(En)gendering New Roles:

War and Exile as Agents of Female Empowerment in Contemporary Iraqi Women's Literature

Natalya Minoff

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ABSTRACT

In my thesis, I will conduct a comparative analysis of the wartime and exilic narratives written by three contemporary female Iraqi authors. Through a close reading of Betool Khedairi's two novels *Absent* (2004) and *A Sky So Close* (2001), Mikhail's poetical memoir *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* (2009), and al-Radi's autobiographical journal *Baghdad Diaries* (1998), I will assess the extent to which the experiences of war and exile elicit a renegotiation of gender roles for the female protagonists in their works. For the Iraqi women who they portray in their texts, both the 1990-91 Gulf War and the subsequent period of exile bring about certain voids, which serve as windows of opportunity for them to subvert conventional gendered hierarchies and assert themselves through various modes of creative expression. In the absence of their husbands during the war, these female characters take on new roles and responsibilities within their households that empower them. Likewise, the departure from their native countries and traditions while living in exile allows them increased freedom of expression and mobility. Hence, both war and exile dismantle traditional relationships and power dynamics, enabling the female characters in these works to renegotiate their identities. Furthermore, through the very act of writing, Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi exert their authority as Iraqi women during the Gulf War and in exile thereafter. The publication of their texts revolutionized Iraq's literary tradition, transforming it to include the female narrative. Thus, these female authors exemplify the very societal reconstruction that they illustrate through the content of their works, using their writing to reconfigure the cultural fabric of Iraqi society.

To all those women, whom history and the severity of ruling systems have made unseen… to all those women who are still stumbling on the path of freedom in countries with no social justice or equal opportunities, to all of them I say: thank you ... this day wouldn't have come true without you.

–Nobel Lecture by Yemeni activist
Tawakkol Karman, December 2011

INTRODUCTION

From pre-Islamic times to the contemporary era, the Arab world's rich literary tradition has offered an inroad into the region's cultures. Despite the wealth of texts that comprises the Arabic literary canon, women writers have historically been marginalized within this cultural arena. Since the latter half of the twentieth century, however, female Arab authors have enjoyed greater legitimacy, creating new forums for their writing, through which they have begun to assert their autonomy and gain credibility. By establishing new linguistic and thematic conventions through their works, contemporary Arab women writers have grouped themselves into a literary genre distinct from that of their male counterparts.

In Miriam Cooke's 1996 book *Women and the War Story,* she discusses the ways in which Arab women have begun to insert their voices into the male-dominated literary tradition, particularly in times of war. In this thesis, I draw upon her analysis, arguing that war entails an upheaval of social and political order, which provides an opportunity for women to express themselves through writing. In the midst of physical destruction, Iraqi women writers contribute to the process of cultural renewal through their texts. I compare the scholarship on women's wartime literature with research on female diaspora literature, noting the similarities between the two experiences for women. Like wartime, exile brings about certain cultural and emotional disruptions that allow women a foray into the literary sphere. In the face of geographic

dislocation, exilic female authors attempt to reconstruct their relationships with their native countries through writing.

Iraq presents a telling political and cultural context in which to examine the literature by Arab women writers. As a country that has faced continual war since 1980, Iraq has been characterized by perpetual violence and volatility; hence, many Iraqis have sought refuge abroad in search of greater security and stability. It was within this incessant cycle of war and displacement that Iraqi female authors began to inject their voices into Iraq's literary tradition, conveying their accounts of war and exile through their novels, memoirs, and journals. While female Iraqi authors lagged behind women writers in the Levant, who began publishing their works in the 1950s, Iraqi women are emerging onto the nation's literary scene in increasingly large numbers (Zeidan 1-2). As female Iraqi authors who wrote during both the 1990-91 Gulf War and their experiences in exile thereafter, Betool Khedairi, Dunya Mikhail, and Nuha al-Radi capitalized upon the unique conditions created by war and displacement to express their voices through writing. Through their literary works, they demonstrate the ways in which the experiences of war and exile in the 1990s empowered them as women.

I have chosen to compare the experiences of war and displacement because these circumstances present distinct instances of transition and transformation that have powerful implications for women. The societal disruptions that women encounter during wartime mirror the cultural disorientation that they experience while in exile. Just as war entails a collapse of family structures as men leave their homes for the army, exile implies an abandonment of preexisting geographic and social ties. The ruptures that accompany both of these experiences present obvious obstacles to women's self-expression. In the case of the Gulf War, as Iraqi men left for the military frontlines, women bore the responsibility of providing for their children,

which relegated them to the domestic sphere. In addition to this physical confinement, the economic crisis that the war entailed limited Iraqi women's prospects for education and employment (Al-Ali, "Reconstructing Gender" 748). While the Gulf War constrained Iraqi women within their homes, the experience of exile in the years following the war drove many of them outside of their native countries, presenting them with a different set of challenges. Physically removed from the social networks that had brought them comfort within Iraq, female Iraqi refugees experienced alienation, which forced them to reconstruct relationships and forge new connections.

Despite the challenges that war and exile pose to women, these experiences also present women with unique opportunities to exercise their authority. Both war and exile entail a deconstruction of political and social order, which opens up a space for women to renegotiate their roles and reconstruct their identities. In this thesis, I will look at the ways in which the female Iraqi authors Betool Khedairi, Dunya Mikhail, and Nuha al-Radi used their personal experiences of war and exile to establish themselves as prominent figures within Iraq's literary scene. Amidst the volatile political conditions that the Gulf War entailed, these female writers seized the opportunity to inject their voices into the nation's master narrative. By documenting their experiences of the war, they offset the trend of male dominance in Iraq's literary canon, asserting their voices in unique ways. As women who left Iraq in the years following the war, these female authors also employed the experience of exile as a means by which to exert their authority. Just as they capitalized upon the absence of order during the war, using it as a chance to seek empowerment through writing, they took advantage of the lack of government censorship abroad, which allowed them to publish their works. Hence, both war and exile created critical

ruptures for these Iraqi authors, which encouraged and enabled them to express themselves through writing.

Just as the conditions of war and displacement allowed Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi to establish their authority as writers, these transformative experiences also provide unique opportunities for the female characters in their works to express themselves. While Mikhail and al-Radi's texts are autobiographical in nature, Khedairi's works that I will examine are fictional; hence, my close reading of Khedairi's novels will differ from that of Mikhail's and al-Radi's texts. Whereas my analyses of Mikhail's poetical memoir and al-Radi's journal will focus on the personal experiences of the authors themselves as portrayed through their texts, in my reading of Khedairi's novels, I will consider the experiences of the various fictional women that she includes in her works. Ultimately, I conclude that the experiences of war and displacement open up unique spaces the women in Mikhail's, al-Radi's, and Khedairi's works to assert themselves through various means of creative expression.

I have selected Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi as authors to study because each of these three women experienced both war and exile. Thus, they overtly juxtapose the experiences of war and exile in their texts, elucidating the similarities and differences between these two conditions for women. Mikhail divides her autobiographical prose-poem into two parts, with the first half depicting her life in Baghdad during the Gulf War and the second half portraying her experience in the United States in the years following the war. Similarly, in *Baghdad Diaries,* al-Radi writes the first two chapters, "*Funduq al-Saada* or Hotel Paradiso" and "Embargo," while entrapped within her Baghdad apartment during the war, and she writes the latter two chapters, "Exile" and "Identity," after her emigration from Iraq, as she moves between various countries.

Like Mikhail and al-Radi, Khedairi experienced both war and displacement; after living through the Gulf War in Baghdad she immigrated to England ("Betool Khedairi Will Only Write about Iraq"). While her personal experience no doubt informs her writing, unlike the other two authors, she writes fictional rather than autobiographical narratives. In *Absent,* Khedairi illustrates the effect of the Gulf War and ensuing period of economic sanctions on her fictional Iraqi characters; hence, I will use this text as my example of a female wartime narrative. While her novel *A Sky So Close* also depicts the experience of war, I will focus my analysis specifically on the narrator's experience of exile, as she departs for England in the latter half of the novel. My literary critique will thus consist of four texts in total. I will use Khedairi's *Absent* and the first half of both Mikhail's *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* and al-Radi's *Baghdad Diaries* to examine the female wartime experience, and I will use Khedairi's *A Sky So Close* and the second half of Mikhail's and al-Radi's texts to analyze the female experience of exile.

By portraying the effects of both war and exile in their texts, Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi call attention to the interplay between these conditions, displaying the complications of the post-war exilic experience. For the women in their literary works, the circumstances of war and exile do not exist in isolation; rather, the experience of war affects that of exile, as it catalyzes their departure from Iraq. While Mikhail and al-Radi seek empowerment within Iraq by writing about their experiences of war, they build upon this empowerment while in exile, employing their freedom outside of Iraq as an opportunity to publish their texts. In Khedairi's fictional exilic novel *A Sky So Close,* the narrator's experience of war while in Iraq informs her life in England afterward. While she first begins to renegotiate her identity as a child during the Iran-Iraq war, she moves to England at the start of the Gulf War, whereupon she finds empowerment in new ways.

The first chapter of this thesis grounds my literary analysis of the texts by Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi in the political and cultural context of Iraq during the 1990s. After providing a brief overview of Iraqi society during and after the Gulf War, I look at the extent to which the war catalyzed displacement for many Iraqis, thereupon introducing the causational relationship between war and displacement that informs the content of this thesis. While the scholarship surrounding the Gulf War's impact on women focuses on its restriction of their political and social rights, many scholars fail to consider the potentially constructive effects of war on women, such as its creation of new outlets for them to express themselves. Hence, I proceed to examine how both war and exile induce similar identity transformations for Iraqi women, looking at the means by which Iraqi women expressed themselves creatively under both conditions. Lastly, I turn specifically to the literary works by Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi, assessing the validity of their texts as prisms through which to examine the transformation of gender roles that the experiences of war and exile elicit for Iraqi women.

In the following chapter, I conduct a close reading of the Gulf War narratives by Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi, examining how the war provided unique opportunities for the female characters to express themselves and assert their authority. The women in Khedairi's 2004 novel *Absent* engage in various acts of creative expression in the midst of economic distress in Baghdad. In this way, they take advantage of the societal disruptions that the period of war and sanctions entails, employing the absence of order as an opportunity to express themselves. In Part One of her 1995 memoir *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea,* Mikhail also demonstrates the empowering effects of the war for Iraqi women. Through her writing, Mikhail engages in acts of creation in the face of physical destruction, reconstructing linguistic conventions in order to claim a space within the Iraqi literary canon. In the first half of her

journal *Baghdad Diaries: a Woman's Chronicle of War and Exile,* al-Radi also portrays the Gulf War's impact on gender roles in Iraqi society. She illustrates the significant role that women play in sustaining the physical and emotional well-being of her friends and family members during the war. She also emphasizes the significance of women's creative hobbies during the war, signaling the empowerment that they gain through art and writing in wartime.

In the third chapter, I turn to the exilic narratives of Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi, noting the empowerment that the female protagonists of their novels enjoy outside of Iraqi society. In Khedairi's 2001 novel *A Sky So Close,* the young female protagonist reconfigures her identity after emigrating from Iraq to England. In the absence of the constraints that she faced during her life in Iraq, she begins to assert herself as an individual with her own values and priorities. In the second half of *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea,* which was published in 2009 and focuses on Mikhail's life in exile in the United States, Mikhail expresses her newfound freedom through her poetic language. No longer restricted by the Iraqi government's censorship, Mikhail uses her writing in the U.S. as a tool for empowerment and a means by which to reconstruct herself and her relationships with others. Like Mikhail, al-Radi demonstrates in the latter half of al-Radi's *Baghdad Diaries* how her exile from Iraq enables her to use various modes of creativity to express herself. Through her writing and artwork, al-Radi assumes a position of greater authority than her career as an artist in Baghdad had allowed her.

While these three authors followed different trajectories upon their departure from Iraqi in the 1990s and wrote about their experiences in distinct ways, the similar contexts in which they wrote allow for an effective comparative study of their works. In depicting the female Iraqi narrative through the forms of novel, poetic-prose memoir, and journal, they offer complementary literary lenses through which to examine identity transformations. As they

illustrate through their texts, war and exile pose distinct societal disruptions, which act as windows of opportunity for women to assume positions of authority and express themselves. By asserting their autonomy in times of war and exile, Mikhail, al-Radi, and the female characters in Khedairi's novels empower themselves, renewing their identities and renegotiating gendered conventions. Moreover, through the very act of writing their texts, Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi establish themselves as pioneers of a reformed literary tradition in Iraq. In asserting their voices and foregrounding gender within their narratives, they contribute to the same trend toward female empowerment that they illustrate through the content of their works.

CHAPTER 1: CONTEXTUALIZING THEIR WORKS

In this chapter, I will provide a political, cultural, and literary context for my analysis of the wartime and exilic narratives by Iraqi authors Betool Khedairi, Dunya Mikhail, and Nuha al-Radi. First, I will outline the political climate of Iraq during the 1990-91 Gulf War and the ensuing period of economic sanctions, considering the effect of this societal turmoil on the country's women. Based on findings by scholars of gender in Iraqi society, I argue that while the war physically limited women's freedoms by confining them to the domestic realm, it paradoxically allowed them to take on new responsibilities that empowered them. With their male family members and loved ones away on the battlegrounds, Iraqi women took advantage of their absence to assert themselves in unique ways.

In the following section, I examine the extent to which both war and exile open up windows of opportunity for women to renew their identities through various modes of creativity. Iraqi women capitalized upon their husbands' absences during the Gulf War by engaging in acts of creative expression, such as painting and writing, which allowed them to contribute to the process of cultural reconstruction during a time of physical destruction. I proceed to examine the effect of displacement on the creative roles assumed by displaced female Iraqis. In the absence of governmental opposition to their work by Saddam's regime, exilic Iraqi women enjoyed greater freedom to express themselves creatively. In doing so, they reconfigured their own identities, using art and writing as means to redefine themselves as members of the diasporic Iraqi community.

Next, I turn specifically to Iraqi women's writing, noting the extent to which their contemporary war and exile narratives disrupt the nation's conventionally male-dominated literary canon. Female Iraqi authors use writing as a tool for power; by injecting their voices into

Iraq's cultural arena, they assert themselves as women and redefine their position within the nation's gendered hierarchy. I conclude by focusing on the wartime and exilic narratives by Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi, using their texts as lenses through which to examine the effect of war and displacement on Iraqi women. The three authors occupy distinct literary genres; whereas Khedairi writes fiction, Mikhail writes poetry, and al-Radi writes a chronicle. In spite of the differences in their literary approaches, their shared experience as exilic women who lived through war merits a comparative study of their works.

I. Political Backdrop: Iraq During the Period of War and Sanctions

Under the rule of Ba'athist president Saddam Hussein, who governed Iraq from 1979 until his deposition in 2003, Iraq has been fraught with violent political turmoil. Just one year following his seizure of power, the country broke out into war with Iran, which lasted until August 1988 and dismantled Iraq's infrastructure. It was in this state of economic distress that Saddam waged war just two years later on Kuwait, launching the nation into yet another period of violence and civil strife (Tripp 252). Because of Iraq's turbulent political climate, many Iraqis have immigrated to other countries, where they seek personal safety as well as liberties that Iraq's government had denied them (Chatelard 13). This continuous cycle of war and exile that characterized Iraqi society under Saddam's reign provides a unique context through which to analyze the nation's gender dynamics as portrayed through literature. While the succession of violence in Iraq engendered political, economic, and cultural instability, this dismantling of order entailed a simultaneous disruption of gendered hierarchies. In this section, I will examine the effect of the Gulf War and its aftermath on Iraqi women, providing a political context for my analysis of the wartime narratives by Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi.

The Gulf War as a Catalyst of Exile

Following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, Iraqi civilians suffered the costs of UN-imposed economic sanctions, which restricted their access to food, water, electricity, and public health services (Tripp 261). U.N. Resolution 661, which the Security Council ratified just prior to the invasion, prohibited all international trade with Iraq, discontinuing the importation of crucial items to the war-torn nation (U.N. Security Council). With the country's infrastructure destroyed as a result of continual bombings, the economic crisis also physically weakened the Iraqi population, as the shortage of water purification systems brought about widespread disease and malnutrition (Tripp 261). Despite the oil-for-food program that the U.N. instated in 1995, allowing Iraq to sell limited quantities of oil in order to fund provisions necessary for survival, the humanitarian crisis persisted throughout the duration of the economic embargo, which lasted until 2003 (Sadiq and Tiller).

The period of war and sanctions that the Iraqi nation faced in the 1990s forced many civilians abroad to countries with greater political stability. In a 2009 paper published by the Centre on Migration, Policy, and Society in Oxford, Geraldine Chatelard traces the migration of Iraqis to other regions of the world between the 1990-91 Gulf War and the 2003 U.S. invasion, estimating that one and a half million Iraqis emigrated from the nation in the decade leading up to the 2003 U.S. occupation (Chatelard 13). Thus, the Gulf War catalyzed exile, as political violence incentivized Iraqis to flee to neighboring countries or to the West. As I analyze the exilic works of Iraqi women in the third chapter of this thesis, I will consider the extent to which their experience of war both incited their emigration from Iraq and impacted their lives in exile.

The Effect of War and Sanctions on Iraq's Women

Among the most adversely afflicted members of Iraqi society by the 1990-91 Gulf War and the subsequent period of sanctions were the country's women. In their 2006 article "Women in Post-Saddam Iraq," Lucy Brown and David Romano call attention to the war's debilitating effect on Iraq's women. They explain that as Iraqi families confronted financial crises during the war, they refrained from educating their daughters, perceiving girls' schooling as less important than that of boys (Brown and Romano 55). Without adequate education, Iraqi women thus lacked prospects for employment throughout the 1990s; hence, they were relegated to the domestic sphere. As their husbands served on the frontlines, women became the sole caretakers within their homes, bearing the responsibility of foraging for food for themselves and their children (Al-Ali, "Reconstructing Gender" 746).

As the U.N.-imposed economic sanctions continued to plague Iraq in the years following the war, Iraqi women's prospects for entering the paid workforce remained bleak. Nadje Al-Ali writes that due to the breakdown of the welfare state, those women who were employed before the war were "pushed back into their homes and into the traditional roles of being mothers and housewives" ("Reconstructing Gender" 747). Because of their reassignment to the household during this period of political and economic instability, women "had to revert to or learn homemaking skills practiced by their grandmothers" (Al-Ali 746). This physical confinement, she argues, prevented them from asserting themselves within Iraqi society (747). Hence, Al-Ali paints a grim picture of the status of Iraqi women during the war, emphasizing the ways in which they suffered throughout the period of violence and economic strain.

