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## Subaltern Voices in Iraqi Culture and Literature: Practices of Violence and Silencing Against Women

### A B S T R A C T

This paper tackles the role of women as second-class citizens in Iraq. It aims to highlight the concept of gendered subaltern in terms of Iraqi culture and literature. The study argues that Iraqi literature has successfully pinpointed strategies of violence and subalternity, practiced on Iraqi women. It significantly shows that wars, bloodshed, and economic hardship have traumatized Iraqi women, making them an "Other," "oppressed," and "muzzled." Some literary works by Iraqi writers are cited as examples of how the subaltern female has been depicted in their works of fiction and nonfiction. The study examines short tales written by Iraqi writers of different ethnic backgrounds to shed light on the many ways in which Iraqi culture is commented upon and portrayed in literature.

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أصوات المهمشين في الثقافة والأدب العراقي: ممارسات العنف وإسكات النساء

اروى حسين الدوري / جامعة تكريت كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية

### الخلاصة:

يتناول هذا البحث دور النساء كأفراد من الدرجة الثانية في العراق. يهدف إلى تسليط الضوء على مفهوم تهميش النساء من حيث الثقافة والأدب العراقي. يجادل البحث بأن الأدب العراقي قد أشار بنجاح إلى

استراتيجيات العنف والتهميش التي تمارس على النساء العراقيات. يوضح بشكل كبير أن الحروب وسفك الدماء والمعاناة قد أثرت في النساء العراقيات، مما جعلهن "الآخر"، "المضطهد"، و"المكتم". يتم الاستشهاد ببعض الأعمال الأدبية لكتاب عراقيين كأمثلة على كيفية تصوير المرأة المهمشة في أعمالهم السردية وغير السردية. يناقش البحث قصصاً قصيرة كتبها كتاب عراقيون من خلفيات عرقية مختلفة لتسليط الضوء على الطرق المتنوعة التي يتم بها تناول الثقافة العراقية وتصويرها في الأدب.

الكلمات المفتاحية : المهمش ، المعارضة الثنائية، الأسر ، الابتزاز ، العنف

## Introduction

The term "subaltern" originates in postcolonial theory. It refers to colonized people who are marginalized in terms of social status, political influence, and geographical location. Although the Indian-American Feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak is widely recognized as a pioneer in the field of subaltern studies, the term was first used by the Italian Marxist and Communist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), who noted that the subaltern refers to a social group that is inferior or belongs to a subordinate position in society. Subaltern studies examine social strata, racial and ethnic backgrounds, cultural practices, religious beliefs, and linguistic varieties. The second half of the twentieth century was a nightmare and a horror serial for the Iraqi people, full of upheavals, wars, revolutions, violence, and sanctions, all of which occurred at a time when modern sensibilities were being formed. Social and psychological effects of rapid change have received inadequate attention in the academic literature. but their oblique influence on literary poetry remains.

Subaltern is originally a term which refers to subordinate subjects in socio-cultural hierarchies. The term subaltern is first coined in the work of Antonio Gramsci to refer to groups who are outside the established structures of socio-

political representation. The concept of subaltern makes direct reference to postcolonial studies which focuses on power relations, suggesting a position that is occupied by the 'Other' who is alternative to the dominant power and is located in a position of marginality. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak suggests that "the subaltern is denied access to both mimetic and political forms of representation." (qtd. In Gidwani, 2009, 67) Spivak critically deconstructs the concept of the subaltern, emphasizing its complexity and the plurality of practices it encompasses across diverse cultural contexts. In her analysis, Spivak moves beyond a monolithic or homogenized understanding of the term, instead highlighting its multifaceted nature. She argues that the subaltern is not a singular, fixed identity but rather a dynamic and heterogeneous category shaped by varying historical, social, and cultural forces. This nuanced approach underscores the impossibility of reducing subalternity to a universal experience, as it manifests differently depending on the specificities of local and global power relations. By doing so, Spivak not only challenges essentialist readings of the subaltern but also draws attention to the intricate interplay of marginality, resistance, and representation across cultures.

It is worth restating that third world feminist discourses cover a range of issues demanding a re-writing and re-reading of male texts such as those of Freud in a "race sensitive" (Spivak, 1986: 81) manner so that the production of a third world woman as a "colonial object" produced by the "hegemonic First World intellectual practices" (Spivak, 1996: 2-4) is brought back into focus. These intellectual practices stem from an assumed privileged position of "what can I do for them?" (ibid), assuming that most third world women need help. Hence; the argument of the present study takes into consideration Iraqi women, the subaltern, as part of the Third World by subjecting the theoretical approaches regarding female

marginalization that is referred to by Gayatri Spivak. It problematizes the idea of 'silencing' that stems from a patriarchal model. It depicts man as the center and a woman as a marginal entity who is prohibited to voice herself freely in the name of religion and social conventions. There is a clear overlapping between the politics of subaltern and gender studies since both highlight an emphasis on those who are marginalized and silenced on different accounts.

