, and loss of physical attractions in old age.

This fervent desire to seduce her husband into coming back turns into a fervent search for him:

for years, I have my black abaya on my head...I go out searching for you in the streets, alleys, and houses, a street turns me into another, a house turns me into another, an alley turns me into hell, hoping that I might see you, or see someone that has seen you, or has seen your shadow. (p.196)

It is a crystal clear that man is the center of 'X's' life; he is the pivotal point around which her whole world revolves. Things fall apart in her world because the center cannot hold. After twenty years of absence, little remains of this woman: only a grey hair,

tears of joy trapped in her sorrow, and remnant of passionate words!.

The same applies to the man who visits the woman and claims to be her 'absent' husband. He is a tired, weak, and an awkward man in his fifties. Unfortunately, she does not recognize the man whom she has always "imagined, called waited, cried, and longed for"(199) because, as he points out, he is not the man she used to know, but a "corpse which comes to celebrate its birthday; a birthday that is stolen by trains; a train that delivers it to another train, to another train, to another train, ad nauseam"(199).

Everything changes in the life of 'X' and her husband: their house, their physical appearance, and their society. More important, their perception of the world changes as more unidentified 'they' intrude in their lives and take control of all its aspects. In their attempt to compensate for the mass absence of men in the region, 'They' contrive to clone them in the form of 'dolls' to provide bereaved and forsaken women with them. 'X' wants to restore her husband when he was young as if she is transfixed in a time she does not want to leave. She submitted a copy of his picture and a list of the physical properties she wants him to have to the 'factory.' What the Wife is saying seems out of joint to the husband who expresses his need to have "mind that could comprehend this sort of madness"(p.204).

The following speech by 'X' illustrates one of the tragic consequences of warfare, namely; the imbalance between the number of men and women. She states:

Women: nothing but women. Streets, houses, and small rooms are filled with women...Men went away, there were killed, made absent, lost, buried. Women are here; women are there. Life should have stopped here for a while; there must be a means to make men available; they manufacture them, and send them wholesale to the wives, mothers, and lovers. (p.204)

'X' cannot realize that this man, who claims to be her husband, is a real not cloned man. It seems that 'They' were so smart in

manufacturing the smallest details in the required men: their bodies, memory, their gait, their voices, manner of talking, and even their smell. In a complete denial of 'Y' as a real man, 'X' tells him that she will never give up waiting for his coming back. This may explain her rejection of his offer to compensate her for his long period of absence and her suffering.

The dividing line between belief and disbelief for 'X' was the perfume whom her husband was accustomed to use before his disappearance. When he swears to her that she had given him the small perfume bottle as a present in the day of their wedding, she realizes that what she is having is not a dream, but a reality she experiences with all her senses. In a moving speech which tells of a strong feeling of bafflement mixed with joy and disbelief, 'X' states:

Impossible! What is happening to me? A dream, it is a dream, a dream. (*Speaking to herself*). My husband, yes, he is my real husband, the perfume, the song, his words, everything about him (*she cries*). You cannot but be my husband, husband, husband, real husband, I swear by God, my husband.(p.210)

Soon after this deceptively happy realization, there was another knock on the door. The husband whom she orders from the cloning factory has arrived!. 'Comedy' is the term 'X' uses to describe the situation she finds herself in. 'Two husbands' for a woman who used to dream of having a shadow of man in the house!. What happens with the first real/cloned husband is meticulously repeated with the second real/cloned husband and with the third real/cloned husband as well!. So who is the real and who is the cloned? Both present the same evidence that tell he is the real husband. However, the boundary between the real and the unreal is blurred here and we are left with an unanswered conundrum. The play ends with a fierce strife among 'Y1', 'Y2', and 'Y3'. Each tries to regain his lost manhood, his place as the head of the house, and his wife's love. Nothing is heard but loud cries and shrieks of terror!.

It is significant that AlZaidi dedicates the collection of plays, one of which is *Summer*, to a ((Country that abandons [his] soul, its name is ‘AbdulNabi’, and a Country that is still in [his] soul, his name is ‘Iraq’))(p.iv). In this sense, cloning of men in the play implies a demasculinized and dysfunctional country. The dramatist laments the loss of the sense of pride, security and real manhood as exemplified by his dead father, and looks forward to helping his country and people by writing plays that aims at raising public awareness of the dangers of unceasingly engaging in futile wars. This means that writing, for Al Zaidi, constitutes a form of resistance to all forms of injustice and suffering that befall Iraqi people post 2003.

As an existential act, waiting in the play transcends the personal level of a wife waiting for her absent husband. Metaphorically speaking, this act moves smoothly from the personal to the collective level as it implies the long waiting of the Iraqi people for freedom and salvation from the oppressive political system that reign supreme in Iraq pre-and post-2003.