While the period of war and sanctions in Iraq confined women to the domestic realm, Al-Ali, Brown, and Romano fail to consider the ways in which Iraqi women combated these

limitations on their freedoms. Indeed, the war delimited the liberties of Iraqi women throughout the 1990s; however, it also provided a unique opportunity for them to capitalize upon their traditionally feminine roles within the home. Though the Gulf War limited women's agency in various ways, the female characters in the novels by Iraqi authors Betool Khedairi, Dunya Mikhail, and Nuha al-Radi assert their authority within the confines of their homes. While Al-Ali devalues the "homemaking skills" that Iraqi women are forced to learn in times of war, the women in their works use these skills as empowering assets.

II. Cultural Dimension: Creative Expression and Female Iraqi Identity During War and Exile

Because Iraqi women struggled to enter the paid workforce during the Gulf War, they found other means of empowerment that did not require their obvious infiltration of this conventionally male arena. With their husbands away on the battlegrounds during the war, the domestic duties of Iraqi women increased in importance, as women became responsible for the physical and emotional sustenance of themselves and their family members. Female Iraqi writers and artists also took advantage of the political and societal turmoil of wartime as an opportunity to inspire a renewed sense of order through various forms of creative expression. Through writing and art, Iraqi women sustained not only the physical well-being of themselves and their family members during the war, but also the cultural vibrancy of Iraqi society.

Additionally, female artists and writers within the Iraqi diaspora used their creative talent to forge a sense of stability and renewed Iraqi identity amidst the cultural disorientation of exile. In her article published in Nadje Al-Ali's and Deborah Al-Najjar's 2012 anthology *We are Iraqis: Aesthetics and Politics in a Time of War,* Nada Shabout contends that the experience of

exile mutes creative expression among displaced Iraqis; however, she does not consider the unique effect of displacement on female artists, specifically. While Shabout argues that established Iraqi artists generally lose their credibility after emigrating from Iraq (16), the lesser-known female artists in Iraq enjoy greater liberty and acclaim for their works after abandoning Iraq's culturally and politically oppressive society. Just as Iraqi women writers and artists employ their creative works as means by which to reconstruct Iraqi society during times of war, their counterparts in exile use their art and writing as ways to reconfigure their own identities and their relationships with the Iraqi nation.

Rebuilding Iraq, Rebuilding Themselves: Creativity as a Means of Reconstruction

Iraqi women discovered methods of transcending their domestic confinement during wartime by contributing to the rebuilding of post-war Iraqi society in unique ways. In her 2005 article, Al-Ali emphasizes the advantage that women have over men in rebuilding Iraq, therefore advocating their contribution to the reconstruction of Iraqi society. She writes that "Iraqi women have been more resourceful and adaptable to the changing situation than Iraqi men," which she attributes largely to the "incredible creativity" that women demonstrated during the period of war and sanctions (Al-Ali, "Reconstructing Gender" 758). By channeling this creativity into various forms of art, particularly literature, Iraqi women contributed to the cultural revival of Iraqi society following the Gulf War. In doing so, they redefined themselves as significant contributors to the reconstruction process, establishing themselves as victors rather than victims of the war.

In her article, Shabout argues that wartime disrupts the Iraq's conventional artistic canon, writing that because many of the nation's recognized artists abandon their professions for the war

effort, they create "a professed artistic vacuum [and] a stifling of creativity" within Iraq (10). While Shabout references the absence of creativity created by the death or displacement of Iraqi artists during wartime, she ignores the role of female artists during times of civil strife in Iraq. During the Gulf War, female Iraqi artists and writers took advantage of men's absence in order to establish their own credibility and gain legitimacy within the nation's artistic sphere. They employed the shortage of male artists as an opportunity to express themselves through their creative works.

One means by which Iraqi women sought to assert themselves as creators during the period of destruction in the 1990s was through writing. While the decade of war and sanctions deprived women of many rights and physically confined them to the home, female authors in Iraq overcame these boundaries by creating their own rules and constructing a new sense of order through their literary works. By recording their personal experiences of the Gulf War through their writing, Iraqi women writers made significant contributions to Iraq's literary scene. The Iraqi female authors whose works I will analyze in subsequent sections of this thesis demonstrate that Iraqi women did not acquiesce to a state of powerlessness during the period of war and sanctions. Through their writing, Betool Khedairi, Dunya Mikhail, and Nuha al-Radi asserted their power as women amidst a period of political turmoil, revolutionizing Iraq's patriarchal literary tradition.

Female Creative Expression in Exile: Forging a Renewed Identity

In the introduction to their compilation of short essays and fictional pieces by Iraqis, Al-Ali and Al-Najjar argue that just as Iraqi women use art and writing to express themselves during war, female Iraqi artists living in exile also assert themselves through their creative works. Al-

Ali and Al-Najjar write that "dislocation and displacement do not stop someone from identifying with, feeling for, and hurting about Iraq" (xxxi). For Iraqi women, exile does more than merely "not stop" them from feeling a connection to their nation; it amplifies their sense of Iraqi identity and offers an outlet for them to express it creatively.

While Al-Ali, Al-Najjar, and Shabout call attention to the interdependency between creative expression and empowerment for Iraqis, they ignore the role of gender as it plays into this relationship. In her discussion of art in Iraqi society, Shabout explains that in the 1990s, Saddam's regime provided the means for Iraqi artists to display their work. Thus, she argues that the dismantling of this state apparatus in 2003 "left artists without support… stifling [their] creativity" (7). Although Saddam's regime condoned and promoted certain creative works by established Iraqi artists, it censored the works of many others, including those of many women. During the period of war and sanctions in the 1990s, Iraqi female artists such as Dunya Mikhail and Nuha al-Radi confronted strict governmental opposition to their work, which drove them into exile, where they enjoyed greater freedom of expression through their writing and art. Thus, for these Iraqi women who were unable to traverse Iraq's political and societal repression under Saddam's regime, exile presented them with an opportunity to gain credibility and empowerment.

IV. Iraqi Women's Literary Revolution

In this section, I will discuss the opportunities that both war and exile present for Iraqi women to insert their voice into the nation's literary canon, from which they have historically been excluded. First, I will present a brief history of Iraqi women's emergence onto the country's literary scene, noting the extent to which their involvement has increased in recent

years. I will then turn to the female war narrative, considering how Iraqi women employ the unique circumstances of war as an opportunity to express themselves through writing and seek empowerment. Lastly, I will examine the commonalities between the war and diaspora narratives of women, focusing on the extent to which both elucidate the transformation of gender roles that occurs under both conditions. After looking broadly at the concept of diaspora, defining the term and comparing it with the notion of exile, I will consider the female diasporic experience specifically, noting how these effects of displacement foster a shift in gender roles.

Female Iraqi Authors: A Historical Overview

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, men dominated Iraq's literary sphere. In the early 1920s, Iraqi women began contributing to various cultural journals and newspapers, which expanded the forum for the publication of their writing; however, they were still denied the legitimacy that male Iraqi authors enjoyed (Ghazoul 182). The first female Iraqi poets, such as Salima 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Mala'ika and Fatina Husayn Na'ib, established themselves as pioneers of Iraqi women's poetry in the mid-twentieth century (Ghazoul 181); however, the challenges that they faced reflected those of other Iraqi women who sought to infiltrate the nation's literary arena. In order to gain recognition as poets, both al-Mala'ika and Na'ib wrote under pseudonyms that masked their female gender (Ghazoul 179), signaling the difficulty that female Iraqi writers confronted in publishing their works.

While Iraqi women emerged onto the nation's literary scene by writing poetry, in the second half of the twentieth century, they extended the genres of their work to include novels, short stories, and dramas (Ghazoul 184). Female Iraqi authors began to write fiction in the 1950s, and through these literary works, they exposed salient women's issues in Iraq, such as female

domesticity and women's role in Iraqi society (Ghazoul 192). Despite the rise in Iraqi women's literature in the latter half of the twentieth century, it was not until the 1990-91 Gulf War that women began to "go beyond traditional literary genres to combine narrative with poetry, drama with expository writing, and reality with myth" (184). In my analysis of the works by Iraqi women writers Betool Khedairi, Dunya Mikhail, and Nuha al-Radi, I cite the Gulf War and ensuing period of exile as the primary reasons for this stylistic shift in Iraqi women's writing. The chaos created by war and exile provided opportunities for Iraqi women to express themselves creatively, which they did by reconfiguring literary conventions and blending genres. As Iraqi women who wrote about the experiences of both war and exile, Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi serve as revolutionary figures in the nation's literary culture. Ghazoul writes that the "national tragedy [of the Gulf War] gave rise to an explosion of literature" (190), and through their writing, Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi exemplify this "explosion," which shattered the trend of male-dominance and ignited the prospects for Iraqi women's empowerment.

Reading the Female War Narrative

In her extensive scholarship on Arab women's literature, Miriam Cooke focuses specifically on Arab women's wartime narratives, assessing the effect of war on the content and reception of Arab women's writing. In her 1996 book *Women and the War Story,* Miriam Cooke argues that women's perceived powerlessness in times of war has affected the reception of their literature. Because the legitimacy of war stories often depends on firsthand accounts of combat, she argues, women have historically "had no authority to speak of the dead and dying" (Cooke 3). They have been silenced and ignored in their accounts of war, which has necessitated their construction of a new kind of war story distinct from the conventional male narrative. Literature

has acted as a means of expression for women, as it has "allow[ed] for the articulation of individual women's different experiences, beliefs, choices, and aspirations" (Cooke 3). It has opened up a space for women to make their voices heard, particularly in the context of wartime, in which they are militarily sidelined and culturally subjugated.

Despite women's freedom to express themselves through literature, however, their oppression during wartime has required them to "subvert the dominant [literary] paradigm" (Cooke 13) in order to be heard. Rather than conforming to conventional archetypes of writing, female authors have created a way to represent war that reflects their own experiences. Female Arab authors narrate the experience of war by emphasizing elements of confusion and chaos rather than those of aggression and anger, which have historically dominated the male war narrative. Unlike men, women writers do not attempt to infuse a sense of order into their literature; rather, they present the situation as "out of control" (Cooke 16), which may actually present a more accurate depiction of the realities of war than the systematically structured traditional narrative. This allows them to avoid "trespassing on men's space," permitting them to "assign their own meanings to what they have felt and done" (Cooke 41). In speaking to their own experiences, female authors also write about the ordinary activities that occupy them during times of war, placing them in their own literary genre and offering the reader insight into the authentic female experience of violence (Cooke 41). Through their writing about the war experience, the three Iraqi authors whose works I will examine assert their voices by dismantling traditional narrative structures.

War Stories of Iraqi Women

While the 1990-91 Gulf War largely confined Iraqi women to their households (Al-Ali, "Reconstructing Gender" 746), Cooke argues that female Iraqi authors used writing as a form of escape from the oppression that the war forced upon them. In *Women and the War Story*, Cooke focuses primarily on Iraqi women's writing during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. She uses their literature to illustrate the literary techniques that distinguished these women authors from male writers who wrote about the war. In her analysis of Daisy Al-Amir's 1988 collection of short stories, *On the Waiting List,* Cooke writes that "the stories are filled with anxiety and dream but say nothing about the war" (Cooke 223). While she uses this pre-Gulf War literature to exemplify the covert narrative style of women writers, her assertions hold true for Iraqi women's literature produced in the following decade, as well. Just as Al-Amir emphasizes elements of confusion over those of violence, the female Iraqi writers that I will study write more about their emotions during the war than they do about the war itself. In both Khedairi's 2004 wartime novel *Absent* and Mikhail's 1995 memoir *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea, Part One,* these female authors narrate certain events implicitly, deviating from conventional forms of storytelling.

In *Women Claim Islam,* Cooke expands upon her previous analysis of Iraqi women's war narratives, incorporating a brief study of women's writings during the 1990-91 Gulf War. She explains that the Gulf War "drove some women to the pen for the first time" (Cooke 16), prompting them to use writing as a tool for empowerment. Just as she notes the propensity for female authors to write about the chaos that accompanied Iran-Iraq War, Cooke roots her analysis of Iraqi women's Gulf War narratives in a similar assertion. Through my analysis of the literary works by Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi, I demonstrate the extent to which these female authors use the context of war as an opportunity to express themselves through writing. They fill

the voids created by the absence of order and deaths of men during the war by acting as creators, contributing to the societal reconstruction of Iraqi society through their written work.

Understanding Women's Diasporic Writing

In many ways, the experience of exile poses a stark contrast to that of war; it denotes extrication from one's homeland rather than oppressive entrapment within it, and it implies a yearning to return home rather than a desire to leave for purposes of safety. Despite these differences, however, the experiences of war and displacement evoke similar sentiments among the individuals that they affect, and the similarities between these conditions are particularly salient among women. Additionally, and most importantly for the purpose of this thesis, exile elicits a renegotiation of gender roles, opening up a space for women to traverse not only national borders, but also the boundaries imposed on them by conventional gender norms. Just as female wartime authors use writing as a way to redefine their gender identities through both the content of their narratives and the very act of constructing them, exilic female writers capitalize upon the advantages that migration often bestows upon them, using the opportunity to express their increasing influence through writing.

Clarifying Terms: "Diaspora" and "Exile"

Various scholars debate the terms "diaspora" and "exile," attaching nuanced connotations to each word. In his 1998 article, Naficy writes that while "exile" had historically carried political associations, involving the forcible expulsion of individuals from their countries by their political leaders, this definition has changed in recent decades due to the advent of globalization. Now, he writes, many people choose to leave their native countries for economic reasons, which

has changed the historic conception of exile (Naficy 55). Naficy distinguishes between diasporic and exilic communities based on the fact that while the primary connection for exiles is to their homeland, "diaspora populations' ties are to the compatriot communities in different locations and countries" (52), implying a broader network of common identification. Ultimately, he resolves to absorb the term "diaspora" into the broader notion of exile, as "one condition can transform into the other and both can transform from being concerned with displacement to belongingness" (52). In spite of the subtleties that distinguish exilic and diasporic individuals, their existence within a "permanent state of displacement and flux" (Naficy 52) implies a shared experience of disorientation that unites them.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the terms "diaspora" and "exile" interchangeably to describe the experiences of Iraqi women in the 1990s. While each of the authors whose works I analyze underwent individual departures from Iraq, they are bound together by their shared experiences, warranting the categorization of their texts as diasporic. In her book *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories From 1948 to the Present,* Nadje Al-Ali notes that in addition to implying migration based on political circumstances, exile also "refers to a state of mind or being," as "set practices and traditions are unsettled when people are forced to leave the known and familiar behind" (17). Indeed, the female characters that I will analyze experience an upheaval not only of their physical roots, but also of their native traditions and values. Uprooted from Iraqi society, they take advantage of their displacement as an opportunity to reformulate their identities.

The Female Diaspora Experience

Just as Miriam Cooke laments the fact that men have traditionally dominated the war narrative, in his 1994 article, James Clifford writes that discourse surrounding the experience of exile has historically excluded women. Despite this, he contends that "women's experiences [of displacement] are particularly revealing" (Clifford 313), as the experience of exile produces conditions that are amenable to a "renegotiation of gender relations" (314). He debates whether the diaspora experience reinforces or mitigates the subjugation of women, writing: "On the one hand, maintaining connections with homelands [and] kinship networks… may renew patriarchal structures. On the other, new roles and demands… are opened by diaspora interaction" (313). Thus, Iraqi women who migrate to Western countries must navigate the balance between retaining their traditional values and taking advantage of the opportunities for greater independence and responsibility that exile affords them.

In *Migrant Women: Crossing Boundaries and Changing Identities,* Gina Buijs echoes Clifford's assertion regarding this internal conflict experienced by diasporic women. Just as Clifford argues that exile may present women with an opportunity to reconfigure their roles, Buijs writes that migration oftentimes grants women "the ability…to take control over their own lives" (Buijs 18). An examination of the exilic texts written Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi confirms Buijs' assertion that exile engenders a shift in gender roles, rendering women independent and liberated and inviting them to share their stories through writing.

Just as the isolation that women experience during wartime encourages them to forge bonds with one another, the alienation that diasporic women confront leads them to build relationships in order to foster a sense of community (Clifford 314). As the female protagonist of Khedairi's exilic novel *A Sky So Close* emigrates from Iraq to London, she communicates with her comrades back home through letters. Similarly, Mikhail and al-Radi use writing as a means

by which to communicate with their friends and family members in Iraq, as well as with other members of the Iraqi diasporic community. Writing therefore provides a mechanism for exilic Iraqi women to rebuild the relationships of which their exile deprives them. Despite the fact that the women in their texts migrate to distinct locations after leaving Iraq—Khedairi's female protagonist immigrates to England, Mikhail moves to the United States, and al-Radi migrates between various countries—these three women are all emblematic of the female Iraqi diasporic experience. Physically and culturally disoriented, they use writing as a way to reconstruct their own identities and express their voices.

V. Khedairi, Mikhail, and Al-Radi: The Crossroads of War and Exile

As female Iraqi authors who lived through both war and exile during the 1990s, Betool Khedairi, Dunya Mikhail, and Nuha al-Radi depict these experiences through discrete literary genres. Whereas Khedairi's two novels, *Absent* and *A Sky So Close,* offer fictional narratives of war and displacement, Mikhail's poetical memoir *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* presents an autobiographical account of her life in Baghdad during the Gulf War and in the United States thereafter. In contrast to both of these literary texts, Nuha al-Radi's *Baghdad Diaries* offers a journalistic depiction of her experiences both during the war and in exile. In addition to portraying wartime and exile in distinct ways through their texts, these three authors each underwent unique experiences, which distinguishes the content of their narratives from one another. Whereas Mikhail was forcibly exiled from Iraq due to government censorship of her work (Mikhail, *Diary*), Khedairi and al-Radi emigrated from Iraq in pursuit of greater social and economic opportunities (Khedairi, "The Daughter of a Foreigner"; al-Radi, *Baghdad Diaries*). They also took distinct trajectories after leaving Iraq; whereas Khedairi moved to the United

Kingdom and Mikhail settled in the United States, al-Radi moved between countries rather than settling permanently.

Despite the differences in the lives of these three authors, their common identification as Iraqi women who endured both war and exile allows for a complex comparative study of their works. In the following chapters of this thesis, I will proceed to use their texts as lenses through which to study the implications of war and exile on gender roles. Through my analysis, I will look not only at the extent to which the roles of Iraqi women were transformed by the experiences of war and exile independently, but also the interplay that exists between war and displacement.