Spivak has enriched feminist studies by focusing on how female characters in the Third World are denied their subjectivity. She criticizes the "narcissistic" attitude and "individualism" of the so-called Third World metropolitan women who live in a sense of "false freedom" of work and study.(Parker,2011,286) The claimed individualism of these women is in fact part of the colonialist ideology of gender subjugation since their labor mainly serves the continuity of the metropolitan life. According to Spivak, all women of the Third World are persecuted and they are submissive to their persecution in the name of customs or shame! Unlike the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, Spivak's model of the subalterns are women of postcolonial communities who are powerless groups in their communities because they are doubly silenced and oppressed. Spivak explains further that the Hindu widow, as a case in point, must be content with the criminal conventions of sati which a Hindu widow is subjected to; otherwise she is a bad woman. A Hindu widow should accept that the core meaning of sati is not a widow burning but rather widow faithfulness and goodness. Spivak argues that women in indigenous cultures are abused and denied their human rights. They cannot voice themselves freely but only unwillingly say what is imposed on them. She also comments that colonization has encouraged the abuse of women. Being formerly colonized nations, women in Third World cultures are subalterns who suffer polices of otherness, muzzling and misogyny in the name of history,

conventions or religion. They are cut off from serious civilized debates of equality. Spivak contends that 'subaltern' is an overlapping term between Feminism and postcolonial studies (Postcolonial Feminism), since it shows how both are interrelated in terms of recognition, equality and justice. One can easily register the supplementary of Feminism to Postcolonialism. This has often been noted because some of the defining theories and ideologies of Postcolonialism have been assessed by scholars accordingly through reference to Feminism. Both fields of study incorporate the idea of the 'Other', an "out-group" of a dominating culture whose identity is considered inferior; hence becomes subject of discrimination by the "in-group". (Staszak,2008:2)

In her essay "Women and the Other", Simon de Beauvoir says that women in most primitive cultures are listed under the category of the 'Other'. She argues that the duality of the 'Self' and 'Other' is related to ethnicity, race, class and sex; hence "Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought." ( de Beauvoir, 13) Accordingly, Jews are the 'Other' of anti-Semites, negroes are othered by white American racists, natives are othered by colonialists and women are the different 'Other' in male-centered communities. De Beauvoir comments that female otherness "lacks the contingent or incidental nature." (ibid: 25) This means that women's dependency on men is not anatomic or physical but rather a socio-cultural system of behavior that has been accustomed to through history. Postcolonial-Feminists are attentive to free the female 'Other' of the Third World from silencing and paternalism.

In his novel *Standayini* (Breast Giver), the Bengali novelist Mahasweta Devi tells the story of a woman who takes care of herself and her family by feeding her master's children. After she gets breast cancer, both her former master and her family leave her. She dies soon after. Spivak examines the validity of speaking of

and for the subaltern from a position of non-subalternity in her commentary on *Standayini*, which she authored. She does it by addressing the problem of narrative and depiction of the subaltern in this manner. There are two ways that the subaltern might be narrated: either as an object of writing, on the one hand, or as an active subject, on the other. Both are examples of narration, but the results are significantly different in each instance. Spivak presents four different ways that the novel might be interpreted; nevertheless, none of these readings, in her opinion, are able to escape the danger of assuming the role and speaking in the voice of the subaltern.

The first interpretation views the nursing woman as a symbol of the country, while the other three interpretations take three distinct feminist viewpoints. These are the liberal feminist perspective, the Marxist feminist perspective, and what Spivak refers to as "a theory of woman's body" (Spivak 1987, 258).<sup>3</sup> These interpretations, in Spivak's view, either treat "the subaltern as metaphor" for something else or utilize her as a conceptual component in their hypotheses. As a consequence of this, they do not provide a sufficient description of the subaltern herself. The four interpretations, regardless of how intriguing or correct they may be, do not result in the sort of interpretation of subalternity that Spivak advocates, and they prevent the reader from having access to the perspective of the subaltern character.

Mahasweta Devi's work addresses the unspoken reality of the plight of women as well as their ability to put up a fight. readers are able to obtain the linearity that is lacking in contemporary mainstream literature through her novel, and her fiction provides a variety of perspectives on the figurative position of women in society as well as the materialistic use of their bodies for the purpose of societal and economic advancement. A lot of the text's power comes from Mahasweta's unique

style and voice. Classical Hindu myths are used in this story, as they are in the author's other works. The language is a mix of slang, dialect, literary Bengali, and English.