Comparable to waiting, cloning goes on endlessly. Cloning in the play extends to include language, feelings of loss, actions, responses, etc. (Alsarai, 12 Febraury 2013). The act of waiting is symbolically used to “condemn the Iraqi politicians who are engaged in a bloody game for power; the unreal/cloned husbands stand for those politicians whose promises and projects are as fake as them”(Jassim, 2012).

The wife, in this respect, can symbolically stand for a country, i.e., Iraq, torn apart by wars, social and economic commotion, and risky internal and external policies(See Al’itabi, 13 July, 2012). By the same token, the ‘cloned husbands’ can be interpreted as the various political parties- be they Islamic, national, or liberal- and their sham and ‘cloned’ projects. These parties are saying the same things, presenting the same false promises, and fruitlessly engaging in endless quarrels not for saving and rebuilding the country/wife, but for serving their own purposes. This makes them false “leaders/saviors” as Eiliwi (25 September 2012) states, and makes the play an “attempt to condemn the current political situation, and a

demand for a real national project that saves the country from the utilitarian policies of those clones/parties”(Al-Nassar, qtd. in Ubeid,2019, 526). The play, as Alnassar explains, belongs to what he terms ‘Post-war life’ project. It discusses the feeling of frustration in any positive change which takes hold of post-2003 Iraq. Iraqis, in fact, were hopeful and optimistic, but they were shocked by the increasing security threats, political disorders, and deterioration of life quality (Khalid, 2012).

IV. Conclusion: Ten Women, One Ordeal: There are about eight years between the writing of *Nine*(2004) and *Summer*(2011). In 2004, news about Iraq were bubbling over in TV channels headlines, newspapers front pages and other media. This changes considerably in 2011 as life goes on and as Iraq no longer makes a frequent show up in the news headlines. It changes, yes, but not for women as the two plays makes it clear.

The plays are comparable in many respects. To begin with, both dramatists’ theatrical products are shaped by the tragic experiences of wars which Iraq has been going through in the last forty years. AlZaidi, as a matter of fact, belongs to what is termed “the war generation” in Iraq. His plays, themes, and characters are framed by his awareness of war as a life-changing experience. He was conscripted, like hundreds of thousands of Iraqis; wounded by a shrapnel and a bullet that is still in his body; he lost one of his brothers in the war and saw many of his army comrades killed or turned into charred bodies. All these painful wartime experiences make writing about war, for AlZaidi, a must, a duty, a means of survival and coping with harsh reality(Ali, 22 January, 2020).

Likewise, Raffo’s life experiences is typical of many exiles and immigrants. Although she was born in the USA, but she usually looks back to Iraq where her family’s ancestors, memories, and friends are. Her writing of *Nine* is meant to offer Americans true images of the traumatic experiences of Iraqi women as they are in reality not as presented in media. Those women jump out of the

pages of magazines, newspapers, TV. screens and youtubes to say that what you are watching is a real suffering not a mediated one. In this sense, *Nine* is a story of two countries and societies that find themselves opposed to, and fail to understand, each other.

Moreover, both are solo performance-based plays. Solo performance is usually a deeply-effective theatrical method through which the characters give vent to personal, social, and political concerns in a lively performance setting. Reliance on one actress to perform the nine characters in *Nine* helps to emphasize the collective nature of women's ordeals. Likewise, the wife in *Summer* also stands for all Iraqi women who fall victim to wars. This makes women in both plays symbolic emblems of suffering rather than real characters. Both become a suitable dramatic vehicle for lamenting a lost homeland and a life that is torn to pieces. As such, the dramatists' choice to de-name some characters is indicative.

Both plays testify that arts and politics are inescapably connected as a means of expression and representation. In their plays, Raffo and Alzaidi are concerned with exposing the politics-based abuse and violence that run havoc in the lives of those women. Violence here is understood as a great harm usually inflicted by man-dominated systems. Amal and the nine years old are victims of the patriarchal system while the remaining characters are victims of political system. Theatre in both cases becomes a means of resisting and documenting violence; thus, emphasizing the "necessity and healing power of narrative reconstruction"(Saal, 2012, p.146). Despite that, it is noteworthy that the violence both dramatists condemn is not gender-based; i.e., both men and women fall victim to violence in Iraq as the numerous references to men who lost their lives, or are detained, persecuted, or exiled attest. Both women and men experience armed conflict in the same way and are negatively affected by violence-based incidents.

Both plays belongs to what is termed "home front" plays. Western literature, more often than not, takes war as a man's not a woman's domain. Men fight, conquer, are saluted and celebrated for their heroisms and glories. In this scenario, women are excluded and

relegated to the background. *Nine* and *Summer* are intended to illustrate that women are as worthy as men in terms of being an appropriate and presentable subject in plays of war.