The autobiographical texts by Mikhail and al-Radi portray a two-part transformation of gender roles that begins during the war and continues to inform their experiences as women in exile. While Mikhail and al-Radi enjoy certain freedoms within the unique context of the Gulf War, these liberties are amplified by their emigration from Iraq. Unlike Mikhail and al-Radi, Khedairi separates her depiction of the female wartime and exile experiences into two novels; hence, her literature does not present the same overt continuity between war and displacement that the works by Mikhail and al-Radi do. While the narrator of her novel *A Sky So Close* experiences the Iran-Iraq war in Baghdad before immigrating to England, for the purposes of this thesis, I will consider *A Sky So Close* as an exilic narrative. Contrastingly, her fictional work *Absent* portrays daily life in Baghdad during the Gulf War and ensuing economic embargo. Thus, I will read this text as an example of a wartime narrative.

The Complications of Reading Translations

Before delving into a literary analysis of these works, I would like to acknowledge the complexities that arise when examining a translated text, particularly when utilizing it as a lens through which to examine greater cultural trends, such as the transformation of gender roles. While al-Radi wrote *Baghdad Diaries* in English, the texts by Khedairi and Mikhail were translated into English from their original Arabic versions. The translator of Khedairi's novels, Muhayman Jamil was born in Baghdad and, like Khediari, he moved to the United Kingdom in the 1990s ("Muhayman Jamil"). Mikhail's translator, Elizabeth Winslow, graduated from Cornell University and currently resides in Las Vegas ("Elizabeth Winslow"). In my analysis of the works by Khedairi and Mikhail, I will conduct close readings of certain passages as they were originally written in Arabic; however, the majority of my analysis will focus on the translated English versions.

Scholars of translation have studied the potential problems that arise when translating texts into English. In her 2010 article "'The Muslim Woman' as Celebrity Author and the Politics of Translating Arabic: Girls of Riyadh Go on the Road," Marilyn Booth considers the degree to which publishers distort texts that have been translated from Arabic into English in order to appeal to Western audiences. She argues that publishers altered her English translation of Rajaa Alsanea's 2007 Arabic novel *Girls of Riyadh* in order to incorporate it into the American "chick lit" literary genre (Booth 149). Indeed, the translation of Alsanea's novel proves problematic for this reason; however, Khedairi's and Mikhail's texts circumvent this issue, as they do not conform to an American literary genre that demands certain conventions. Nonetheless, the transformation of language inevitably affects its meaning. Thus, in my close reading of these English translations, I consciously pardon minor linguistic inconsistencies, and I move to an analysis of the original Arabic texts when necessary.

VI. Conclusion

As Iraqi women who wrote both within Iraq during the Gulf War and outside of Iraq thereafter, Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi elucidate the gender transformations that these experiences of political turmoil and cultural upheaval elicit. Through both the content of their works and the act of writing itself, these female authors demonstrate the ways in which women assert themselves creatively in times of chaos and confusion. By writing novels, memoirs, and journals, these female Iraqi writers inject their voices into the nation's literary arena, which had traditionally been dominated by men. Whereas Mikhail and al-Radi assert their authority by documenting their lives through autobiographical texts, Khedairi uses the female characters in her novel to illustrate the female empowerment that war and exile facilitate. Mikhail, al-Radi, and Khedairi's female protagonists renegotiate their identities as Iraqi women living within the contexts of war and exile. In the absence of order and preconceived ties to their family members and the Iraqi nation, they express themselves through various modes of creativity. Thus, through their narrative accounts, Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi exert their authority within the political, cultural, and literary contexts that they occupy. Not only do they employ their writing as a means by which to illuminate the critical role that women play during war and exile, but they also revolutionize the male-dominated literary sphere through the very act of writing.

CHAPTER 2: GENDER IN IRAQI WARTIME LITERATURE

In this chapter, I will analyze the literary works of three female Iraqi authors who wrote during the period of war and sanctions, which delineated and delimited their existence in Baghdad throughout the 1990s. Through a comparative reading of Betool Khedairi's fictional works *Absent,* Dunya Mikhail's poetic memoir *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea, Part One,* and Nuha al-Radi's autobiographical chronicle *Baghdad Diaries,* I will examine the ways in which the Gulf War and the ensuing period of economic sanctions both placed obvious restrictions on women in Iraqi society and provided an opportunity for their self-empowerment. While the period of war and sanctions in Iraq largely confined women to the domestic sphere, forcing them into a position traditionally associated with submission and subservience, it also allowed for their incorporation into the national reconstruction effort in unique ways.

After analyzing the impact that the Gulf War had on the female characters in these three literary accounts, I ultimately conclude that the war served as more of an empowering force than a debilitating one for them. Because war led to a collapse of physical and societal order, including the dismantling of conventional familial relations, it allowed women to assume positions of greater authority within their households. While the war did not elicit an explicit shift in gender roles, it enabled women to capitalize upon their conventionally "feminine" characteristics and behaviors in a way that awarded them influence and importance. In asserting their power through various means of creativity, the women in the works by Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi demonstrate the great extent to which Iraqi women contributed to their nation's cultural revival during and following the Gulf War.

I. War and Gender Roles: A Close Reading of Betool Khedairi's *Absent*

Born in Baghdad in 1965, Betool Khedairi has devoted her literary career to semi-autobiographical novels that act as social commentaries on Iraqi society. Like Dalal, the protagonist of her 2004 novel *Absent,* Khedairi studied French literature, receiving her Bachelor's degree from the University of Mustansirya (Khedairi, "About Me"). In an interview conducted in Arabic and published in a 2004 issue of Jordan's *Sharqiyat* magazine*,* Khedairi explained that her Iraqi father condemned her work as a writer; thus, she gained inspiration from her Scottish mother, who worked as a librarian and encouraged her to read and write ("Betool Khedairi Will Only Write About Iraq"). In *Absent,* Khedairi depicts the function of the mother figure as a driving force for Dalal's professional ambitions, perhaps drawing upon her own life as a model for this theme. Set during the economic embargo in Baghdad in the late 1990s, Khedairi's novel demonstrates the way in which the nation's dire political and economic circumstances concurrently empowered and restricted Iraqi women in the years following the Gulf War.

In many ways, Betool Khedairi's 2004 novel *Absent* presents a reconstruction of the war story, shifting the paradigm of war literature from the overt to the covert, from a narrative of violence to one of silence. Khedairi's account of the Iraqi period of war and sanctions exemplifies to Cooke's assessment of women's war writing as powerful through the subtlety of its language (Cooke, *Women and the War Story* 16). In *Absent,* the female protagonist's narration avoids the explicit in order to call attention to the more implicit and personal experience of war for women. While Khedairi's novel takes place during a period of great destruction within Iraqi society, the narrative highlights certain types of construction that occur despite the political turmoil. In this way, Dalal's story acts as a rebuilding of sorts, demonstrating the uniquely feminine propensity to create new modes of understanding. Because of the gaping absences that

pervade the female war experience, the women in Khedairi's novel assume the role of creators by reconstructing their stories and their own identities. In portraying the female characters as creators and relating the story of Dalal in a manner that deviates from conventionally masculine modes of storytelling, Khedairi conveys the transformation of gender roles that wartime elicits.

War as an Agent of Absence

In her novel, Khedairi portrays the female characters as empty, absent figures within their society. As the young, orphaned female protagonist, Dalal embodies this absence; she lives with her aunt and uncle and uses their marital relationship as a substitute for the parental model that she lacks. In her portrayal of the older female characters in her novel, Khedairi attributes their sensations of emptiness to the loss of their husbands in the war. Dalal's aunt tells her the story of one of her female customers who spends her nights alone after to the death of her husband, explaining that "she likes to listen to her bedroom curtain, billowing in a gentle breeze as it makes a soft rustling sound…imagin[ing] it's the sound of her husband's dishdasha" (41). The white noise that replaces this male figure indicates the vacancy experienced by Iraqi women due to the absence of their husbands. Dalal's aunt also relates to Dalal the story of the woman who sells embroidery threads to her, explaining that she is "so afraid of being alone" because "her husband [is] missing in action, lost on the battlefield" (43). For this female vendor, embroidery serves to fill in for the void that her husband used to occupy. As she, along with the other women who have lost their husbands in the war, seeks to forge a new identity independent of her male counterpart, she takes on artistic means of creation and reinvention in order to do so.

Even those women who have not lost their husbands in the war are defined by images of emptiness and absence. While Dalal's aunt had previously used lipstick to accentuate her beauty

in the "Days of Plenty," during the period of war and sanctions, Dalal takes advantage of the times when her aunt is away to outline herself in the mirror with her aunt's lipstick. After completing her drawing, Dalal writes on the mirror, "I abandon my pose, leaving behind me a map tracing out my figure hanging in the middle of a mirror in a darkened room" (12). This empty, suspended depiction of herself demonstrates the way in which Dalal's presence as a woman is defined—in this case, visibly—by her absence. As Dalal encounters a statue of Shahrazad during her walk down Abu Nuwas Street with Ilham, the female nurse who lives above her, Ilham compares herself to the statue, musing, "I'm like her in some ways: the hard solid exterior. Bronze on the outside, hollow on the inside…Can you imagine how strange it feels to be a structure filled with emptiness?" (81). Ilham's physical self-characterization as a woman lacking substance rationalizes the fear felt by women who lack a male figure to fill this empty space.

Following the arrest of Ilham, her vacated apartment also resembles the female experience in wartime. Like Ilham herself, the apartment is defined by what it lacks; it contains all of Ilham's possessions but excludes Ilham. As Dalal sifts through the remains of Ilham's flat, she comes across "clumps of carpenter grass [that] have been compressed together into cubes…like tiny building bricks piled up on top of each other" (186). Ilham's abandoned apartment thus serves as a microcosm of the female experience during war; it embodies both the carnage and the gaping absences that war entails.

In addition to Khedairi's portrayal of the female characters as empty, the oblique manner in which Dalal tells her story reflects the absence and silence that characterize her life as a woman. Throughout the novel, Dalal refrains from recounting events explicitly; rather, she speaks through subtle inferences, defining her experiences through the absence of narration.

Dalal avoids overtly describing events relating to the traditionally taboo topic of sex. As she stands outside her aunt and uncle's bedroom, she conveys the sounds that signal the sexual encounter between them without directly explaining what it is that she is overhearing. Likewise, Dalal recounts the sexual interaction between herself and her lover, Adel, solely through innuendo, explaining that "the legs of the bed quiver" (181). By implying information surrounding these sensitive subjects rather than stating them outright, Dalal emphasizes these moments through subtlety; she accentuates facts by deliberately omitting them from her narrative.

Finally, the original Arabic title of Khedairi's novel suggests a form of emptiness deeper than its English translation can convey. While Muhayman Jamil entitles her English version of the text "Absent," the word from which she draws this translation carries nuanced connotations. The title of Khedairi's Arabic novel, "Ghayeb," literally translates to "the absent one." The word follows the *ism fa'al* linguistic pattern in the Arabic language, which is used to replace a pronoun with a certain role or characteristic that it embodies. Thus, the form of the word itself implies a sort of vacancy, as it stands in for the name of a certain subject. Additionally, by deliberately failing to specify which character the word "ghayeb" serves to characterize, Khedairi imbues her novel with a form of ambiguity that continues throughout the narrative as the various characters attempt to navigate the confusion of wartime.

Women as Creators

The hollowness that defines the existence of the female characters in Khedairi's novel drives them to take on a role as creators as they attempt to fill in for the vacancies that war elicits. While Dalal, her aunt, Ilham, and the other female residents of Dalal's apartment

experience a sense of purposelessness as the war continues, they utilize the dismantling of order that the war entails to engage in their own, uniquely female process of construction. By constructing relationships and asserting their creativity, the women who occupy Dalal's apartment employ their characteristically feminine traits to become productive members of war-torn Iraqi society.

From the beginning of the narrative, Khedairi demonstrates women's capacity to construct relationships during the war. Rather than referring to Abu Ghayeb as her uncle, Dalal calls him "my aunt's husband" (2), creating a new frame of reference in which his relationship with a woman defines his identity. Throughout the novel, the female characters continue to build and define the relationships between the occupants of Dalal's apartment building. Umm Mazin, the traditional and religious fortune-teller living upstairs, fosters camaraderie among the women in the building, holding gatherings in which "all the women listen in to the tales of the others" (30). Despite her flawed diagnoses and treatments, Umm Mazin seeks to build and rebuild relationships, offering her services to women who lament their husbands' lack of sexual interest. By offering them a cure, she not only seeks to rekindle their husbands' passion, but also to equip them with the power of seduction, a way to take control over the reconstruction of their own marital relationships.

Just as the women in Khedairi's novel build relationships, they also engage in more tangible means of construction in the form of artwork. After Ilham is afflicted by cancer, Dalal's aunt constructs a false breast for her. In this way, Dalal's aunt physically redefines her femininity, allowing Ilham to continue living as a woman without a visible deformity. Moreover, Dalal's aunt devotes herself to the process of creation through her profession as an embroiderer. She becomes so invested in the art of embroidery that "she looks at time as two different

seasons: one for sewing summer dresses and one for sewing winter clothes" (68), essentially redefining periods of time according to her artistic hobby.

In addition to their involvement in the visual arts, the female characters in Khedairi's novel also express themselves through writing. Upon her meeting with her neighbor, Uncle Sami, Dalal comes across the diary of his deceased wife, Umm Raid, in which she recounts her experience living in Iraq during the earlier years of violence. While Umm Raid was killed in the war, the survival of her diary suggests the value of the written word as a form of art. As a photographer, Uncle Sami laments the inferiority of his artistic medium of choice in relation to that of his wife, explaining, "I was mistaken when I thought I'd achieved perfection through my art. I became pretentious and considered myself superior to the rest of humanity, and in particular, to my wife" (76). While photography serves as a way to objectively capture reality, Uncle Sami acknowledges the failure of this art form to reflect "what's happening inside [of himself]" (76). Just as the aunt's embroidery assigns meaning to the passage of time, Umm Raid's writings grant Uncle Sami and Dalal insight into the realities of war in a way that neither Abu Ghayeb's paintings nor Uncle Sami's photographs can express.

The very manner in which the female characters tell their stories serves as a means of construction in and of itself, as it deviates from the conventional male narrative and contributes to a new female-dominated method of storytelling. The subtlety that defines Khedairi's writing style, evident through her use of Dalal as a young female narrator, offers the reader insight into the way in which women perceive their surroundings and are able to effectively recount them. Just as Dalal's aunt and Ilham engage in acts of artistic construction, Dalal also reworks narrative conventions. She attributes salience to topics that a male narrator may deem unimportant while merely touching upon subjects that would ordinarily govern a wartime narrative. In addition to

narrating sexual encounters in an oblique manner, Dalal also focuses the majority of her narrative upon personal relationships rather than international or governmental ones. While she does occasionally recount the political violence that surrounds her, the majority of her narrative centers around the interactions that take place between the various occupants of her apartment and between her aunt and Abu Ghayeb. Thus, Khedairi's novel emphasizes the way in which women successfully take control not only over the direction of their own lives in times of war, but also over the narration of the war story itself.

A Reconfiguration of Gender Roles as the Ultimate Consequence of War

The transformation of the women in Khedairi's novel from figures associated with absence to women equipped with the power to create demonstrates the renegotiation of gender roles that period of war and sanctions brings about for these female characters. As the chaos and carnage of wartime disrupts all sense of normalcy, the female characters use this lapse in order to abandon their traditionally female roles and seek empowerment. While Abu Ghayeb initially prohibits Dalal from working outside of the home, as the war continues and the economic sanctions intensify, Dalal takes on two occupations and decides to invest in schooling. Despite Abu Ghayeb's attempts to relegate his wife to the home, she, too, succeeds in her economic endeavors, eventually superseding her husband in her monetary earnings. Abu Ghayeb attempts to maintain his role as the dominant member of the household by foregoing his career as an artist and assuming a profession as a beekeeper; however, his failure to successfully manage the bee apiary—accentuated by his relative powerlessness in comparison to the female queen bee—indicates the ultimate authority of women over the preservation and reconstruction of Iraqi society.

While Umm Mazin initially acts as the unifying force within Dalal's apartment, bringing together the various female occupants to offer remedies to their physical and emotional maladies, her ultimate arrest signals the abandonment of traditional customs and the transition of women into more modern occupations. Relying upon coffee grounds and Quranic verses to guide her fortunetelling practice, Umm Mazin's profession is grounded in superstition and religion. In the midst of the instability that the period of political and economic turmoil creates within Baghdad, Dalal depends upon Umm Mazin to instill within them a sense of order and reassurance through her work. As she relates to Dalal her personal background, Umm Mazin explains that she became a fortuneteller because "God's Prophet (Peace be upon him) blessed this profession" (87), and Umm Mazin's religious devotion dictates her actions throughout the novel, as she insists that God will solve the problems of her clients that she herself cannot remedy. Dalal eventually becomes skeptical of Umm Mazin's work, explaining to Ilham that "she uses verses from the Qur'an to deceive people" and "insists that a woman's religious duty is to stay at home…serv[ing] her husband and devot[ing] herself to prayer" (111). As the violence escalates and Umm Mazin is forced to surrender her work as a traditional healer, Dalal and her aunt replace Umm Mazin as dominant women in the professional sphere. The female characters' transition from ritualistic to pragmatic professions signals the opportunities that the war presented for them to assert their authority.

At the start of the novel, Dalal performs domestic duties, and upon requesting to work as a cleaner at a local hospital, her uncle restricts her from doing so, telling her, "You will not be a cleaner while I'm around to provide for you" (27). As Abu Ghayeb's desperation to become economically successful intensifies, however, he takes Dalal along with him to the apiary in his effort to earn a substantial income by working as a beekeeper. As she matures and the economic

embargo worsens, Dalal realizes that she is "forced to depend on [her]self" (125) and begins to work as an assistant to her neighbor, Saad, in his barbershop while also working with her uncle at the apiary. In addition to contributing to the household's finances through her work, Dalal also invests in an education at a French school at the suggestion of Ilham, who convinces her that in the years following the war, "the time will come when the Western nations will return to [Iraq] to reconstruct it" and that working as a translator would allow her to help "rebuild [the] country's infrastructure" (84). Thus, while Dalal's participation in the paid workforce empowers her financially, her decision to learn French provides her with the tools necessary to participate in the process of post-war reconstruction.