Although not many literary texts are written to tackle the issue of FGM (Female genital Mutilation) as it is still considered a social taboo, a number of authors from Africa, US and the Middle East produced works which speak out against FGM, using literature as a medium to end the practice once and for all. The African-American author Alice Walker (1944- ) published her controversial novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) in which the protagonist Tashi returns to her Olinka tribe in order to undergo the rite of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Tashi appears also in Walker's earlier novel *The Color Purple* as a minor character who undergoes the traditional African rite of FGM and facial scarring. Tashi is saved from the bloody procedure of FGM by Christian missionaries who viewed the practice with horror, but she finds herself suffering a loss of identity being dislocated both from her new American culture, where she takes the name Evelyn Johnson, and her original African culture.

Walker's novel is written in a form of interior monologues and few letters which narrate the main events and the traumatic experience of the protagonist. It opens with an interior monologue by Tashi which begins "I did not realize for a long time that I was dead." A series of following monologues by protagonist and other characters reveal the trauma that Tashi underwent. An experience which eventually leads to the neurotic state of mind and the growing of her violent affiliations which cause her to murder M'Lissa, a tsunga, the Olinkan woman who has become celebrated in her own country as females circumciser. Tashi and the females of her tribe are mutilated when they are between the ages of five and

eleven. This practice is revealed to be one of the most barbaric forms of violence and suppression that African females are subjected to.

FGM as backward cultural practice is found its way of portrayal in literary works mostly by American writers as Walker and African authors as Osmane Sombene, an African author who believes that “artists are self-appointed emissaries with the desire to represent the best.” (Dionne, 2017, 4) They handle the responsibility to portray the subalternity of females in postcolonial cultures which suffered long years of servitude under Colonialism. Unfortunately, very few, if not, literary texts are written in Iraq and the Middle East that openly tackle the issue of FGM as violent cultural which rapes both the childhood and femininity of little girls. Hopefully, this paper may serve as a call to authors and students of literature from Kurdistan region and the rest of Iraq to overcome the sense of shame and ethically represent FGM as an oppressive cultural practice.

Rape has been referred to as a highest level practice of violence against women. It is a practice of sexual objectification that is marked by forced sexual intercourse and may end in sexual murder. It is identified by some key features related to it, including “denial of subjectivity”, “ownership”, “lacking autonomy”, “lacking agency”, and “fungibility”.(Jordan, 2022,143). Not only does rape pose a danger to the objectified self, but it also infiltrates and taints, destroying a sense of both confidence and safety in the world. Since 2010, many published scholarly studies have been examining rape and rape culture. In her book *Asking for It*, Kate Harding talks about cultural myths about rape, like the "miscommunication theory," and how common they are. She does this by looking at different ways that this happens in culture, such as through the legal system (both police interactions and court cases), TV, the internet, and the media. By doing this, Harding not only

shows how widespread rape culture is, but she also suggests ways to fix these harmful ideas while she breaks down the system.

In her book, *Rape is Rape: How Denial, Distortion, and Victim Blaming Are Fueling a Hidden Acquaintance Rape Crisis* (2013), legal scholar Jody Raphael traces the history of scholarly work on cases of acquaintance rape and puts her own arguments about the social phenomena of victim blaming and victim shaming next to stories from people who have been raped by people they know. Even though some critics find the topic disturbing and other critics often deny that acquaintance rape is common, Raphael's book brings attention to the very real and very common experience of acquaintance rape.

In another study entitled, *Framing the Rape Victim: Gender and Agency Reconsidered* (2014), Carine Mardorossian writes about the power dynamics of rape. She does this by "examining both how rape and victimization are culturally conceptualized today in feminist theory, film, or fiction and how these representations affect victims of violence and social responses to the crime." (17)

Erika Cleveland and Sybil Durand examined sexual assault representations in four YAL(young Adult Literature) texts and discussed the implications these had for education in their article, "Critical Representations of Sexual Assault in Young Adult Literature,"(2014) in order to consider "how young adult literature (YAL) engages the national discourse on rape. Cleveland and Durand focus on educational implications within young adult literature in order to consider what these novels teach young adults.