Both dramatists depend heavily on symbols. The main symbol in *Nine* is the black abaya which all women/characters wear. Its color stands for the blackness that envelops and engulfs Iraqi people, while the manner of wearing it signifies the various personal and social attitudes which those characters hold towards themselves and life in general. *Summer Rain* in Alzaidi's play sums up the main theme; i.e., the futility of waiting for something that will never come up, and stands for death in life as this rain is false and deceptive one. The black abaya might also be contrasted with the 'Savagery' painting by Layal. While abaya, which covers all of a woman's body, is traditionally used to shield or protect women in public places from peeping gazes, Laya's 'Savagery' which features "a nude woman clinging to a barren tree" illustrates how vulnerable women are in a world dominated by savages and brutes. However, there is an important difference between Raffo and AlZaidi in that *Summer* seems to be more engulfed in symbols than *Nine*. Unlike Raffo, AlZaidi seems more reticent in naming the causes of women's suffering. Raffo refers to the American, Saddam's regime, and paramilitary groups as the main causes while AlZaidi refrains. AlZaidi's position and choice is understandable as Iraqi dramatists suffer and kind of censorship by political, religious and militia-like groups.

The progress of time in both plays is not linear; rather, it is circular. Both plays, in fact, end as they begin, with Mulaya lamenting the tragic loss of her homeland and the miserable 'X' in keeping waiting the husband she is waiting for. Likewise, the action in both plays is essentially repetitive.

Titles of both plays are connotative in the sense that they reflect the main themes. *Nine* is said to be derived from two sources: Geraldine Brooks *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*

(1996), and Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the prophet Muhammed's cousin and the fourth of Rashidun Caliphs, saying "God created sexual desire in ten parts; then he gave nine parts to women and one to men." Studies suggest that the lives of female characters in Raffo's play are warped by one part of male brutal and sadistic desire to rule and control the world (See, Romanska, 2010, P.214 & Mahadi and Muhi, 2012, pp.91-92). I suggest that the lost desires of the wife in *Summer* can be considered a completion of the already lost ones in *Nine*. The lost desires cover a wide range of needs and emotions: women in both plays are in dire need of love, security, happiness, decent life, and survival in an ever deteriorating world.

Both dramatists depend in the production of their plays on few theatrical props: old shoes, black abaya, paintbrush, and a whisky bottle in *Nine*, and a mirror, a sparsely-furnished room with an old bed, closet, dressing table, a comb, and again abaya. The austerity of the production point to the severity in the life of these women: what matters for them is survival rather living life fully.

Both plays seem to give a bleak picture of what it means to be a women in situations of war and conflict. In these situations, women are usually left to their fate. As such, they are compelled to find means of survival which usually range from passively and endlessly living in a state of waiting, going into exile, or getting numbed to what is going on.

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قصص النساء العراقيات غير المروية عن الحرب

دراسة مقارنة بين مسرحية تسعة أعشار الرغبة لهيذر رافو ومطر صيف لعلي عبد

النبي الزيدي

أ.د. هناء خليف غني

المستخلص

على الرغم من أنَّ النساء العراقيات لا يشتركن اشتراكاً مباشراً في الحرب، إلا أنَّ معاناتهن من التأثيرات المدمرة للحروب والصراعات المسلحة هي بقدر معاناة الرجال. ولهذه المعاناة عدة أشكال من مثل الحرمان العاطفي والاقتصادي والترمل والاضطراب الاجتماعي والشخصي، وخلافاً لسرديات المعاناة الذكورية في ميادين الوعى والميادين الأخرى، لاتزال سرديات الألم النسوية في الجبهة الداخلية مهملةً نسبياً، وبما أنَّ الغاية من مسرح الحرب هو مناهضة الحروب وتعزيز الوعي بنتائجها الكارثية، أضحي إلقاء الضوء على قصص البؤس غير المروية التي تؤدي النساء أدوار البطولة فيها أحد أهم مرتكزاتها. تجادل الورقة البحثية أن معالجة قصص النساء ستكون وسيلة أكثر فاعلية في تعزيز الوعي المناهض للحرب. والورقة البحثية الحالية دراسة مقارنة بين مسرحيتين: تسع أعشار الرغبة للكاتبة الأمريكية هيذر رافو ومطر صيف للكاتب العراقي علي عبد النبي الزيدي، وثمة العديد من أوجه التشابه المدهشة التي تجمع المسرحيتين في مجال رسم الشخصيات وتوظيف الرموز والرسالة السياسية. وتستند كلاهما على أداء الممثل الواحد على الرغم من حضور تسع شخصيات نسوية في المسرحية الأولى، وتأتي هذه الورقة البحثية بمنزلة دعوة لاتخاذ الإجراءات الضرورية في المساعدة في التخفيف من التجارب المؤلمة التي خبرتها النساء العراقيات في الحرب وبعدها.