Like Dalal, Dalal's aunt also seeks economic opportunities as the economic sanctions tighten. Khedairi introduces Dalal's aunt with image of her sweeping Abu Ghayeb's scales, which fall from his body due to his psoriasis. Despite the traditionally feminine act of sweeping that this moment captures, it also draws attention to the physical decay of Abu Ghayeb, whose psoriasis signals a symbolic loss of strength. Abu Ghayeb's weakness relative to this wife grows more apparent as the economic sanctions tighten, whereupon Dalal's aunt begins to use her artistic skill to take charge of the household financially by selling her embroidered shrouds. Abu Ghayeb understands the power of his wife's creative prowess; he comments that the United Nations has restricted Iraqis from purchasing cloth for weaving purposes, noting sarcastically, "as if that could threaten the security of the region!" (90). Despite his apparent nonchalance, however, it becomes clear that Abu Ghayeb actually feels threatened by his wife's skill, signaling the sense of empowerment that women's creativity affords them in the period following the war. Upon returning home to find a large sum of money that his wife acquired by selling shrouds, he refuses to appreciate her success. After Dalal's aunt assures him that "her

profession will be the winner in the end" (97), Abu Ghayeb commits himself to reclaiming his position as the primary financial provider of the household by committing himself to his job at the apiary.

While Abu Ghayeb seeks employment at the apiary in order to secure his financial dominance in the household, his inability to maintain control over the female bees with which he works allegorizes the uniquely female power to rebuild Iraqi society. Abu Ghayeb explains to Dalal that unlike the queen bees, which preside over the colonies, the male bees "have shorter bodies and no stinger" (67), rendering them innocuous and less productive than their female counterparts. As Dalal later converses with Umm Mazin about her use of honey, Umm Mazin recites a Quranic verse, saying, "And thy Lord taught the bee to build its cells in hills, on trees, and in men's habitations" (89), also suggesting the ability for female bees to conquer the territory previously owned by men. Just as the female bees usurp the traditionally male space of construction and control, the male bees occupy the conventionally feminine realm. As Dalal teaches her aunt about the habits of bees, she explains that the death of the queen bee engenders a state of chaos, which leads the male worker bees to "lay the eggs instead of the queen bee and end up being called false mothers" (176). The gender role reversal that occurs in bee communities following the death of the queen bee mirrors the shift in gender roles that the chaos of war brings about in Iraqi society.

Just as the war presents an opportunity for women to take an active role in national reconstruction initiatives, it also disrupts traditional romantic relationships, allowing for the replacement of traditional marriage institutions with ones that do not conform to conventional gender norms. As Dalal informs Ilham and Uncle Sami of the tension that her aunt's financial success has inflicted upon her marriage, Ilham comments that "a successful marriage has gone

out of fashion" (122), and Uncle Sami modifies her statement, asserting that "it's marriage itself that has gone out of fashion" (113). Indeed, a later conversation between Dalal's aunt and Abu Ghayeb affirms the dissolution of their marriage. Sensing the challenge that her entry into the workplace poses to her husband, Dalal's aunt confronts Abu Ghayeb about the toll that this change in financial roles has taken on their relationship. She attempts to console him by reminding him of the recent improvements in Iraq's economic situation and assuring him that the ease in economic sanctions will remedy their relationship. He responds sarcastically, however, saying to her, "I therefore wish you an even larger income" (147), indicating his spiteful attitude toward her encroachment upon his role in providing for the household. Abu Ghayeb's inability to inhibit the economic success of both his wife and his daughter, in addition to his failure to exert his control over the female-dominated bee community, proves the ultimate authority of women over the restructuring of post-war Iraqi society.

Khedairi's novel illustrates the way in which war brings about a shift in gender roles, both within the household and on the national scale, as women act as agents of post-war reconstruction. The physical and emotional emptiness that war elicits provides a window of opportunity for women to engage in acts of construction, whether in the form of embroidery, personal relationships, narrative styles, or contribution to the household's financial earnings. As Adel explains to Saad following the missile blast that destroys Umm Mazin's apartment, "Sometimes… we have to experience destruction in order to concentrate on building ourselves up" (159). Adel's statement holds true throughout the novel as the characters attempt to both rebuild Iraq's infrastructure and reconstruct gender roles. The period of destruction during wartime is precisely what dismantles traditional marital relationships and gender roles,

positioning women to take a leading role in redefining traditional gender roles and restructuring Iraqi society.

III. Gender Transformations in Wartime in Mikhail's *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea, Part One*

Dunya Mikhail, like Betool Khedairi, was born in Baghdad in 1965 and has written a variety of works that reflect upon the political, economic, and societal conditions in Iraq over the course of her literary career. While the majority of her literary work consists of poetry, *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea*—which she wrote both during her time in Iraq in the early 1990s and during her exile in the United States thereafter—is considered by critics to be a "multi-genre bilingual book" (Mikhail, "New Directions Interview"). In the first section of her text, Mikhail recalls the events of the Iran-Iraq War and the subsequent Gulf War, both of which she personally experienced in Baghdad. The second portion of her work, which centers around her life in exile, differs starkly from the first, as she employs more direct narration, straying from the abstract and fantastical descriptions that characterize Part One of her narrative. Mikhail attributes this stylistic shift to the fact that censorship in Iraq limited her ability to speak candidly of political events, whereas abroad, she did not face the same restrictions (Mikhail, "New Directions Interview"). She asserts, however, that the narrative constraints imposed upon Part One of her narrative did not pose a significant obstacle to her ability to express herself, as she believes that the "metaphors and layers of meaning" endemic to poetry allow her to more accurately describe the confusion of war than would a strictly prosaic account (Mikhail, "New Directions Interview").

Like *Absent,* Dunya Mikhail's prose-poem demonstrates the way in which war dismantles Iraqi society, necessitating a reconstruction not only of infrastructure, but also of memories, relationships, and societal order. Just as Khedairi employs images of absence in order to call attention to the feminine emphasis on the unspoken, Mikhail's memoir traces the edges of meaning, connoting emotions rather than denoting facts. Part One of Mikhail's "poetical memoir" (Mikhail, *Diary* vii) focuses on her experience as a woman living in Baghdad during and after the war. Published in Iraq in 1995, the first half of *Diary* illustrates the female experience of emptiness and alienation during wartime. Devoid of any concrete sense of order or time and lacking male figures in her life, Mikhail lives in a vacuum of absence. She is therefore forced to construct a world of her own, to rework even the conventions of language and style to create a new way to narrate her wartime experience. Like the process of creation that the female characters in Khedairi's *Absent* undertake, Mikhail's act of reconstruction in the form of writing reflects the redefinition of gender roles that accompanies political turmoil, as she seizes the opportunity to empower herself through writing.

Conception of Absence in Mikhail's Diary

Mikhail begins her memoir by recalling the lack of men in her life, lamenting the challenges of existing without the framework of order that they had offered her. After expressing her nostalgia for the naïveté that defined her childhood, she writes that as a child, her father had bought her a chessboard, explaining, "This is life—black and white" (4). While she only alludes to the death of her father, mentioning his admission to the hospital that preceded his "absence" (4), his death impacts her perception of events. Following the death of her father and the start of the war, this "black and white" dichotomy dissolves into confusion, forcing Mikhail to navigate

her chaotic surroundings. Everything that she once knew loses its meaning, rendering her incapable of viewing the world around her with the clarity that her father's chessboard metaphor connotes. Though she continually juxtaposes lightness and darkness, her use of these extremes indicates her confusion rather than her understanding of the realities of war. Describing herself as trapped within a glass box, Mikhail writes that she sees "a series of geometric shapes with black signs and dazzling lights… telling me to move or stop" (57). While these objects refer to traffic lights, her use of light and dark to describe them signals her inability to understand what they mean. Rather than serving to elucidate her surroundings, the "black and white" manner of viewing the world blinds her, preventing her from making sense of the events that befall her.

In addition to her father's absence, Mikhail also mentions the absence of her lover and the confusion that his death implicates. Rather than recounting her past relationship with her nameless lover, Mikhail refers only to his "shadow," which "squats on its heels on the hands of our clocks and revolves" (6). As she recalls the violence that she witnesses amidst the stormy weather outside, Mikhail again references this unnamed man, writing, "But I didn't find a trace of your footprints" (13). In defining her lover only by the shadow and footprint of his existence Mikhail calls attention to the emptiness that defines her life during the war. By starting off her wartime account with the death of these two male figures, Mikhail emphasizes the way in which the absence of men affects women, particularly in times of war.

Aside from the physical absence of men, Mikhail indicates her lack of memory, another void produced by the war. As she describes the bombs that have created gaping holes in the ground, she writes, "When the gap clashes with the walls of memory, a blazing spark is produced" (39), indicating the power of political violence to destroy memories, necessitating the construction of new ones. Mikhail refers to her lapse in memory yet again following her lengthy

description of a bombshell that has landed on the beach. She explains that just as many people use forgetfulness as a deliberate way to avoid speaking of things like bombshells, she, too, "did nothing but forget" (55), replying to those who ask her about the shell by saying that her "dreams are filled with clouds" (55), lacking clarity or accuracy. In light of Cooke's argument in *Women Claim Islam* that "survival depends on the ability to forget, to unlearn the language that unleashes war" (Cooke 20), Mikhail's apparent memory loss serves as a necessary mechanism by which to ensure her own survival.

In addition to her deficiency of memories, Mikhail also lacks the knowledge that would allow her to convey an accurate account of the war as she experienced it. Mikhail admits her lack of knowledge unabashedly, consistently asking questions such as "Has the war stopped?" (10) and "Why should we hide in shelters when the sky is clear?" (13). Even that which she does know devolves into the unknown as a result of the war. As she looks down at the ground and notes the dryness of the earth that she once knew to flourish with vegetation, she laments: "O, my homeland, how withered you are becoming!" (30). While she had known this land to be a part of her home, wartime necessitates a reconstruction of preexisting a truths, a rejection of what was once known as "home" but has been tarnished by the carnage of war.

The Female Power to Create

Just as the women in Khedairi's *Absent* turn to creative hobbies such as embroidery in order to distract them from their loneliness, Mikhail also adopts modes of creativity to contribute to reconstruction of Iraqi society. In assuming a role as a creator, Mikhail compensates for both the lack of male figures in her life and the absence of her own memories. By depicting herself as

God during the creation of the universe and by creating a new kind of language to depict the war, Mikhail counterbalances the physical destruction that surrounds her with acts of construction.

Throughout her memoir, Mikhail continually plays the role of God, giving life to inanimate objects and personifying elements of the natural world. She uses the breakdown of hierarchal structures during wartime as an opportunity to impose order upon her surroundings by assuming a divine presence. Following her meditation on the disorienting effect of the war, Mikhail writes:

> "In the beginning, there was only a shapeless, single-celled amoeba.
> …
> I grasped the stars
> and hung them in the empty sky.
> In order to eliminate the confusion
> of the single chaotic mess,
> I divided it
> and two radiant balls rolled out" (33).

By manipulating the first lines of the book of Genesis, Mikhail takes over the narration of the biblical verse, reconstructing words that would ordinarily disallow tampering. In addition to acting as a God-like figure by changing the language of the verse, with the very content of her words, Mikhail assigns to herself a godly role, as she claims the ability to perform celestial acts that exceed the capabilities of mankind. She continues to assert her supernatural abilities, including the power to manipulate time, as she claims to have "moved the time machine's lever to the year 1991" (40). Despite these outrageous statements that her narrative privilege allows her to make, Mikhail acknowledges the limitations of her power, conceding that she cannot turn the time machine back to the year zero because "the disaster has ruined everything and the machine can no longer travel either into the past or the future" (41). Thus, despite the fact that the confusion of wartime allows Mikhail to take control over certain elements of the natural

world, she still lacks the ability to completely reconstruct Iraqi society, signaling the irreparable effects of the war.

In addition to her explicit attempts to assume the role of God, Mikhail acts as a creator by constructing a new kind of language to describe the war, straying from narrative conventions. As she discusses the death of language that accompanies wartime, Mikhail writes that "language has no tomb in the world of the shell" (55), insinuating her own obligation to preserve language through her writing. Because previous linguistic forms have died out, she invents a new form of language to replace that which was lost. This language that she creates is poetry; however, she explains that during times of war, even poetry strays from the rhyme and rhythm that ordinarily defines it. She alludes to the amorphous character of poetry, explaining that it has "shifted from gaseous matter to liquid then to solid" (55). She thereby chooses poetry as her means of expression because it can adapt to new contexts, even those characterized by war. She illustrates her unraveling of linguistic structures by throwing the dictionary into the sea and watching as the Arabic letters that spell *milh,* the word for "salt," rearrange themselves to spell *hilm,* or "dream" (56). With this image, Mikhail shows how war dismantles not only the ordering of society but also of the very letters that make up language. In the original Arabic version of her text, Mikhail literally deconstructs these words. She writes the three individual letters that make up the Arabic words *hilm* and *milh* without connecting them to one another, allowing them to float independently on the page. In this way, Mikhail expresses the political instability in Baghdad through the absence of linguistic structures in her text, constructing her own narrative style in the form of a prose poem.

Just as Dalal narrates certain instances covertly in Khedairi's *Absent,* Mikhail chooses to recount events implicitly, straying from traditional, overt forms of narration. In her narrative, she

provides the exact dates of two air raids; however, her description of each lacks exactitude, emphasizing the confusion that surrounds these events rather than the events themselves. While Mikhail cites January 17, 1991 as the date of the first Allied bombing, in her description of the bombing, she focuses on the emotions with which she associates it rather than the objective facts surrounding it. Despite her ability to recall the date that the bombing took place, she does not know whether it occurred "at dawn or during the night" (14), indicating the extent to which the event disorients her, dismantling her conception of time. In her description of the second air raid, which takes place on January 16, 1993, she also highlights the disorder that she associates with it, writing that "the planes returned with their confusing air raid sirens," and that she had "thought what [she] had heard was the sound of memories" (20). Mikhail's narration of the war's impact on her consciousness calls attention to elements that a more direct, conventional narrative may ignore. In *Women and the War Story,* Cooke argues that in writing about war, women "subvert the dominant paradigm" (Cooke 13), and by emphasizing the characteristics of war other than violence, Mikhail does just that, inserting her voice into the genre that men have for so long dominated.

In addition to offering a uniquely feminine manner of examining the effects of the war, through her work, Mikhail takes control over the restructuring of society by attempting to instill a sense of order upon her chaotic surroundings. Following the death of her father, upon whom Mikhail had relied to explain her surroundings to her, Mikhail explains that rather than crying for his absence, "I cried for my presence!" (5), as she can no longer rely upon a man to impose a sense of order upon her life. While her father had shown her the chessboard that he used as a model for the world, in his absence, Mikhail assumes the responsibility of maintaining order within her society. As she reflects upon the tasks she must complete before dying in the war, she

writes, “I remembered that I had not put the chessboard away,” and she proceeds to “[arrange] each piece in its place on the board” (13). While she does not explicitly assume a masculine role in her effort to assert her control over the Iraqis whom she considers chess pieces, her attempt to manipulate her surroundings indicates the way in which war imparts power and responsibility upon her. Just as the war allows the female characters in Khedairi’s *Absent* to take control over the sectors of society that had previously excluded them, it offers Mikhail the opportunity to take on an empowered role following the death of her father and lover.

Poetic Prose as an Empowering Medium

While Mikhail’s narrative account reflects her attempt to assert her dominance in the wake of her father’s absence, the reticence with which she exerts her control demonstrates the barriers that impede women’s empowerment even in times of war. As Cooke writes in *Women and the War Story,* female authors purposely refrain from imposing order on their descriptions of political violence. They deliberately portray their surroundings as chaotic so as to avoid “trespassing on men’s space” (41), which is characterized by structure and order. By bending and blending literary styles, creating a work of writing that combines prose and poetry, Mikhail asserts her authority as a writer, as the hybrid form allows her to benefit from both the free-form nature of poetry and the clarity of prose.

The poetic element of Mikhail’s work offers her liberties that a strictly prosaic work would prohibit, allowing her to take on a role as a creative and constructive figure amidst the chaos of war. Through her visually cascading lines and her gaping spaces populated by ellipses, Mikhail illustrates the confusion of war through the very aesthetics of her writing; she enhances her narrative clout by expressing her emotions through both the content of her words and the

visual appearance of the words themselves. She severs sentences in seemingly arbitrary places, suspending certain words on the page devoid of context. In describing her surroundings, she writes:

> "Roads
> trees
> rivers
> windows—
> these things are not acquainted with me,
> but I know them well.
> They are like tears falling
> at a sudden, false shadow." (8)

In assigning each component of the world around her to its own line, Mikhail mirrors the alienation that she confronts as a victim of the war. Her isolation of these words also makes the objects appear scattered and strewn, lacking any sensible order. Mikhail's infusion of visual elements into her literary work thus allows her to express herself in a more dynamic and dramatic manner than would a conventional narrative account. While her poetic style empowers her in many ways as a writer, Mikhail's experimental narrative also offers her authority through its prosaic component. Her intermittent departure from the poetic realm into a more conventional prose-based method of storytelling grounds her account in reality, contextualizing her work and affording her credibility as an author. Despite its imaginative elements, her integration of historical facts into her work, such as her mention of the air raids that occurred on specific dates, complements the fantastical descriptions that make up the poetic portions of her narrative. Through the combination of these distinct narrative styles, Mikhail successfully conveys ineffable emotions through her poetic language without disregarding the political context that informs her work.

In addition to the respective advantages of poetry and prose as genres, Mikhail's very fusion of the two styles into a new and unique form of writing empowers her as an author. Her

creation of a new poetic-prosaic writing form reflects her ability to seize the opportunity that war presents for women to invent new modes of empowerment. Just as Dalal's aunt embroiders, employing her artistic expertise as a financial asset and tool for power, Mikhail takes advantage of the disorder that war brings about to uproot narrative conventions and create a genre of her own that affords her authenticity and credibility. While she does not explicitly take on a masculine role in the midst of war like Dalal's aunt does when she becomes the breadwinner of the household, Mikhail demonstrates the shift in gender roles that war brings about by seizing power through writing.

While Mikhail's careful placement of her words on the page enhances the richness of her narrative, her translator, Elizabeth Winslow, reconfigures certain passages in her English translation. Although Winslow retains the format of the majority of Mikhail's Arabic memoir, including the above passage, she inserts line breaks into her version that Mikhail does not include in her original Arab text. In Winslow's English version, as Mikhail reflects upon her loneliness following the death of her lover, she writes:

> "One evening…
> No… One morning…
> No… I don't know… One waiting…" (5)

In this passage, Winslow's English words do not differ in meaning from Mikhail's original Arabic language; however, her formatting of the text deviates from the original, connoting different emotions. In her original version of this passage, Mikhail writes these words as one continuous line rather than breaking the phrases into three separate lines, as Winslow does in her translation. Thus, Mikhail conveys not only the confusion of war through the meaning of her words, but also the monotony of war through the absence of visible spaces in her writing. By changing the aesthetics of the words on the page from an unbroken block of text to short,

interrupted lines, Winslow subtly undermines Mikhail's authority as a poet. Mikhail acknowledges Winslow's stylistic changes in the introduction to her text, in which she writes, "The change [from unbroken Arabic lines into broken English lines] seemed to deepen the poetical sense of the translation" (vii). Mikhail's acceptance of Winslow's changes thus signals her willingness to allow the work to take on a trajectory of its own in translation, conveying distinct meanings to different audiences.