In her article "Rape Scripts and Rape Spaces: Constructions of Female Bodies in Adolescent Fiction," (2017), Aiyana Altrow says that young adult books that do not have a rapist or do not fully describe one "focus on and pathologize" female

characters (50). Altrow looks at how four young adult books such as *What Happens Next* by Colleen Clayton, *All the Truth That's in Me* by Julie Berry, *You Against Me* by Jenny Downham, and *The Mockingbirds* by Daisy Whitney show how women relate to their bodies, food, and clothes. She says, "These representations are ideologically problematic because they place rape inside the bodies of girls and women" (63). These rape culture-related literary pieces help us better understand how literature reaches its target audience with information on rape and rape culture.

## II. Gendered Subalterns in Iraq

This study draws a special attention to Iraqi women of post 2003 as typical subalterns who suffer the bitter consequences of invasion, terrorism and economic decline. In the recent years, violence against Iraqi women and girls has reached new levels of cruelty. But with the imminent transition to stability, and the signed commitment to implementing Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, both Iraq and the Kurdistan Region have a new impetus to protect and enhance women's role. This study refers to some examples sexual and gender-based violence in Iraq and the issue of "honor and shame" as a central issue in addressing legal, structural, and societal barriers to women's empowerment.

War and displacement have exacerbated pre-existing systematic violence against women and girls in Iraq, including Kurdistan Region. The unfulfilled humanitarian needs, erosion of community networks, lack of job opportunities, and restrictions on movement have made women more vulnerable to violence and exploitation. This is particularly true for female-headed households of the internal displaced families in refugee camps. To earn the living of their families, some of these women are forced to resort to negative coping mechanisms that include

prostitution, “survival sex,” and other exploitative relationships. An increasing number of women believed to have extremist affiliations such as murder, revenge rape, forced suicide, or societal exclusion in the form of denial of food, security and identity documents.

Social disruption often leads to the rise of unjustified paternalism and control over the personal lives of women and girls. This is a wide world phenomenon with deep historical roots, often legitimized by ideas of honor and moral obligations to 'preserve' it. In Iraq, women embody the honor of the family as the mother of the next generation of the family and society. This places her at the center of cultivating a collective identity and turns her into the “mother of the nation.” However, when women challenge this dynamic, it can be seen as a threat to family dignity and loss of familial and social order.

Since women are less likely than males to perish in the kinds of armed attacks that get media attention, their fatalities are also less likely to be recorded when they do occur. They are subjected to physical, sexual, psychological, and verbal abuse at the hands of occupation soldiers, Iraqi security forces, Iraqi political party militias, insurgents, and criminal gangs, as well as strangers on the street and family members in the home. This abuse comes in a variety of forms, including physical, sexual, psychological, and verbal. The latter forms of assaults, in particular, are linked to elevated levels of socio-economic instability. Second, women are more susceptible to this broader spectrum of violent acts, which has direct repercussions for their capacity to engage in public life.

The primary codification of gender roles in Iraq and Kurdistan region took place during the period of ethnic persecution, mass killing, genocide, militarization, and armed struggle. The participation of colonial settlers and the

building of alliances with the most conservative structures of society influenced the revival of the tribal policies to intensify authority over families and women in particular, a process that has led to the revival of gendered subalternity. Even in terms of parliamentary representation, Women in Iraq are the subalterns who have a less percentage of representation in high positions of the state in the successive governments. They hold only one or two governmental positions, at best, despite the "female quota" for women's representation in the Iraqi parliament which constitutes about a third of its members.

Women and girls in Iraq are still subjected to all sorts of domestic abuse due to the misreading of religious scriptures and cultural norms that justify silencing and subalternity. The following pages of the paper examines some practices of violence against IFS (Iraqi female subalterns) including honor crimes, domestic violence, raping and FGM (female genital mutilation).

### **III. Fear and Strategies of Subalternity**

Womanhood in Iraq is inextricably related to national identity and citizenship. Men represent the public realm as the nation's economic contributors, whilst women are seen as transmitters of culture and dignity, confined to the private sphere. Women are seen as culture carriers due to their capacity to reproduce members of a country and hence transfer cultural ideas and symbols to their offspring. Thus, female reproduction has been at the center of national discourse, submitting female bodies and sexuality to policing, surveillance, and public control. As a result, women bear the burden of preserving honor, domestic dignity and national identity. During times of conflict, the female subject is more susceptible to violence, economic and social inequity, and political marginalization. War is getting more personal, with the front line of war no longer

being outside of the community, but instead directly attacking citizens. Better understanding of subaltern strategies in Iraq requires that we recognize the long and distinguished record of female activism in Iraq for social change and the overthrow of repressive governments.