IV. War as an Agent of Female Expression in Nuha Al-Radi's *Baghdad Diaries*

If Khedairi's *Absent* presents a fictional account of war-torn Iraq and Mikhail's *Diary* offers an autobiographical poetic narrative, Nuha al-Radi's *Baghdad Diaries: a Woman's Chronicle of War and Exile* introduces a third, distinct female perspective on the realities of wartime. *Baghdad Diaries* consists of precisely what its title implies: a record of the Gulf War as perceived by a woman—namely, Nuha al-Radi. Born in Baghdad in 1941, al-Radi later moved with her family to Beirut before leaving for London in the late 1950s to study pottery there. She moved back to Beirut thereafter; however, when the Lebanese Civil War erupted in 1975, she returned to Baghdad, where she lived through the carnage of the 1990-91 Gulf War and began writing *Baghdad Diaries* (McFarquhar).

The debilitating effects of the war that al-Radi captures in her diary continued to impact her life up until her death of leukemia in August of 2004. In the months preceding her death, al-Radi attributed her disease to the vast quantities of depleted uranium that poisoned Baghdad's atmosphere, left over from the bombs dropped by the allied forces during the Gulf War. In her obituary published in *The Guardian,* reporter Julie Flint writes that "she felt she would be speaking for all Iraqis who linked their cancers to the radioactive particles and toxins that were

exploded into their environment" (Flint). Though the residue from the war literally permeated al-Radi's body, bringing about her death, the war also served as an enlivening force for her during her life, as it drove her to take on new responsibilities. In *Baghdad Diaries,* al-Radi demonstrates how the war presented an opportunity for her to employ her creative skills as a driving force of life.

While her diary may be viewed as part of a literary genre entirely separate from that which would characterize the more imaginative works of Khedairi and Mikhail, al-Radi employs certain narrative elements used by both Khedairi and Mikhail, and through her work, she seeks to illuminate similar truths about the effect that the war had on Iraq's women. Like Khedairi's novel, al-Radi's diary centers around a variety of characters, including her friends, family members, and any other individuals with whom she interacted over the course of the recorded time period. In involving so many characters in her work, both male and female, al-Radi presents a comprehensive portrayal of Iraqi society at the time, offering a candid insight into the effect that the war had on gender roles in Iraq. Al-Radi's diary also employs the elements of Mikhail's *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* that serve to expose the societal effects of wartime. While she abstains from using poetic, flowery language to describe her experience in the way that Mikhail does, like Mikhail, al-Radi draws directly upon personal experience to portray the reality of life as a female during the war. Thus, just like Khedairi and Mikhail, al-Radi implicitly brings gender to the forefront of her account, illuminating the way in which the political and economic hardships both hindered and empowered her as a woman.

Like the works written by Khedairi and Mikhail, *Baghdad Diaries* portrays the effect that the Gulf War had on gender roles in Iraq. Rather than eliciting a gender role reversal, the war enables the women in al-Radi's account to employ their traditionally feminine roles and

responsibilities in new, productive ways. It creates demand for their talent and provides new venues for their creativity, allowing them to capitalize upon the absence of men and establish themselves as prominent figures in Iraqi society. In her diary, al-Radi calls attention to the integral role that she and her female relatives and colleagues played in promoting the well-being of those with whom they reside. In the absence of any concrete understanding of time and order, the women in al-Radi's life seize this opportunity to exert their femininity in necessary and powerful ways.

Imposing Order During a Time of Disorder

Intended to provide a realistic glimpse into her daily life, al-Radi's chronicle narrates the effects that the war had on her while also calling attention to the functionality of the diary itself. She uses her diary not only to expose and express the female war experience, but also as a tool for herself to demarcate the passage of time and the occurrence of events that befall her in the midst of political and societal turmoil. Like Khedairi's and Mikhail's literary works, al-Radi's *Baghdad Diaries* highlights the absences that the war brought about. Aside from the dearth of men, to which al-Radi makes various references, al-Radi also comments on the lack of structure and order that characterized her life during the war. Through her descriptions of roles assumed by the women seeking shelter in her home during the war, it is evident that along with this dismantling of order came an uprooting of the patriarchal system that traditionally governed Iraqi society. While the female characters in al-Radi's account do not take over the positions of familial and societal power that had been occupied by men before the war, they skew the traditional patriarchal order by using their femininity in empowering ways.

While various unrecorded factors may contribute to al-Radi's sense of loneliness and isolation during the war, the most obvious absence that she recounts is the lack of an identifiable sense of order and time. Whereas Mikhail illustrates her inability to keep track of the passage of time through her serpentine narration, which conflates and confuses various time periods, al-Radi explicitly admits her loss of a sense of time. She explains that "I don't have a 1991 calendar so I can't even tick the days off" (10). She therefore relies upon her own journaling to keep track of the days. She proceeds to record the events of each day in her diary, writing in extreme detail so as to "keep a record of what is happening to us" (10) without omitting any information. Despite the fact that her writing allows her to successfully monitor the passage of time, she emphasizes the other ways in which the war defamiliarizes the familiar, demanding the assumption of new tasks and hobbies and the rejection of old ones. She explains that since the start of the war, her mother, "who usually never stops knitting" now "can't knit" (17), and her cousins, Suha and Amal, have begun knitting instead. She even cites the war as a catalyst for her own sudden desire to write in a diary, which is "not something I normally do" (17). Thus, in addition to stripping her of a sense of chronology, the war also alters the characteristics that had defined herself and her family members in the days before the war. Her diary therefore serves not only as a sort of clock on paper, but also as a representation of the new traits the emerged out of the war in response to the disorder and disturbance of everyday life that it caused.

In addition to using her diary as a way to keep track of time and events, she also uses it in order to force herself into an engagement with the war itself, making herself an active participant in the affairs of her country. While she does not actively engage in combat, al-Radi writes in her diary in order to remind herself that there is a war raging outside of the confines of her home, something she intermittently admits to forgetting. At the start of the war, she writes that she and

Suha "spent the day merrily painting in [her] studio while the war was going on full blast outside" (11). She proceeds to reflect upon "where this detachment [that she feels] comes from," wondering why she retains the ability to live life normally "while others are gnashing their teeth with fear" (11). While she engages in activities such as painting and cooking in order to distract herself from the violence surrounding her, through her writing, she retains consciousness of the war and establishes herself as an active member of Iraqi society.

Creativity, Revisited: a Vehicle for Female Empowerment in Wartime

While al-Radi may employ her culinary and artistic expertise as a way to distract herself from the war, her use of these creative skills indicates her attempt to retain her identity as an artist and assert her role as a creator in times of war, during which old roles and identities become instable. As the war persists, al-Radi laments the fact that "in wartime my creative process simply dries up" because "the destructiveness around is so soul-destroying" (58); thus, her desperation to preserve her artistic abilities signals her effort to withstand these "soul-destroying" effects of war, to cling to the creativity that she considers to be a core element of her identity. Through cooking, painting, sculpting, and gardening, al-Radi channels her artistic creativity, employing her traditionally feminine attributes as a means of empowerment during the war.

Al-Radi's obsession with cooking, to which she repeatedly refers over the course of her account, points to both the increasing necessity for this typically female chore in times of war as well as al-Radi's ability to use cooking as a tool for innovation and creativity. Throughout the time in which she seeks shelter in her family's orchard along with her friends and family members, al-Radi turns to cooking as a means of both survival and entertainment. As resources

grow scarce at the start of the war, al-Radi and her female relatives with whom she resides exercise their creativity in the kitchen in order to most effectively and economically provide meals for themselves and the rest of the occupants of al-Radi's apartment. In an effort to preserve their meat, al-Radi's mother makes basturma*,* a dish consisting of raw meat infused with spices and salt. Al-Radi comments on the improvisation that the creation of this dish demanded; she explains that because of the lack of animal intestines available, her mother "stuffed the mixture into nylon stockings" (15). While this action suggests ingenuity, it also demonstrates the distinctly female propensity to preserve, provide, and produce. Al-Radi's mother's use of nylon stockings as a makeshift encasing for her inventive concoction represents the need for women in times of war. As an item of clothing unique to women, the stockings physically hold together the contents of the dish, symbolizing the need for women to impose order on Iraqi society during the war.

In her article, "Dissidence, Creativity, and Embargo Art in Nuha al-Radi's 'Baghdad Diaries,'" Brinda Mehta comments on way in which the women in al-Radi's diary employ cooking as a tool for power. She argues that "al-Radi's culinary creations position the kitchen as an artist's workshop that keeps cultural production alive peacefully," citing this as a "model of underground resistance, despite the external destruction of museums, archaeological sites, and other centers of cultural heritage" (Mehta 228). Like Dalal's aunt's embroidery and Mikhail's poetry, al-Radi's cooking serves as an attempt to deflect the debilitating effects of the war, to produce creative work in the face of physical destruction. Mehta adds that "the women of the al-Radi household contribute to the peace effort by collectively feeding the dispossessed nation through a healthy diet" (227). While this accentuates women's traditional role as nurturers and caretakers, which may dissuade one from viewing these women as authoritative figures, Mehta's

characterization of al-Radi and her female relatives as physical providers actually suggests their heightened level of empowerment during the war. Just as Dalal's aunt uses her embroidered shrouds to fuel the nation's economy and her family's finances in Khedairi's novel, al-Radi uses her cooking to physically fuel her friends and family members. While the war largely relegated women to the domestic sphere, the increasing necessity for women as providers of physical sustenance during the war empowered them within the confines of their home.

In addition to cooking, al-Radi uses her artistic skills as a means of empowerment. Al-Radi uses painting as a way to distract herself from the carnage of war, establishing her studio as a peaceful sphere, an arena distinct from the violence and commotion outside her home; however, she also uses art as a means of resistance. Through her "Embargo Art" exhibition, she expresses her frustration with the Iraqi and American governments, using her artwork as a forum to silently exert her voice. In this way, al-Radi uses her creativity as a tool for power without straying from the domestic realm. Like the women in Khedairi's and Mikhail's texts, al-Radi works within the confines of both her home and her conventionally feminine role to express her voice and assert her power through artistic creativity.

At the start of the war, al-Radi paints a portrait of her elderly friend, Mundher Baig, and his family. Shortly after al-Radi's completion of the painting, Mundger Baig dies; however, al-Radi's painting lives on as an artistic representation of his life. Al-Radi explains that as she was painting the portrait, she was filled with a "dread feeling" (22) that incited her to finish it quickly and hold "the unveiling [of the painting] in [her] house before the paint was dry" (23). Al-Radi's ability to create art in the midst of destruction indicates the way in which she employs her creative prowess in constructive ways. Just as her mother invents basturma as a dish to preserve the family's supply of meat, al-Radi paints in order to virtually preserve the life and culture of

her community during the war. While her painting is not an overt act of resistance to the war, it represents her ability to metaphorically combat the loss of human life that the war brought about.

In her book, *Iraqi Women,* Nadje Al-Ali includes a quote from Fedwa, a friend of Nuha al-Radi who lives in her orchard during the war, that comments on the value of al-Radi's artistic passion. Fedwa explains that she and al-Radi painted together, and this collective, creative experience "really helped us," and made her feel as if they were "a community living together, trying to re-create old ways of life" (Al-Ali 179). Fedwa's emphasis on the safety that she felt when painting with al-Radi shows that it engendered a sense of empowerment not only for al-Radi as an individual, but also for the network of women with whom she lived who benefited from her ability to focus on art in a time of destruction.

While al-Radi paints as a way to preserve the life was lost during the war and foster a sense of security, she also uses art as a form of resistance. The primary means by which she expresses her opposition to the war is through her "Embargo Art" exhibition, which consists of a collection of military items. Despite the fact that she herself cannot fight on the frontlines, al-Radi transforms her art into a form of aggression that acts as an intimidating force. She explains that her completed sculpture "looks quite lethal," and she therefore resolves to call it "'Creature of Mass Destruction,'" or "'Destroyer' for short" (116). When she hears that the UN is coming to Baghdad to search for weapons, she worries that they will take her "Destroyer," perceiving it as a threat. While this may be seen as a limitation on her creative artwork, as the destructive appearance of her work warrants her concern that it will be taken away from her, it also demonstrates the power that it assigns her as an artist. Despite the sculpture's innocuous nature, its function as a representation of violence awards al-Radi intimidating influence. Even without

engaging in physical violence herself, al-Radi is able to exert a covert form of aggression through her artwork.

Aside from visually representing the carnage of war, al-Radi's exhibition demonstrates the triumph of her artistic authority over institutionalized forms of power. In helping her to create her exhibit, the Polish ambassador Kristoff offers to take apart the cars of diplomats and provide her with the parts, leading al-Radi to muse that she "like[s] the idea of dismantling one's car for the sake of ART" (116). Al-Radi's destruction of the cars of men with political clout for the sake of art signals the extent to which her artistic creation empowers her. Like her portrait of Mundher Baig that she completes just before his death, her "Destroyer" sculpture also indicates her ability to construct in the face of physical destruction. Her exhibit also awards her financial benefits, tangible proof of her empowerment through artwork. Despite the fact that the Iraqi government has imposed restrictions on the country's artists, requiring them to pay an exit fee upon leaving the country, al-Radi successfully circumvents this requirement. She manages to make 200,000 dinars through her exhibition showings in Baghdad and Amman, a substantial profit that demonstrates the way in which her creativity acts as both a financial asset and tool for power during the war.

Just as al-Radi cooks, paints, and sculpts as a way to silently exert her voice and contribute to the rebuilding of Iraqi society, she also uses gardening as a dual creative outlet and forum for her frustration. As the area in which al-Radi's friends and family members seek shelter, al-Radi's orchard signifies an oasis of life within a vast arena of death and destruction. As the war persists, al-Radi continually checks on the condition of her garden and orchard, expending equal effort to keep her plants alive as she does to ensure the well-being of herself and the residents of her home. Like cooking and painting, gardening serves as a distraction for al-

Radi; she writes, “Gardening is my only relief” (47), signaling its function as a source of comfort for her.

While the act of planting and maintaining her garden may mentally and emotionally remove her from the horrors of war, it also serves as a way for her to exert her force and contribute to the reconstruction effort. She explains, “if I’m feeling aggressive, I cut and prune, and when I feel hopeful, I plant” (47). Thus, while she cannot assert her frustration through physical force, she channels her aggression into the act of gardening. Just as she paints in order to symbolically preserve the life of Mundher Baig in advance of his death, she also uses the garden as a venue to physically create life in the face of death. Upon returning to Baghdad in 1994 after fleeing to London and then the United States two years earlier, al-Radi checks on her garden and finds that her seedlings have been either “beaten to a pulp” or are “in a heavy state of disarray” (68), demonstrating the difficulty of creating and preserving life in times of war. As the violence surrounding her home continues, the state of her garden worsens. She begins to notice strange bugs eating her plants, and her palm trees start to die. The various vegetables in her garden fail to grow, and she later attributes the death of her plants to the air filled with chemicals as a result of the bombs dropped during the war.

The death of her gardens points to the limitations of al-Radi’s female power to create and reconstruct during the war; however, al-Radi describes the debilitating effect that the war had on men’s strength, as well, indicating that the war may have been more disempowering for men than for women. She explains that “one of [her] three male palm trees is a dud” (115), leading her to comment on the death of these seemingly resilient male plants, concluding that “their pollen is sterile” (115). She later indirectly compares the effect of the bomb-induced uranium and barite in the air on her plants and on the men in Baghdad. Her friend Isabel explains to her

that "men's sperm count is less and weaker" due to "the after-effects of the mineral fallout…from the Gulf War" (125). Thus, while the carnage of the war delimits al-Radi's ability to create, it physically impedes the ability of men to procreate, an emasculating handicap that deems women comparatively empowered.

Reconstruction of Order, Gender Roles, and Identity

In *Baghdad Diaries,* al-Radi depicts the way in which the war led to a deconstruction of time and identity, necessitating the creation of a new societal order. She explains that "killing is the new world order" (35), signaling the war's disruption of all conventions of normalcy. While the violence in Baghdad caused the destruction of houses, bridges, and other elements of the city's infrastructure, it also engendered the collapse of intangible structures, such as the patriarchal order that had previously governed Iraqi society. In her article, Mehta argues that "war and sanctions led to the breakdown of existing class-based hierarchies as a prelude to the eventual collapse of the internal political and socioeconomic foundation of Iraqi society" (225). While the war and sanctions may have dismantled class-based structures, an analysis of the roles assumed by women during the war, as exemplified by the female characters in al-Radi's diary, demonstrates the collapse of gendered hierarchies that the war brought about, as well.

Just as the disorder that war elicits allows the female characters in Khedairi's and Mikhail's texts to exert their power through various means of physical construction, al-Radi uses cooking, art, gardening, and even the very act of writing itself as a way to establish herself as a dominant and empowered figure during the war. Her creativity in the kitchen allows her to provide physical sustenance for her friends and relatives, and her artistic creativity enables her to metaphorically create and preserve life in spite of the destruction surrounding her. Al-Radi's

diary itself serves as a means of empowerment for her, as well. She infuses her adamant opposition to the war into the words of her journal, making comments such as "I think Bush is a criminal" and "this country is totally ruined" (21). Through these statements that overtly convey her dissatisfaction, combined with her more covert attempts to exert herself through various means of construction, al-Radi seeks empowerment in a time of physical devastation and demolition.

V. Conclusion

While the war limits the freedom of the female characters in these novels by confining them to their homes, it concurrently presents conditions under which they can exert their authority within their households. For the women in each of these texts, wartime brings about certain absences, which they use as windows of opportunity to express themselves creatively. In Khedairi's novel, the lack of societal and political stability incites the female characters to impose a sense of order within their social networks, building personal relationships and exercising their dominance within their family structures. In her poetic memoir, Mikhail also experiences the loss of her father, her lover, and even her own memory. She compensates for this emptiness by creating new experiences and memories, constructing a new language to describe her experience during the war. Similarly, al-Radi employs the absence of societal order in Baghdad as a chance to assert her creative skills. Because the domestic hobbies of cooking, painting, and gardening do not require her to leave the home, they become particularly salient during wartime. She thereby becomes the primary provider for the occupants of her home, much like Dalal's aunt becomes the breadwinner of her family and Mikhail takes on a God-like role through her biblical language. Thus, in spite of the differences in genre and content of these three

literary works, the commonalities between them indicate the empowerment that Iraqi women experienced in Baghdad during the Gulf War.