During times of conflict, women face disproportionate brutality and suffering committed by invaders inside a nation as well as their own country This occurs as a result of gender-specific abuse and the need to preserve family and cultural systems. Furthermore, women constitute a community that academic settings disregard while examining war traumas. In a short story by Abd al-Khalq al-Rikaby, entitled *Guraf Ashjan* (Rooms of Ashjan), readers are introduced to ‘a model’ of Iraqi gendered subaltern represented in the protagonist Ashjan whose given name means Sorrows, the plural form of sorrow in Arabic. The name has a metaphorical meaning; it represents the enclosed spaces area and the restricted view she is given. Ashjan, like the rest of his family, lives in a crowded, cramped room that they all share. providing equally poor households with the conveniences of a multi-story home, when living conditions are bad. "Under the pressure of scrutinizing eyes, those of her father and mother, Ashjan starts her journey to maturity with a trembling steps, hunched down with her head down and her eyes closed: “She walks quite slowly” (5). There is a steady drumbeat of warnings for her to be wary of young guys and to avoid making eye contact with them. When she steps outside, though, she is accosted by young males. flattering comments and reassuring assurances. In the glare of these men, she changes in the marketplace, when she is met by a "forest of eyeballs" (6): "erotic eyes that seemed to be looking directly at her, eyes that were watching for the slightest mistake or failure to catch her intransigent, unwavering gaze, which refuse to be deterred by criticism or disregard” (ibid) A displeased mother, an insignificant daughter, and an irate

father all squeezed into a single room make for an uncomfortable situation. Ashjan's mother who is presumably attempting to placate her son, and his brothers all share a home. Only the television provides amusement, and it mostly shows young people dancing, singing, too. A picture depicting a cheery sailor is also shown, along with robust, masculine arms. Nighttime is the only time Ashjan can be alone. take stock of and recollect the looks and comments she is getting from everyone around her. And yet She thinks her parents are monitoring her and counting down the hours till she sleeps.

One day, a new pair of eyes joins the ones already keeping an eye on her. along with a piece of paper she tucked inside her purse. She hardly attempts to read the seducing message in the bathroom stall, but she is just semi-literate. The bathroom is the only space of privacy for her where she can freely get the paper out of her bra, one of her secret hiding places. Ashjan, then, gets back to her room. She is grilled by her mother when she returns to her room. Her parents have been told about the occurrence, thanks to her brother who has seen the stranger deliver a message to his sister. Ashjan receives an intrusive attack on her body and is unpermitted to leave the home unless in emergencies from then on. She is abandoned in the room with the appealing picture of a blue-eyed sailor and TV programs replaying a scenario of a father-daughter conflict in which the daughter is the aggressor goes to her own room, only to be followed by her father, who apologizes. Clearly, the story presents a contrast between the actual and the imagined. screen, between Ashjan's confined life on the one hand and the free existence on the other. Desires, ironically, are allowed free reign only on the broadcast show. Even while she remains seated, eyes continue to follow her. Every time she leaves her room to do the dishes in the kitchen, A young guy from the floor below arrives in the kitchen or while hanging laundry. His descent and climb

on the stairs seem to be timed to meet with hers, while whispering in her ears a strange longing. As he crosses the street one day, He grabs for her breast as she stands on the stairs. She loses her precarious balance and falls down with her pots and pans, creating a commotion. The young man's pallid complexion reveals the cause of the fall and suffices to cast judgment on her in the sight of others Ashjan is no longer permitted to leave her room and roam about the home, save to use the restroom, and even then she is accompanied by her brother. She is left with no options. Only the TV and the Sailor poster provide a view of the outside world. She starts to suspect that the sailor is staring at her and the TV speaker is staring at her. She attempts to avoid her father's discovery of her nakedness. She shifted her posture to escape the speaker's stare, but it was in vain. He seemed to be watching her wherever she is. Feeling compelled to act anything before another disaster strikes her as a result of those eyes setting Ashjan starts to untie the hem of her dress and wears big stockings on her. She wears a shawl over her hair.

Ashjan is depicted covering in the finals. "And so she was free to be alone for the first time," she said, veiling her face. in her own room, a place whose walls are her body and whose doors are her arms, and whose face is her window" (16). We can see Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" with an Iraqi spin. The ever-shrinking circles surrounding Ashjan create an ever-increasing sense of isolation. The protagonist selects the room that would give one with a place to develop. Ashjan is blamed as a woman. She is both terrified and tempted by masculinity in this strange situation where loses sight of reality as a result of gender subjugation and media simulations. She starts to succumb to anxiety and defend herself by depriving herself the minimal freedom. Ironically, her veil permits her personal space but she fears that it, too, will be taken away in the pattern of ever shrinking freedom.

#### IV. Incest and Women Silencing

Incestuous pairings are a fundamental cultural problem in married societies (also called incest taboo). According to Lavender (2006,1273), the incest taboo is one of the global taboo connections that forbids being married to or having sexual encounters with certain close relatives. Even though incest is not a new phenomenon in Iraqi culture, the recent increase in these incidents has sparked public outrage. They prompted many activists to call for the implementation of the domestic violence law and the formation of specialized secret committees in schools, universities, and state institutions. They aimed to investigate these cases and refer them to specialized centers for further investigation. Iraqi courts and community police recognize the reality of such incidents, but women still face challenges when trying to prove the abuse and convince the law and society that they are victims of the incest and desires of those closest to them.

The human transgression in "The Dying Lamp" by Foad Al-Takarli unleashes the ferocity of nature. Jabbar, the protagonist, is a 15-year-old who listens in on his parents' fights via a screen. Gradually, this repeated scenario exposes a father who wants to use his first wife's funds to acquire a second, younger wife; however, the parents of the bride-to-be oppose the plan, and so their thirteen-year-old daughter is instead married to Jabbar, who is then fifteen. The narrative describes Jabbar's helplessness as he spends his sixth night with his new wife next to him and his dread of his father. Every night, Jabbar keeps vigil over the light till it goes out. As readers, we share his concern and can hear the rumblings of the approaching storm and the pounding of the rain on the hut's roof through the cracks in the door. It is becoming clear that Jabbar's anxiety is manifesting itself as a concern that his father may hit his wife. At some point, the father approaches the wedding bed with a stick traditionally used to chase away dogs, ignores his wife's advice, and strikes

his son, calling him a dog. Aching from sleeplessness, Jabbar stumbles out of bed to see his father raping the child-bride Heela (Haylah). He faints as he wants to scream because his body is shaking so much. Nothing else matters to him except the ugliness of the scene unfolding before his eyes; However, despite the fear that makes his pulse race, he cannot tear his eyes away from them. Redder than dried blood is the lamp's light. A leg, like some skinned cadaver, is hoisted high as he looks on among the agitation of the clothing, Heela's screaming, and the bestial groaning. There then erupts a piercing, animal-like scream. (55).

Fuad Al-Takarli gives the characters animal voices. The father, for example, is described as "bestial," "grunting," and "animal screech," making him seem like a beast. The dehumanization of Jabbar the Younger continues in his own offspring. In the story, he is thrashed with a stick meant for canines, called a dog, and described as such: "He, too, is like those stray dogs: a little, dirty, wretched dog, a dog one has only to toss a shoe at to be able to take away the bone it doesn't really desire" (54). Animalistic violence and sexuality shine out in this domestic setting; Jabbar, the innocent protagonist, eventually reveals these traits despite his apprehension. A strange presence has penetrated his personal house, and all he can hear is his own heart beating. His father's voice, which he heard, was foreign and unfamiliar to him. No, that couldn't have been his father. It is a story about violating taboos, child abuse, and incest in which the son cannot even object; "he longed to scream," "he attempts to scream," but never utters a word or cry. Both the victim and the witness are rendered speechless. (55) The fading light is both a fixture and a symbol in the hut. As it fades, there is no longer any brightness in this bleak circumstance. In this story, nature is not endowed with human feelings; rather, it is used as a sad fallacy to mimic the domestic violence. Despite the fact that they deal with intergenerational conflict, father-son relationships also hint to

political authority: the brutality of the ruling over the ruled. The incestuous takeover of the bride by her father-in-law is an infringement on the rights of the ruled by the ruler. The work of Al-Takarli reveals the unspeakable atrocities of parental assault, and as a result, it dismantles the romanticized concept of a happy family unit at home.

## V. Portrayal of Gendered Violence

The reason behind choosing to begin with FGM (female genital mutilation) is that FGM, the most horrible and dehumanizing phenomenon of domestic violence, is invading Iraq especially in some places of Kurdistan region. FGM is a tradition that is deeply rooted in Kurdish culture, and many people still try to find a way to justify it in religious teaching, even though this is still a very controversial topic. The problem comes up when a cultural tradition or long-standing custom seems to clearly violate the rights of an individual, who often has no choice but to go along with what society wants. FGM must be stopped in Iraqi Kurdistan, especially in its rural areas, and this will take a lot more work. But campaigns to raise awareness about the many dangers of FGM and to push for strict enforcement of protective laws are having a positive effect on this long-standing human rights issue. The differing forms of procedure around the globe that fall under the umbrella term FGM are carried out between infancy and up until sometimes the years of adolescence. Predating Islam and Christianity, it is not connected to a particular religion, being practised by communities that may be Islamic, Christian, Jewish, or of certain African religions.