CHAPTER 3: FEMALE EMPOWERMENT IN THE IRAQI DIASPORIC NARRATIVE

In this chapter, I will conduct a literary analysis of the exilic narratives by Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi, looking at the impact of national displacement on the identities of the female Iraqi protagonists. Khedairi's *A Sky So Close,* Mikhail's *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea, Part Two,* and the latter half of al-Radi's *Baghdad Diaries* each offer distinct depictions of exile; however, they elucidate similar trends endemic to the post-Gulf War female exilic experience. All three of these narratives serve as overt continuations of the female war story. Before immigrating to Europe, the narrator of Khedairi's *A Sky So Close* lives through the Iran-Iraq war in Baghdad, which informs her experience in exile thereafter. The second half of both Mikhail's *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* and al-Radi's *Baghdad Diaries* also emerge out of the female wartime experience, illuminating the trajectory toward empowerment that post-war exile brings about. While the Gulf War incites both Mikhail and al-Radi to assert their creative talents in unique ways within Iraqi society, their emigration from Iraq allows them even greater liberty to do so.

The literary works by Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi offer complementary lenses through which to examine the female exilic experience. As a quasi-fictional story about a young Iraqi girl who immigrates to London after the Iran-Iraq War, Khedairi's *A Sky So Close* draws upon her own experience as an exilic Iraqi woman, demonstrating the female propensity to employ exile as an opportunity for empowerment. In her memoir, *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea, Part Two* Mikhail offers an autobiographical account of her life in exile in the United States in the mid-1990s. Like the female narrator of Khedairi's novel, Mikhail uses the absence and nostalgia that she experiences in exile as a chance to exercise her authority as a woman. In the chapters of her

diary entitled "Exile" and "Identity," al-Radi also calls attention to the unique circumstances that exile brings about, which allow her to gain credibility as a female artist. Together, these three texts offer a complex depiction of the experience of exile for Iraqi women following the Gulf War, demonstrating the way in which displacement allows for the realization of their authority and autonomy.

I. Exile and Female Empowerment in Khedairi's *A Sky So Close*

While she focuses on the life of a young woman in Baghdad during the Gulf War in *Absent,* Khedairi calls attention to the female experience of exile in *A Sky So Close,* which was published in Arabic in 1999 and translated into English two years later. The two novels act as foils, commenting on the way in which the experiences of war and exile, respectively, bring about the same conditions that allow for a transformation of gender roles. Just as wartime creates certain vacancies in *Absent* that present opportunities for women to take on active roles, the experience of exile in *A Sky So Close* also elicits absences, which provide a space for women to renegotiate their identities and seek empowerment. Whereas in *Absent,* the losses of husbands and fathers to the war offer opportunities for the female characters to take on new responsibilities, in *A Sky So Close,* it is the absence of Iraq that allows for the empowerment of women. Like the women in *Absent,* the female narrator undergoes a renegotiation of her gendered identity rather than a complete gender role reversal. As an exilic Iraqi woman living in England, she reworks her identity in a way that empowers her without forcing her to abandon her femininity.

In a 2003 Arabic interview with *Al Jadid Magazine*, Khedairi denied the characterization of her novel as an autobiography (Khedairi, "The Daughter of a Foreigner"); however, the

similarities between herself and the unnamed narrator suggest the opposite. Just as the central character of *A Sky So Close* immigrates from Iraq to the United Kingdom, Khedairi has lived a nomadic existence, moving between Iraq, Jordan, and the United Kingdom, and currently residing in Amman, Jordan. Additionally, the very function of the novel proves Khedairi's strong identification with the narrator. The narrator's father dies just before she emigrates from Iraq, and the novel itself serves as an ode to her father. Likewise, as Khedairi explains in the interview, her own father passed away in a car accident in 1990 ("The Daughter of a Foreigner"); thus, *A Sky So Close* serves as Khedairi's dedication to her own father through the voice of her narrator.

Khedairi's decision to emphasize these commonalities between herself and the protagonist of her 2001 novel signals her conscious essentialization of Iraqi society within her text. In a 2003 interview with *USA Today*, Khedairi explained that the narrator's mixed ethnic heritage mirrors her own. As the daughter of a Scottish woman and an Iraqi man, Khedairi claimed to have experienced the same cultural dissonance that complicates the life of the young narrator in her novel. She explained in the interview, "I express and write in Arabic. That covers my Eastern emotions…[but] my logical side is Western" (Leinwand). In acknowledging this cultural divide that characterized her life, Khedairi engages in a form of self-Orientalization, or the deliberate emphasis on the "Eastern" elements of her identity that are categorized as "the other" within Western society. This binary rhetoric that Khedairi uses to describe herself permeates the content of her novel, as well. Thus, in my analysis of her text, I will place myself within the cultural framework of the novel that Khedairi herself creates. All sociological conclusions that I draw regarding Iraqi culture are rooted in Khedairi's portrayal of Iraqi society through her text, which may be skewed by her intentional Orientalization of the nation's culture.

The Iraqi Countryside as a Patriarchal Society

Throughout her childhood and adolescence, the unnamed narrator of *A Sky So Close* conforms to the conventional gender roles that Khedairi associates with rural life in Iraq. Though she is raised by both her English mother and Iraqi father, her father's traditional religious ideology influences her to a greater extent than does her mother's secular lifestyle. While the narrator's mother plays a formative role in her life, her combined foreign-born and female identity limits the prospects for her parental authority. Because of his gender and ethnicity, the narrator's father acts as the head of the family, dictating the behaviors of both the narrator and her mother. His masculinity renders him not only an icon of male dominance within the family, but also a symbol of traditional, rural Iraqi culture. Following the death of her father and her subsequent migration to Europe, the narrator delves into a new geographic and cultural context that allows her to realize her authority and autonomy as a woman.

The narrator's father's physical and ideological grounding within Iraqi society demonstrates the inextricable link between himself and his native country. Throughout the novel, the narrator's father remains firmly rooted in his traditional ways and rejects any form of cultural change or physical migration. He denies his wife's request to move from the rural village of Zafraniya to the city of Baghdad so that their daughter can be educated in the School of Music and Ballet there, arguing that sending her to this non-traditional school "could damage her future prospects" (10). Instead, he insists that his daughter stay in the village and "mingle with the peasants' traditions…bond with the land, with the people and their animals, the way we were raised" (10), signaling his resistance toward uprooting his family from the traditional society that he knows. While the narrator's mother dissuades her from socializing with her Iraqi friend

Khaddouja, who she considers primitive and unruly, her father encourages their friendship. He associates the rural lifestyle of Khaddouja's family members with stability; their work as farmers literally grounds them in Iraqi soil and prohibits migration. When the narrator indicates to her father that her mother may leave Iraq, her father responds by saying, "You're not going anywhere! … You're staying here on the farm. How could you leave your friends from the riverbank?" (52), using her relationship with Khaddouja as a tool to teach his daughter the importance of stability within the Iraqi countryside.

As a symbol of rural Iraqi society, the narrator's father diametrically opposes her mother, who represents British culture and the desire for social and physical mobility. She explains to her English friends that she is allergic to apricots, a native Iraqi fruit, and that "the mud from the river would be toxic to [her] skin" (31), demonstrating her bodily rejection of the Iraqi land. Because of her aversion to settling down in Iraq, her husband's "determination not to leave [the farm]" (56) drives her into restless insanity; discontented with her stifling life within the remote Iraqi village, the narrator's mother occupies herself by cleaning, rearranging, and repainting the walls of their home. She focuses her attention on these domestic duties and resigns herself to her husband's authority, leading the narrator to notice that her mother "doesn't seem to care about a lot of things nowadays" (59). She no longer objects to her daughter's socializing with Khaddouja and stops insisting that she learn English. In rendering the narrator's mother apathetic and submissive, Khedairi highlights the resilience of her father's adherence to a static lifestyle.

Despite the mother's attempt to assert herself as an independent, modern woman, her husband's insistence that she confine herself to domestic duties limits her agency within Iraqi society. He forbids her from working outside of the house, arguing that doing so would set a bad example for their daughter and "damage her reputation" (103). Even within the home, he restricts

her liberties; he condemns her for socializing with her English friends, David and Millie, and he denies her request for a divorce. In addition to the specific constraints that he places upon his wife, by repeatedly addressing her as "woman!" (47) rather than by her name, the narrator's father calls attention to her gender, overtly gendering her identity each time he speaks to her. In doing so, he accentuates his authority as the masculine head of the household and her relative inferiority as a woman.

In addition to suppressing his wife's efforts to assert her opinions and cultural values, the father's traditional beliefs govern the life of the narrator as a young girl and restrict her ability to exert her independence. As a child, the narrator's father ensures that she does not engage in behavior that he deems unsuitable for girls. Upon her return from dance lessons, her father condemns her, fearing her "impending masculinity," as he is convinced that she will "develop muscles, and [her] body will look like a man's"(71). He also cautions her against "spend[ing] too much time playing with the boys," telling her that "playing with marbles isn't for girls" and advising her to "let the others ride the bicycles" (32). While the narrator challenges her father's wishes, imploring Khaddouja to teach her to ride her male cousin's bike, as her father grows older and weaker, she begins to embrace and cherish her relationship with him. In his weakened physical state, the narrator's father gradually concedes his parental authority, which improves his relationship with his daughter and presents her with an opportunity for empowerment.

Internal Cultural Displacement: Seeking Empowerment within Iraqi Society

Although the narrator and her mother do not leave Iraq until after the father's death, they capitalize upon the father's illness in order to subvert the family's conservative structure. Because Khedairi employs the narrator's father as a symbol of traditional Iraqi society, his

physical decay signals a symbolic deterioration of this culture. As the narrator's father grows frailer, the narrator and her mother begin to assume greater responsibilities and stray from their conventional roles within the nation's male-dominated society. Just as the absence of male figures in Iraqi wartime literature provides a space for women to renegotiate their roles and contribute to the nation's reconstruction, the weakened physical state of the father allows the narrator and her mother to assert their dominance as women. The father's illness simulates a form of cultural exile for the narrator and her mother; it virtually displaces them from the patriarchal culture that had previously defined their life in the Iraqi countryside and offers them opportunities for empowerment.

Following her father's heart attack, the narrator and her mother strive to assert themselves and defy the restrictions that the father had imposed upon them. The narrator explains that "for the first time, I've discovered that I can think!" (61), and this heightened awareness allows her to play a more active role both inside and outside the home. She becomes more conscious and critical of her surroundings, making observations about the people around her as she wanders around the village on her own. In the household, she also helps her father with his work in his flavoring laboratory. While he asks his daughter for his assistance in naming the synthetic flavorings that he intends to trade, however, he ensures that he remains in charge, asserting his authority as her father and pseudo-professional supervisor. Thus, despite the increased levels of responsibility that working with her father affords her, the narrator still lacks complete autonomy in the presence of her father.

While the narrator's work with her father exposes her to a world outside of the traditional society that characterized her childhood, it is through her dance lessons that she begins to fully realize her potential for empowerment. Though she enrolls in these dance classes in Baghdad,

her instruction by a Russian teacher places the ballet school as culturally distinct from Iraqi society. Ballet therefore serves as a sort of refuge for the narrator in which she can express herself as a female. In her dance instruction, Madame relates the art of dance to physics and argues that "dance is logic" (121). By using scientific terminology in her dance instruction, Madame erodes the boundary between the traditionally masculine domain of science and the feminine realm of dance, using ballet as a tool to disrupt the conventions that Khedairi uses to characterize her household. Ultimately, Madame replaces the narrator's father as her primary influence; upon her suggestion that the narrator attend a private university after the dance school closes, the narrator's father resolves to let her enroll, resigning to the fact that "what has happened has happened" (136). The narrator's immersion in the world of dance, governed by a foreign-born female, thus contributes to her success in exerting her agency as a woman.

Like her daughter, the narrator's mother escapes from her cultural oppression by constructing spheres of virtual exile within Iraq that allow her to assert herself. Because her husband's heart attack restricts him to working inside the home, she takes advantage of his physical weakness in order to seek opportunities to leave the house. In response to her husband's accusations that she is abandoning her domestic motherly duties, she responds by saying, "your presence in the house has driven me to go out for as many hours as possible" (77), signaling the causational relationship between her husband's weakened physical state and her eagerness for a mobile lifestyle. While she had initially intended to seek employment with a petrol company, after her husband's heart failure, the narrator's mother begins working for Middle Eastern Airlines, which also calls attention to her restlessness. Though she herself does not embark on flights, her work with an airline represents a virtual exile of sorts. Through her work, she is able

to stray from her role as a mother and wife, and her choice to work in the travel industry indicates her desire for physical mobility.

Death as a Catalyst for Migration

Her father's illness allows the narrator and her mother to bend traditional gender norms, to create cultural refuges within Iraqi society that allow them to take on new roles; however, it is not until they physically abandon the Iraqi nation after her father's death that the narrator fully exerts her agency as a woman. Throughout the novel, death provides an impetus for the narrator's family to travel. The consecutive deaths of Khaddouja and the narrator's father, who both symbolize traditional rural Iraqi culture, drive the narrator to migrate to the more modernized societies of Baghdad and England, respectively. Additionally, the absence of the narrator's Iraqi lover, Saleem, signifies a symbolic death, which also fuels her desire to move to Europe. While the losses of her father, her lover, and her country propel the narrator into new territory and culturally disorient her, they open up a space for her to influence conventional gender roles and exert her autonomy as a woman.

Because of the strong connection to the Iraqi countryside that both Khaddouja and the narrator's father embody, their deaths represent a severing of ties with rural Iraqi society and the cultural norms associated with it. The narrator's mother attributes Khaddouja's death to her "wading in stagnant water" (66), emphasizing the negative ramifications that result from a stationary, farming lifestyle. The family's doctor concurs with her belief in the necessity for movement, advising them to seek a "change of scenery" and causing the narrator to realize that "the time for our move to the city had come" (67). It is only after moving from Zafraniya to Baghdad that the narrator and her mother begin to take on active roles in the form of dance

classes and employment, which demonstrates the correlation between migration and female empowerment.

Just as Khaddouja's death incites the narrator's family to move away, the death of the narrator's father and the subsequent departure of Saleem for the army catalyze the narrator's exile to England. Following her father's death, the narrator resolves to "[burn] all that [he] left behind" (138), removing all traces of his past existence. In eliminating all that which she associates with her father, the narrator strips herself of all ties to the traditional society in which she was raised, preparing herself for a new life that will offer her greater prospects for empowerment. While the narrator's romantic relationship with Saleem temporarily sustains her connection to Iraq following her father's death, their bond becomes fragile after the end of the Iran-Iraq War. Because he realizes that the narrator cannot seek fulfillment and empowerment within Iraq, Saleem advises her in a letter to "cross to the other side," to "travel far away [and] roam the lands" (183). He also understands the impossibility of his accompanying her in her migration, explaining, "as for me, I will stay [in Iraq]" (182). Thus, the narrator is forced to choose between continuing her relationship with Saleem in Iraq and moving away to England with her mother, as the two options prove irreconcilable. By choosing to depart for Europe, the narrator employs the losses of both her father and her lover as opportunities to seek a new life and renewed identity. In the absence of any enduring connection to her Iraq through personal relationships, the narrator constructs new relationships in England that afford her greater prospects for empowerment.

Exile: a Unique Opportunity for Renegotiating Gendered Identities

Upon arriving in England, the narrator reconfigures her identity, assuming a position of authority that her life in Iraq had denied her. While her father had dictated her beliefs and behaviors as a child in Iraq, she now begins to assume responsibility for both herself and her mother. Rather than abandoning her feminine traits in order to take on a conventionally masculine role, the narrator asserts her power and control as a young woman while in England. Afflicted with breast cancer, the narrator's mother depends upon her for physical and emotional support. The vital role of looking after her mother that the narrator takes on demonstrates the heightened level of influence that her life in Europe affords her. In addition to assuming responsibility over her mother's life in England, the narrator begins to take control over her own life, making crucial decisions that impact her personal relationships and experiences. The narrator's departure from the traditional customs of Iraqi society therefore elicits a heightened sense of empowerment.

Whereas the narrator's mother's physical strength and sense of womanhood grows weaker after moving to England, the experience of exile elicits the opposite effect on the narrator. Following her mastectomy, the narrator's mother appears physically less feminine. With just one breast and thinning hair after undergoing chemotherapy, she is characterized by "confused femininity" (202). Conversely, her daughter's role as a female increases in salience; she takes on the conventionally feminine responsibility of caretaking, "commit[ting] [her]self to looking after [her] mother" (198). She ensures that her mother abides by the instructions of her medication and encourages her mother to eat, much like a mother would nurture her child. In addition to caring for her mother while in England, the narrator exerts control over her own body. After becoming pregnant with the child of the Frenchman, Arnaud, she decides to have an abortion without consulting him beforehand. This signals a stark departure from her childhood in

Iraq, in which she lacked control over the events in her life, such as her schooling and her tenuous relationship with Saleem.

While the narrator's heightened sense of responsibility after moving to the West demonstrates the empowering effect of migration, it is through the act of writing that she asserts herself most powerfully after leaving Iraq. As a grown woman living in Europe, she takes control not only over her own life in exile, but also over the very narration of her story. Because she serves as the sole narrator of her account, she commands complete authority over her narrative. The narrator's unique framing of her story also accentuates her authenticity and calls attention to her renegotiated identity in England. The entire novel is presented as a second-person narrative, with the narrator speaking to her deceased father. She addresses her father directly as "you" throughout the story, both recalling the experiences that she shared with him and relating to him the events for which he was absent. As her strongest and most direct personal connection to Iraqi society, the narrator's father offers her a sustained relationship with her home, even after his death. Though his death elicits a disconnect between herself and the Iraqi nation, prompting her exile to Western society, her sustained connection to him through her narrative signals the resilience of her relationship to her native country. Thus, through her writing, she demonstrates her ability to assert her dominance over the retelling of her story without forgoing her ties to her past. In this way, she renegotiates her identity, seeking the empowerment that her traditional upbringing denied her, while also clinging to the values and relationships that define her.

II. War as an Agent of Female Expression in Mikhail's *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea, Part Two*

In the second half of *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea,* published in 2009, Dunya Mikhail recounts the twelve years of her life in exile following her emigration from Iraq in 1995. Just as Mikhail moves from Iraqi to American society, the narrative migrates between East and West and between past and present, including both memories of her childhood in Baghdad and descriptions of her adult life in the United States. Like the female protagonist of Khedairi's *A Sky So Close,* Mikhail faces a multitude of restrictions as a woman in Iraqi society that she attempts to overcome by asserting her creativity. Just as the narrator of Khedairi's novel seeks empowerment through dance while in Iraq, Mikhail does so through her writing, a creative medium that does not fulfill its potential as a liberating source until her immigration to the United States.

Whereas in the first half of her memoir, Mikhail employs the deaths of her father and her lover as opportunities for empowerment during the war, in the latter half, she uses the absence of her native country as a chance to assert herself as a woman through writing. While the loss of her Iraqi home evokes sentiments of nostalgia and alienation, Mikhail uses writing—both of letters to her friends back home and of the narrative account itself—in order to preserve her connection to Iraq while seeking empowerment. Mikhail's exile therefore opens up a space for her to reconstruct language, her memories, and her own female identity without the political and societal constraints that she faced in Iraq. Through her writing, both of letters and of the poetic memoir itself, Mikhail fills in for the various vacancies that she confronts in American society.

Iraqi Society as an Obstacle to Female Empowerment

The memories that Mikhail recounts in Part Two of her memoir demonstrate the restraints that Iraqi society impose upon her. In Iraq, Mikhail never experiences freedom; as an

Iraqi citizen, she is forced to conform to the restrictions of Saddam's totalitarian government, and as a woman, she is a victim of the country's patriarchal culture. As Mikhail ambles through Iraq's Babylon ruins with her Swedish friend Eva, the male chaperone commissioned by Saddam's regime to supervise them limits their ability to speak freely as women. After Eva muses aloud as to whether people will eventually destroy Saddam's statue, Mikhail reacts by commenting, "Thank God the chaperone did not hear her" and informs Eva "that she should not ask those kinds of questions in Iraq" (67). Thus, the male chaperones restrict Mikhail's freedom of speech and her agency as a woman, signaling the difficulty of asserting herself within Iraqi society.

In addition to limiting her freedom to speak freely, Mikhail's gender also constrains her freedom of mobility, physically confining her within the country's borders. While Mikhail periodically references her relief at having been born a female, the reasons that she cites for her gratitude are the very characteristics of Iraqi society that oppress her. Before immigrating to the United States, Mikhail writes:

> "Every day I thanked God for making me a girl—
> I didn't want to be called to military service
> I didn't want to show my identity card in the street
> I didn't want to have to kill anyone—
> I could simply lie in my bed
> And listen to music" (108).

While avoiding military conscription and spending her days peacefully and passively in her bedroom affords her physical safety, the idle existence into which Iraqi society forces Mikhail renders her life in Iraq purposeless. Just as the narrator's mother attributes the death of Khaddouja to her "wading in stagnant water" in *A Sky So Close* (Khedairi 66), Mikhail's confinement within her home induces an emotional death of sorts, as she remains unable to express herself. Even when she does find opportunities to leave her home, she describes herself

as "wander[ing]" (110), implying a lack of direction or objective in her movement. It is her aimless wandering that leads her to feel that she is living "in a false exile" (110), as her desire to exert her autonomy fails to comply with the restrictions endemic to Iraqi society. Hence, Mikhail's frustration with her inactive existence in Iraq incites her to "flee the country" (110) in pursuit of greater physical and social mobility.

The Limitations of Writing as a Source of Empowerment in Iraqi Society

As she reflects upon her memories of Iraq, Mikhail focuses most on her career as a writer, repeatedly referencing the way in which her poetry liberates her. With each reference, Mikhail draws a parallel between writing and movement, signaling the ability for writing to counteract the physical idleness that Iraqi society imposes upon her. Upon being stopped at a checkpoint by an Iraqi soldier while crossing the border to Jordan, she explains that "he let [her] go free" (63) after she told him that she was on her way to attending a poetry conference. This interaction posits her poetry as a passport of sorts, allowing her entry into new territory. Mikhail's first encounter with poetry also implies a connection between writing and escape. After writing her first poem as a child in Baghdad, she proceeds to craft it into a paper boat, "[throwing] it into the river" and "[watching] it drift away" (70). In addition to this physical movement that she imposes upon her poetry, the very form of her writing demonstrates mobility, as it strays from conventions and allows her to take control over its construction. After studying amoebas in her elementary school biology class, learning that "[an amoeba] doesn't have a real form" (71), she relates its nebulous structure to her writing. She writes:

> "I discovered poetry is an amoeba:
> It has an eye for witnessing, a foot
> for leaving traces, and a flexible form" (72).

The very form in which she recounts this discovery showcases the structural malleability of poetry that she describes; the ostensibly arbitrary line break after the word "foot" signals the text's deviation from literary conventions. While Mikhail does not include these line breaks in her original Arabic version, her acceptance of Winslow's stylistic manipulation—as noted in Chapter Two of this thesis—emphasizes the relationship between movement and freedom that she herself experiences. Just as Mikhail enjoys greater liberties after migrating to the United States, the text mirrors this shift, taking on a new form as it traverses cultural and linguistic borders through its translation.

Despite the fact that poetry serves as a source of liberation for Mikhail, her stationary existence in Iraq while writing these poems indicates the failure of writing to truly liberate her prior to her exile. Just as the narrator of *A Sky So Close* cannot fully achieve autonomy while living in her Iraq home, in which her father commands complete authority, Mikhail fails to overcome the patriarchal political and social order that governs Iraqi society. The combination of government censorship in Iraq and women's exclusion from writing groups prevents her from gaining empowerment through her poetry. Thus, writing only truly brings about freedom for her after her migration to the US, where her gender does not restrict her freedom of speech and movement.

While living in the U.S., Mikhail explains that that the Iraqi government had prohibited the publication of the first half of her memoir; hence, she moves abroad in order to seek out publication opportunities. Upon being asked by a member of Iraq's Censorship Department about the meaning behind certain phrases in her memoir, Mikhail responds by saying, "It is not the writer's job to explain… It is the reader's task to understand" (91). In conceding the interpretation of her words to the reader, Mikhail surrenders ownership over her writing. This

demonstrates the impossibility of taking control over her own life while in Iraqi society, as she cannot even claim jurisdiction over the narrative of her own life story under the oppression of Saddam's regime. Mikhail adds that the government's approval of one's work does not necessarily exempt the writer from government control, as "[the censors] think of themselves as training another censor: you" (91). With this statement, Mikhail implies that the very censorship of texts in Iraq intends to drive aspiring authors into a mentality of self-censorship, to encourage them to avoid language that may entail political consequences. While the Iraqi censors do not limit Mikhail's physical movement, their restriction of her freedom of speech, in addition to their attempts to incept within her a trend toward self-censorship, demonstrates her inability to employ the liberating power of writing for her own empowerment.

In addition to the political barriers that restrict her freedom of expression through writing, the patriarchal society that governs Iraq also impedes her ability to employ her poetry as a means of authority. In an effort to foster a sense of community and camaraderie through her writing, Mikhail joins the Writers' Union, which consists of various writers and poets living in Baghdad; however, her female identity prevents her integration within this group. As she enters a coffeehouse with a group of male poets from the Writers' Union, she notes, "I don't know if any woman had ever entered that place before me" (78), and after being ignored by the men surrounding her, she decides, "I did not want to discuss poetry or any other issue there" (78). Her exclusion from the male-dominated social arena in Baghdad evokes within her sentiments of apathy; even amongst other poets, who share her passion for linguistic liberty, she is unable to retain her desire to express herself through writing. Just as the Iraqi government's censors advocate for Mikhail's self-censorship, encouraging her to temper the severity of her language,

the male poets in the Writers' Union convince her of her ineptitude, undermining her ability to use poetry as a tool for empowerment.

The obstacles to Mikhail's empowerment as a writer extend beyond her own personal experiences to the greater plight of female poets in Iraq. Mikhail references her fellow female Iraqi poets, noting the similar struggles that they confront as women pursuing careers as writers within the country's patriarchal society. She describes Siham Jabbar as "the most modern female poet of our generation" (86); however, she explains that Jabbar's parents "threw her books away hoping she would stop 'wasting her time,' help with the housework, and get married" (86). While writing allows Mikhail and other poets to act as creators, taking control over the structuring of sentences and choice of words, the restrictions placed on Jabbar by her parents signal her lack of control over her own life. Like Jabbar, Mikhail's family also fails to appreciate her poetic talent, rendering her career as a writer meaningless. After writing a series of new war poems, Mikhail's mother asks her, "Isn't this [poetry] written from children?" (106), deeming her work unsophisticated and unworthy of praise. While Mikhail expresses herself through writing during the war, her mother's contempt for her work signals Mikhail's inability to gain recognition for her work while living in Iraq.

Absence in Exile: Empowerment Through Writing in the West

It is not until Mikhail immigrates to the United States that she is truly able to achieve empowerment through her writing. Though she never states it explicitly, Mikhail alludes through her narrative to the fact that her poetry is what forced her into exile. In her conversation with her friend and fellow poet Lutfiya Al-Dulaimi prior to her departure, Lutfiya says to her, "I told you publishing that poem about Zeus was risky" (111), insinuating that the content of the first half of

her poetical memoir exposed her as a threat to Saddam's regime, which led the censors to demand her emigration form Iraq. While her exile may have been involuntarily prompted, Mikhail takes advantage of the opportunities that it grants her, as her migration to the West allows her to escape the political and societal oppression that impedes her freedom as a poet in Iraq.

In the same way that the migration of the narrator in *A Sky So Close* creates absences—namely, that of her Iraq—which allow her to exercise her authority as a woman, Mikhail's exile to the U.S. elicits a sense of emptiness that ultimately contributes to her empowerment. Throughout her time living in Detroit, Mikhail laments the absence of personal relationships that she observes in the United States. She describes Wayne State University, where she enrolls as a student, as "completely unlike Baghdad University" (112), explaining that she does not socialize with the other students as she did in Baghdad and, most notably, that her Iraqi lover Mazin is absent. While this emptiness that she associates with life in the U.S. evokes nostalgia, it provides the impetus for her to write in order to reconnect with her friends and family members in Iraq. After being reminded of Mazin upon feeling isolated in the American university classroom, she resolves to write him letters and begins addressing the very narration of her memoir to him, much like the narrator of *A Sky So Close* does with her absent father. She writes:

> "I am sorry I left you among the ruins.
> I am sorry I left without saying good-bye…
> I am sorry. Away from you,
> I look at the blue spaces between skyscrapers…" (115)

Thus, the absence of Iraq invites her to employ her poetry for a meaningful purpose, as she uses it to reconnect with Mazin.

The imagery that she uses in her letter to Mazin also connotes emptiness, calling attention to the visible absences that she intends to fill with her writing. In addition to the "blue spaces

between skyscrapers" (15) that she references, she also alludes to other literal vacancies throughout her time in exile that provoke her to seek empowerment through writing. As she walks along the ruins at Petra after leaving Baghdad, Mikhail mentions the footprints in the sand, as well as the carvings etches into the rocks surrounding her. While she encounters these imprints—physical formations defined by their very emptiness—prior to her arrival in the West, they introduce the correlation between absence and empowerment. After passing through the engraved *al-siiq* passageway at Petra, she "emerg[ed] again like newborns, uncertain and confused" (69), indicating the virtual rebirth that absence brings about. Just as she must negotiate her surroundings after emerging through the massive crevice at Petra, upon entering unknown territory in the U.S., Mikhail is forced to orient herself within a society in which she lacks personal connections. It is through her writing that she ultimately achieves this, using her letters and poetry as means to rebuild relationships and reconstruct her own identity.

Mikhail also recalls a conversation she had with her fellow Iraqi poets Hassan and Arwa at Al-Khadra's café in Baghdad, in which they call attention to the emptiness that characterizes American culture and ultimately allows for Mikhail's empowerment. As they discuss the advent of technology in the West, Arwa worries that the rapidly increasing technological advancements will deplete Western culture of the capacity for human emotion. He believes that industrialized American culture will lead to "a world without art, for there can be no art in such nothingness" (76). While Arwa sees this cultural vacuum as a curse, Hassan views it as an opportunity for innovation, replying, "It's in this very nothingness that art can be created, free and transparent" (76). Indeed, Mikhail takes advantage of the "nothingness" that she feels in the West as an empowering tool, using her poetry to seek fulfillment in a society that causes her to feel empty and alienated.

Mikhail's Identity Reconstruction in the U.S.

While Mikhail writes letters in order to connect with those who she left behind in Baghdad, she employs poetry as a way to compensate for the absence of emotion implicit within American culture. She echoes her earlier conversation with Hassan and Arwa, discussing the extent to which technology pervades American society and corrupts the English language, noting the "numerical codes" that replace phrases such as "I love you" (116). While the ease of online communication appeals to Mikhail, she believes that "even in the midst of technology, people always need emotion" (116); thus, she strives to use words in a way that truly convey emotion, realizing the versatility and malleability of each word that she includes in her writing. She demonstrates the power of words by comparing them to her own existence as a woman in exile. She writes:

> [Words] are nomads
> who don't know why they emigrate
> or why they stay behind.
> They expand or shrink, always flexible
> and ready to give up their nouns and verbs to satisfy us" (116-117).

Just as words assume different meanings depending on their context, Mikhail also reconfigures her own identity as an Iraqi living in the United States. As a poet, she demonstrates this renegotiation of her identity by drawing attention to the "flexible" words themselves that comprise her poetry. While government officials and citizens of Iraq's patriarchal society condemn Mikhail writing, her career as a poet in the United States offers her an opportunity to act as a creator, to impart her sentences with the amoeba-like mobility with which she had associated them as an amateur poet in Baghdad. Thus, through her exilic writing, Mikhail takes

control over her words, using them to successfully convey feeling in the face of America's callous social climate.

In the same way that Mikhail's exilic poetry enables her to reconstruct her relationship with Iraq through letters to Mazin, it also allows her to renegotiate her own identity as a woman. By seeking empowerment through writing while in the West, Mikhail reconstructs her identity in a way that does not strip her of her femininity. Whereas her male counterparts, such as Mazin and Hassan, exert their strength by fighting on the frontlines during the war, Mikhail uses writing as a means to assert herself while in exile. Mikhail's emigration to the U.S. offers her an opportunity to assume authority in ways that do not require her to abandon her traditionally feminine characteristics. She capitalizes upon the traits typically associated with women, such as the desire for interpersonal connections and the expression of emotion, using these values to legitimize her writing. Through her letters, Mikhail fills in for the absence of her Iraqi lover, and through her poetry, she adds the dimension of human emotion to the American society that lacks it. Western culture thus provides Mikhail with an ideal setting to assert herself as a woman. In the absence of political and gender-based restraints, she is free to express herself, and confronted with sentiments of emptiness, she is incentivized to use writing as a means to preserve relationships and cultivate emotions.

III. Agency through Exile in Al-Radi's *Baghdad Diaries*

The second half of al-Radi's *Baghdad Diaries* complements Part Two of Mikhail's *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* as well as Khedairi's *A Sky So Close* in its depiction of the Iraqi exilic experience in the mid-1990s. Whereas both Khedairi and Mikhail grew up in Iraq, al-Radi moved throughout the Middle East and Europe over the course of her adolescent and young adult

life (Flint). Al-Radi's upbringing outside of Iraqi society thus sets her apart from her diasporic Iraqi counterparts, who did not leave the country until after the Gulf War. In addition to her travels abroad before the Gulf War, al-Radi's endless migration following the war makes her experience of exile unique. While Mikhail and the narrator of Khedairi's novel settled in the U.S. and England, respectively, immediately after leaving Iraq, al-Radi migrated between countries and across cultures, seeking refuge in any society that would allow her to employ her artwork as a tool for financial and emotional support.

For both Mikhail and al-Radi, art and writing provide an impetus for movement; the desire to escape Iraq's censorship and to gain recognition for their work leads both Mikhail and al-Radi to emigrate from the country. Because al-Radi pursues every opportunity to showcase her work, however, her art propels her into a nomadic existence. Al-Radi begins the second portion of her account in June 1995 upon her entry into Amman to display her "Destroyer" sculpture at an exhibit, and the remainder of her narrative traces her movement throughout the Arab World, Europe, the United States, and Latin America, where she continues to participate in art exhibitions. Displaced from her native country and without a secure geographic endpoint to her journey, al-Radi lacks the physical stability that Mikhail has in the United States. Thus, she relies on her writing and artwork to act as a stabilizing force in her exilic life. Through her journal, her sculptures, and her paintings, al-Radi finds the autonomy that Iraqi society had denied her, which allows her to reconfigure her identity as an exilic woman.

Life in "Semi-Exile": Redefined Notions of Homeland and Self

As with the exilic women encountered through the literary works of Khedairi and Mikhail, the experience of physical displacement forces al-Radi into a state in which she lacks a

defined identity. In spite of her physical disorientation as she travels across continents, however, al-Radi successfully capitalizes upon her creative assets to gain authority, autonomy, and ultimately, a renewed identity as an empowered exilic woman. Through dance and poetry, the female narrators of *A Sky So Close* and *Diary of a Wave, Part Two,* respectively, demonstrate the ability for women to employ creative expression as a means of empowerment. Al-Radi's successful career as a writer and artist while in exile signals a continuation of this trend; her creative skills allow her to compensate for the loss of identity that she experiences in exile, imbuing her with a sense of purpose and pride.

Through her conversations with other exilic Iraqis, al-Radi expresses the extent to which exile strips members of the diasporic community of their identities. As she converses with her fellow Iraqi exilic friend Hazemma, Hazemma tells her that "outside one's homeland one is a nobody" (141). Al-Radi sympathizes with Hazemma's statement, demonstrating how her physical extrication from Iraq necessitates a reassertion of identity, as it deprives her of predefined national associations. She explains that "one doesn't have to go around proving oneself all the time when one's at home" (143), whereas throughout her time in exile, al-Radi constantly feels the need to assert her autonomy. Initially unable to gain a permit that would allow her residence in the United States, al-Radi lacks documentation of her identity aside from her Iraqi passport. Though she eventually receives her residence permit—a symbol of her sense of belonging recorded on paper—it is subsequently revoked, demonstrating the volatility of her own identity. Upon losing her permit, al-Radi writes, "For a semi-exiled Iraqi, losing a residence permit is not the best situation to be in, but I guess life could be worse" (200). In defining herself as a "semi-exiled Iraqi," al-Radi places herself within a state of limbo. Despite her emigration from Iraq, she identifies only partially with the Iraqi diasporic community. Without a clear nation

or community with which to identify, al-Radi is thereby suspended in a state of aimlessness that requires her to forge a new identity.