FGM is becoming widespread; although it was known as a widespread phenomenon in Africa and some parts of the Middle East. A recently published report by the German Organization *Wadi* for Human and Domestic Rights has

raised many questions about FGM which Iraq had not known before. In a report by activist of women rights, Mahnaz Murad, she refers to an interview on a German broadcast with the project manager of *Wadi* organization in Iraq, Mr. Falah M. Khan who affirms that "this phenomenon is not momentarily; however openness in Kurdistan region led to end the muzzling and sense of shame and to talk about it freely."(Murad, [women.jo/ar/node/130](http://women.jo/ar/node/130), 2009) Khan mentions that a large percentage of females in Kurdistan region have been subjected to FGM despite the fact that this phenomenon was not an issue in Iraq.

Reports and testimonies show that this phenomenon is centered in the Karmian region and extends on a border line with Iran. FGM was widespread in various regions of Sulaymaniyah city, passing through the center to Rania district until it reaches the Soran area of Erbil city. However, the phenomenon began to recede in the countryside of Erbil and some of its popular areas. It has shifted from the cities towards the rural areas.

Nirmeen Hama, a 17<sup>th</sup> year old girl who lives in a village close to Sulaymaniyah recalls the traumatic experience of her mutilation seven years ago. After a long silence, she decides to talk about that horrible day when she lost part of her femininity: "While I was falling asleep, my aunt whispered in my ear to get up and go with her to the market to buy some things for the house. I was surprised at that time that it was still early, and moments later I went out with my aunt and my mother." But soon Nirmeen and her companions took one of the roads that led to the other side, away from the village market. She recollects the traumatic memories of that day: "My aunt and my mother entered the house of our old neighbor Fatima and I was waiting them in the courtyard to come out. There were many young girls near me, playing with their dolls and toys, as if it was the day of Eid. Minutes later, her mother came with her aunt to take her inside the house, and

in a semi-dark room the old woman did the mutilation surgery to the little girl. Nirmeen recalls how her mother kissed her happily: "and spread sweets over my head and put some money in my hand, as she whispered in my ear that she was happy that I have become a pure woman since that day."

That day had severe psychic and physical effects on the victim that are still traumatizing her. She suffers genital pain which requires recurring hospitalization. The young woman makes a strong call to the authorities in Kurdistan to intervene seriously and effectively "in order to eliminate this tradition, which is spreading in the cities and villages of Kurdistan and has nothing to do with Islam." (qtd.in [www.dw.com/ar](http://www.dw.com/ar), 2011)

In his paper "Changes in the Prevalence and Trends of Female Genital Mutilation in Iraqi Kurdistan Region Between 2011 and 2018" (2021), Nazar P. Shabila, a researcher from Hawler University, argues that "FGM decreased remarkably from 2011 to 2018 in all governorates of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region." (Shabila, 143,2021) FGM phenomenon has declined remarkably among different ages, education levels, residence area groups, and most economic level groups. He adds that decline was associated with a significant increase in the education level, financial status, and growth of urbanism. Although the Parliament of Kurdistan Region has issued a law to prevent FGM in the region, Shabila admits that the "rates are still high in Erbil and Suleymaniya governorates" that need further intensifying the preventive tactics. (ibid: 145) He believes that the plateau of female education plays a significant role to decrease that phenomenon. This matter should be taken into consideration in future efforts to ban the practice.

Rape is an act of abuse distinguished by physical occurrence which may lead to blood-shed and genital tearing of victims. It is a violent execution, even in cases of

not spilling blood which leaves the victim with lifelong psychological effects that may threaten her future mental health. In a study entitled “Sexual violence in Iraq: Challenges for transnational feminist politics” (2016) by Nadji Al-Ali, a researcher from the university of London, the author highlights the issue of sexual violence by ISIS against women in Iraq, particularly Yezidi Women. He argues that such practices are “pertaining to imperialism, neoliberalism and globalization on the one hand, and localized expressions of patriarchy, religious interpretations and practices and cultural norms on the other hand.”(Al-Ali, 2016:1)

Iraqi women are confronted with gender-based violence even pre-ISIS existence in Iraq due to the changing conditions related to invasion, sectarian conflicts and economic decline. Perpetrators of sexual and gendered violence appear on a broad spectrum in Iraq, including militia groups, political parties, criminal gangs, family members; in addition to the occupation forces until a few years ago.