Seeking Authority Through Art and Writing

In order to earn an identity less nebulous than that of a "semi-exiled Iraqi," al-Radi uses her artistic talent to gain commendation and credibility. Just as creative hobbies such as cooking, gardening, and painting imbue al-Radi with a sense of purpose during the war in the first half of her journal, art and writing empower her during her life in exile. In the same way that poetry connotes freedom of movement and expression for Mikhail in Part Two of *Diary,* al-Radi's artwork and writings provide the driving force for her relentless migration. Throughout the latter half of her narrative, al-Radi moves to any city that offers her an opportunity to display her work, allowing her creative talent to direct her movement after departing from Iraq. She also uses her writing as a means of virtual transportation, connecting to other diasporic women through her letters and journaling. While both art and writing serve as physically mobilizing forces for Mikhail, they also evoke a sense of permanence, as they offer her emotional stability. These forms of creativity anchor her, offering her forums to channel her self-expression and preserve her values in the midst of incessant physical upheaval. Thus, just as al-Radi's creative hobbies allowed her to exercise her control within her Baghdad apartment during the war, which was characterized by instability, they offer her a means by which to assert herself within the physical and emotional turbulence of exile.

For al-Radi, her artwork acts as a passport, transporting her across national borders and allowing her entry into countries that deny her permanent legal residence. Although al-Radi is not forcibly expelled from Iraq due to her creative work like Mikhail is, her artwork is what

incites her to leave her native country for societies where political oppression does not stifle and inhibit her. As she awaits her exit permit to leave Baghdad for Amman in order to display her "Destroyer" sculpture at an exhibit in Amman, al-Radi explains that she is among many other Iraqi artists waiting for permission to emigrate. She writes that "we artists have always been given free rein" (130), alluding to the relationship between art and mobility.

In addition to warranting her entry into Amman, al-Radi's artwork embodies the very freedom of movement that she experiences during her time in exile. As her fellow exilic colleague, Mahasti, comments on al-Radi's artwork, she terms it "world art," explaining that it has "no barriers," and al-Radi agrees; she responds: "I feel no barriers. I can work anywhere, live anywhere and be influenced by anywhere" (150). Hence, Al-Radi herself adopts the transmutability of her artwork, as she adapts to various cultures over the course of her experience in exile. She demonstrates the liberating power of her artwork in Dubai, where she is commissioned to construct the longest painting in the world as part of an effort "to show art as an international medium that has no borders" (176). This exhibits the way in which her career as an artist mobilizes her, as it allows her to both travel internationally and symbolically erase the borders that once constrained her creativity. As al-Radi sits along the harbor in Greece, she also alludes to the liberating power of art. As she watches fishermen use their toes to fix their nets, she laments the fact that "one doesn't use one's toes anymore"; thus, she resolves to "start using [her toes] for brushes waiting to be used while painting" (199). Her ensuing recollection of her childhood, when she would use her toes to climb trees, implies her association of the body part with mobility and freedom. Her desire to use her toes for artistic purposes therefore implies a connection between art and migration.

While al-Radi's art offers her freedom of mobility, it also acts as the sole stabilizing force in her life, which is characterized by constant transition and disruption. As al-Radi migrates between Amman, Abu Dhabi, Yemen, Mexico, and Greece, her paintings and sculptures ground her, providing her with a constant source of enjoyment, as well as economic income. Despite her physical extrication from Iraq, al-Radi employs her artwork as a symbol of her emotional connection to her homeland. Through sculptures such as "The Destroyer," al-Radi conveys her opposition to Western involvement in the Gulf War, using her art to defend Iraq's right to political and cultural sovereignty. In addition to channeling her political beliefs into her artwork, al-Radi also expresses her enduring ties to the culture and traditions of Iraqi society through her work. During her stay in Yemen with her friends Sol and Lubna, al-Radi helps to restore a sixteenth-century mosque, explaining that the building project "has a lot in common with [her] old ceramic days" (186). In using her artistic skills to physically preserve an Islamic structure, al-Radi retains the religious values associated with Iraq. Additionally, as a building physically rooted in the ground, this mosque serves as a symbol of the stability that al-Radi attains through art in spite of her nomadic lifestyle.

Like her sculptures and paintings, al-Radi's writing also exhibits the constant mobility that defines her life in exile. Like her artwork, her writing accrues value following her emigration from Iraq. Just as she does not gain recognition for her "Destroyer" sculpture until moving to Amman, it is not until she leaves Iraq that her diary is displayed and published. The first portion of her *Baghdad Diaries* manuscript is included in an exhibition at the Morgan Library in New York, and she travels to New York in order to participate in the exhibition, signaling the relationship between her writing and mobility. Throughout her narrative, al-Radi also accentuates the connection between her movement and her writing. She prefaces the

description of her New York exhibit with "I am writing this abroad the plane on my way to Chicago" (157), calling attention to the writing itself as a product of her life in transit.

Al-Radi continues to use her journal as a means of virtual transport, connecting with other female authors through her writing. After reading the diary of a Serbian political activist, Jasmina, al-Radi engages in correspondence with her through letters, and the two of them ultimately compile their letters in a collaborative publication on "Serbia and Iraq, war and embargo" (181). Just as al-Radi's painting in Dubai symbolically transverses national boundaries, her communication with Jasmina through letters shows her ability to achieve the same virtual migration through writing. The format of her journal itself displays the constant movement that al-Radi experiences after leaving Iraq. Structured in the form of a diary, with each section corresponding to a specified date and location, al-Radi's journal offers a visual representation of her journey across the globe. Without clear transitions between sections, the reader is thrust from one geographic location to the next without warning, mirroring the constant movement that defines al-Radi's experience.

Although al-Radi's writing exemplifies the motion that characterizes her life in exile, it also stabilizes her, as she uses her journaling to ground herself in time and space. Despite the fact that a large portion of her exilic narrative focuses on the political turmoil taking place within Iraq, al-Radi periodically calls attention to the self-consciousness of her writing, which anchors her narrative in her current setting. In recording the very act of writing in her journal with phrases such as "On the plane going back to Beirut" (198), al-Radi roots both herself and the reader in the immediacy of the present, using the descriptions of herself writing to ground her account of personal uprooting and upheaval.

Exile as a Necessary Precondition for Female Empowerment

In addition to allowing her freedom of movement, al-Radi's artwork and writing also offer her a forum for political expression in exile, which her entrapment within Iraqi society had denied her. Just as Mikhail must abandon her Iraqi homeland in order to realize her freedom of expression, al-Radi cannot successfully channel her political frustrations into her artistic and literary work until she removes herself from Iraq's socially and politically oppressive climate. While she asserts her opinions regarding international political affairs through the content of her art and writing, the very language she uses to describe her creative works also suggests the liberty she enjoys while in exile. Thus, exile presents the necessary condition for al-Radi's empowerment, and her creative talent provides the means by which to realize it.

Just as exile evokes certain absences for both Mikhail and the narrator of Khedairi's *A Sky So Close,* explicit vacancies also define al-Radi's exilic experience, opening up a space for her to express herself freely and seek empowerment. Al-Radi employs her creative prowess to assist Nidal in constructing props for a play in Lebanon, working in a "multi-story, unfinished building from wartime Beirut," which she describes as "a huge space…in the open" (175). In this vast workspace, al-Radi paints "seven meters of sea and sky" (175), a project that predates her work on Dubai's longest painting in the world but connotes a similar sense of continuity and possibility. Her construction of this painting in Beirut's vacant building demonstrates the way in which she takes advantage of the emptiness that exile elicits to exercise her authority. In addition to symbols of emptiness, the very experience of exile presents al-Radi with a form of absence that empowers her. As al-Radi waits at the Iraqi embassy in Amman for the renewal of her passport, an Iraqi poet explains to her that "artists and creative people have to escape repressive regimes because they need to produce" (140). Like this exilic Iraqi, al-Radi realizes the need to

escape from the censorship of Saddam's regime in order to gain formal recognition for her literary work. Thus, the loss of her native country is what enables her to realize her authority as an artist and writer.

For al-Radi, exile offers the opportunity both to express her political frustrations and to reach an appreciative audience that imparts value upon her work. Just as Mikhail makes overt political statements in her poetic memoir, al-Radi uses her diary to brief the reader on political events that befall Iraq in her absence. She writes that "hope seems to have vanished for the Iraqi people" (158) and proceeds to recount the atrocities that the United States has committed against the civilians of her native homeland. Her artwork also provides an outlet for the political sentiments that her life in Baghdad prohibits her from expressing. While she expresses herself through art during the war in her Baghdad apartment, it is not until she emigrates from Iraq that her art meets positive reception. After migrating to Amman, she notes that "journalists are paying a lot of attention to me" and that "the impact of my exhibition was fantastic" (134). She explains that international reporters are fascinated by her "embargo art" (134) and award her high acclaim for her work, which she had failed to receive in Baghdad.

While al-Radi's writing and art serve as mediums for her political expression, the exhibitions in which they are included also characterize her work in ways that empower her. In the Morgan Library exhibit that showcases al-Radi's diary, her manuscript is displayed alongside Walt Whitman's poetry "under the heading 'War'" (158). In placing her journal in the same exhibit as the work of Whitman, this exhibit elevates her writing to the status of esteemed poets, signaling its heightened value in Western society. Additionally, by placing it within the "War" category, the exhibition implies a connection between her writing and violence. While her "Destroyer" sculpture visually depicted the violence of wartime, her "war" chronicle serves as a

forum for al-Radi to exert a form of aggression. Through the overt political statements that she makes throughout her journal, al-Radi uses her writing as a tool for power. While she does not serve in the Iraqi army during the war, she employs her exile as an opportunity to assert symbolic force through her uncensored words.

Just as al-Radi channels her political frustrations through her writing, she also represents the aggression associated with the war through her artwork. As she awaits her flight to Greece, al-Radi stands in the airport with a large painting of hers in hand and muses, "What a time to travel with a 2-metre-plus roll of canvas that is packed and looks like a lethal weapon" (197). This conflation of art and violence suggests the transformation that she undergoes in exile from a victim of the Gulf War to a symbolic perpetrator of violence. Upon viewing the paintings by Dali, Picasso, and Manet at a museum in Bahrain, al-Radi describes herself as in a "state of shock and awe" (201), intentionally recycling the rhetoric used by the U.S. government to describe the effect of its violent offensives against Iraqi civilians. By imbuing her writing with language associated with violence, and by comparing her works of art to "lethal weapon[s]," al-Radi draws a deliberate connection between her creative works and aggression, using them as symbolic weapons while in exile.

Through her exilic artwork, al-Radi aims to empower not only herself, but also her fellow Iraqis who did not emigrate from their native country as she did. Toward the end of her journal, al-Radi's writing style regresses into a flat, deflated tone, echoing the hopelessness felt by the Iraqi people following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. She writes: "I am going to be sleeping in the sitting room in front of the television again tonight. If I can write anything else I will send it. But for now this is all I can feel" (217). In the midst of this evident apathy, however, she explains that her artwork continues to sustain her desire for empowerment:

> "I have my sculpture: dozens of figures of all heights painted and standing in line and made from recycled wood collected from a building site. They look as if they are demonstrating. They represent the Iraqi people and I am calling them "We, the people" (215).

This sculpture thus serves as her final symbolic call to action. In spite of her physical displacement from Iraq, she identifies with the Iraqi people, referring to them as "we." Thus, while her artwork mobilizes her by leading her to exhibitions around the world during her time in exile, it also allows her to mobilize others.

IV. Conclusion

While the exilic narratives by Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi each depict elements of their individual experiences as Iraqi women who left the country after experiencing civil strife, they illuminate similar themes related to gender, migration, and identity. Admittedly, the stark differences between their experiences should not go unnoticed. The narrators of the works examined in this chapter immigrate to different societies, which no doubt informs their respective experiences of exile. Whereas the narrator of Khedairi's novel immigrates to London, Mikhail settles in the United States, and al-Radi pursues a life of endless migration, based primarily in Lebanon. Their explicit motives for emigrating from Iraq also differ; while the narrator of *A Sky So Close* leaves for Europe for the concrete purpose of treating her mother's illness, Mikhail is forcibly exiled from her homeland due to her incendiary writing, and al-Radi chooses to leave in order to display her politically-charged artwork.

In spite of these differences, however, all three of these Iraqi women leave Iraq with the shared objective of seeking empowerment. They each take advantage of the opportunities that the departure from Iraqi society allows them, perceiving the absence of societal and political oppression as a chance to assert their autonomy. Khedairi's female protagonist, Mikhail, and al-

Radi can thus be viewed as members of the Iraqi diasporic community, as their common experiences implicate them within a shared network of exilic Iraqi women. Not only do they share common national roots, but they also undergo similar identity transformations after emigrating from post-war Iraq. The commonalities between their experiences abroad thereby embed their texts within the greater Iraqi diasporic narrative.

CONCLUSION

The narratives written by Betool Khedairi, Dunya Mikhail, and Nuha al-Radi illuminate the unique circumstances that war and exile present for Iraqi women to seize control over their own lives, as both conditions demand a reordering of preexisting conventions and configurations. In the same way that the Gulf War opened up a space for the authors of these texts and the female characters that they portray to express themselves, their physical displacement in exile poses unique opportunities for their empowerment. In the absence of various physical and societal structures, the women in these literary texts undergo dramatic identity reformulations both in Iraq during the war and in exile thereafter. Through these transformations, they assert their agency as women and renegotiate gendered hierarchies.

Just as Dalal's aunt's embroidery, Mikhail's flowery poetic language, and al-Radi's paintings and sculptures demonstrate women's empowerment through creative expression, the texts themselves serve as creative representations through which Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi exert their authority as authors. As women who wrote both in Iraq during the Gulf War and outside of Iraq in the mid-1990s, they revolutionized the nation's predominantly male-dominated literary canon, expressing their voices within an arena from which they had previously been absent. In this way, they represent the very correlation between political transformations and female empowerment that they convey through the content of their texts.

In considering the larger implications of my literary analysis, it is important to recognize the various problems that arise when using literature as a lens through which to draw greater political and societal truths. Firstly, while the four texts that I have examined in this paper shed light on the female Iraqi experience of war and exile, they represent the experiences of a few select individuals rather than those of all Iraqi women in the 1990s. Hence, I do not purport to

understand the situation of all Iraqi women in wartime and exile based upon my close reading of select works. Rather, I intend to construct a new paradigm, based on a reading of these texts, through which literary scholars can consider the impact of these experiences on women. By focusing on the extent to which the experiences of war and exile empower women, as demonstrated through these literary works, I propose a new angle for examining gender roles under these culturally volatile conditions. Moreover, I would like to acknowledge the possible setbacks of using the experiences of Iraqi women as a way of generalizing about women in the Arab world more broadly. The Arab world consists of many nations, each with starkly different cultural and political systems; thus, I do not hold that experiences of Iraqi women reflect those of all Arab women. Rather, I contend that these female narratives may serve to illuminate the relationship between societal transition and female empowerment in the Arab world.

While the experiences of the women in these texts may also be transmutable to other subsets of women, such as those under authoritarian regimes or those in developing countries, I would like to consider the import of these texts on the status of women in the Arab world, specifically. As a region with a burgeoning culture of women's literature, the Arab world presents a promising arena for women to redefine dominant cultural trends. While women writers have gained increased prominence within Iraq's literary tradition since the post-colonial era, female authors have gained equal, if not greater, legitimacy in other countries throughout the Gulf, the Levant, and North Africa. These literary developments in the Arab world have been accompanied—or perhaps catalyzed—by political transformations, making the region an especially intriguing sphere of analysis. As Arab women writers began to gain credibility in the latter half of the twentieth century, they did so within the context of successive wars and uprisings, ranging from the 1967 Six Day War to the Lebanese Civil War in the 1970s. Thus, the

intersection between political and cultural transformations has particular import for female authors in the Arab world, a region that has been fraught with political turmoil for decades.

Just as the Iraqi women in the literature by Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi take advantage of societal disturbances to assert their authority, women in other Arab countries continue to employ massive political and cultural upheavals as opportunities for self-expression. Today, twenty years after the Gulf War in Iraq, cataclysmic political transformations elicit similar shifts in gender dynamics in the Arab world. Just as the Gulf War dismantled Iraq's physical and social structures, the recent uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, and other Arab states toppled the regimes that had reigned throughout the post-colonial era, disrupting the preexisting political order. The collapse of these authoritative structures has also brought about a reordering of gender roles, as Arab women have used the political turbulence of the Arab Spring to express their voices.

In their April 2011 article in *The Guardian* entitled "Women Have Emerged as Key Players in the Arab Spring," Xan Rice and his co-authors detail the involvement of women in the 2011 uprisings that shook the Arab world. Through the instrumental roles that women played in organizing demonstrations in Cairo, actively protesting in Bahrain, and delivering speeches at rallies in Yemen, "women were key players in the uprisings that launched the Arab Spring" (Rice, et al 1). In spite of the physical brutality, detainment, and sexual violence that female activists faced throughout the 2011 revolts, their political involvement characterized them as mobilized and empowered individuals. Rice and his colleagues note that while the Arab Spring was not primarily a revolution about gender equality, women's contribution to the protest movement has enhanced their image as influential figures.

Grounding the literary works by Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi in the current politics of the Arab world raises various questions related to the conditions under which Arab women can successfully and sustainably achieve empowerment. Does it take severe political transformations for Arab women to exert their agency within their native countries and abroad? If war, exile, and the recent political uprisings in the Arab world enabled women to engage in the reconstruction of their societies and their own identities, can the dismantling of smaller-scale social structures, such as the nuclear family, induce similar gender transformations? For example, might divorce enable Arab women to assert their authority and renegotiate their identities in a similar way? Additionally, reading these texts in light of the Arab Spring uprisings evokes a subsequent set of questions regarding the sustainability of women's empowerment following these periods of political transition. As political tensions subside in the Arab world, will female activists inevitably revert back into their subordinate roles? Does women's sustained empowerment necessitate an incessant cycle of political and cultural change, like that which has defined Iraq since 1980? While these questions lack definitive answers, as literary scholars continue to study the texts of Arab women writers, they should consider the interplay between structural ruptures and gender transformations that informs the content of these authors' works.

As female Iraqi writers, Betool Khedairi, Dunya Mikhail, and Nuha al-Radi serve as role models for Arab women who seek to reposition themselves as empowered individuals. While these authors did not serve on the frontlines during the Gulf War or protest on the streets during the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, they revolted more covertly against other systems of subjugation through their literature. In writing about their experiences in wartime and in exile, Khedairi, Mikhail, and al-Radi infused their narratives into the Arabic literary canon, taking control over an arena that had previously excluded them. Through the pages of their texts, they started a new

page for women throughout the Arab world, engendering a culture of female activism in the region.

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