In her book *The Beekeeper* (2018), the acclaimed Iraqi-American author Dunya Mikhail tells stories of Yazidi women in the Northern of Iraq (Sinjar) who were subjected to sexual abuse and violent practices by ISIS’s terrorism and genocide. Mikhail’s book is mostly testimonial, based extensively on interviews with these women who have been sexually abused, psychologically tortured, and have lost their families and loved ones. The stories of the book are narrated by Abdullah, the beekeeper, as well as first person narrators who recall their traumatic memories of captivation and rape at the hands of *Daesh* (ISIS):

I ended up spending a year confronting those beasts along with the other young female captives from my vil-lage, in a house in the Deir al-Zor area in Syria. They raped us, beat us; they forced us to cook

and clean and wash their clothes. During the day, they would take their weapons and go out. At night, they would come back and gather together to take drugs and recite religious verses. When they told us it was time for Quran lessons, this also meant that they were also going to rape us, because they typically did that right after prayers. They would take naked pictures of us with their cell phones, and before starting each “Quran lesson,” they’d exchange pictures of us with each other to see whether there was anyone who wanted to swap with them. (Mikhail,2018:23)

The title of Mikhail’s book refers to Abdullah Shrem who narrates his efforts to rescue Yazidi women from enslavement:

I used to have a huge garden in Sinjar where I would tend to the beehives for hours on end, especially on Fridays, discovering the secrets of the bees, their meticulous organization, their harmony with nature. The movements of the queen bee up above, her superior flying abilities compared to the males amazed me, made me profoundly appreciate all the women in my life — especially the queen mother — because her loss would completely disorient the colony. In the end, the females surround the males and expel them from the hive because they’re not good for anything other than pollination. That’s some justice, isn’t it? In our society women work and sacrificed without getting what they deserve, without enjoying the same privileges as men. Women are oppressed even outside the world of Daesh, which has nothing whatsoever to do with rational human life, of course.(Mikhail,2016:5)

In 2014, ISIS took over parts of northern Iraq where the Muslim majority and the Kurdish Yazidi people had lived together for hundreds of years. The invading army forced the Yazidi men into open pits and shot them. They also took thousands of Yazidi women and children as prisoners. Sometimes, old women were buried alive. Here is another story of a woman who is raped by *Daesh*:

**“It was another escaped woman on the run calling. We found her this morning at dawn, thank God.”**

**“That’s fantastic. I’m so glad to hear she got away. Was she alone?”**

**“Yes. The problem is ...”**

**“What?”**

**“The man who raped her also got her pregnant. We’re conservative families, as you know, and it’s a big problem for a girl to leave a virgin and come back pregnant. Nobody wants to have the children of terrorists.” “It wasn’t her choice.”**

**“I know. Our spiritual leader Baba Sheikh issued a statement declaring that our girls running away from Daesh were helpless, powerless, yet brave in resisting terrorism....(15)**

In Mikhail's novel, the women have suffered psychological harm, making it difficult for them to return to Yazidi culture. The stories they tell are heartbreaking. Women in war-torn Iraq are Mikhail's subjects. She bears witness to stories of women who have never known peace in their lives. Through interviews with people who were able to escape, Mikhail has made a mosaic of voices to tell a

powerful story of courage, humanity, and cruelty. We learn about slave markets where women are bought and sold and about online auction sites where they are listed as "Girl #1" or "Girl #2." They are raped, "rented," and forced to work for anywhere from a dollar to \$500. These are the spoils of war for ISIS fighters, who are called *Daesh* in the book.

The tales of the raped women in Mikhail's book are connected by a Yazidi beekeeper called Abdullah, who is a Schindler. After the kidnapping of several of his family members, including his sister, Abdullah has made it his goal to rescue the women who have been sold into slavery. He says Mikhail, "Every day that I rescue a prisoner lady, I save her too." (8) He has been doing this for quite some time. He gathers a "hive" of smugglers of both sexes in order to arrange devious rescue operations. He does this by using his enormous network of connections and his excellent knowledge of the highways across Iraq and Syria. There are many such heroes in these many narratives, not the least of which are the women themselves, as well as facts so incredible that the author made a good decision to add images giving evidence to the veracity of their experiences. Abdullah Shrem kept bees and sold honey in Sinjar, Iraq, until 2014. When the Islamic State group (ISIS/IS) moves into his land, he does something really amazing. He sets up a group of rescuers, both men and women, to help the women who have been taken. They also work as transporters to make sure the women are safe. He saves men and women, children, and families, one at a time. He acts almost exactly like the Queen Bee, and his main job is to get these women back to where they belong.

The Office of Kidnapped Affairs in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq pays the smugglers. It is dangerous work, and many smugglers are killed in ambushes and airstrikes. But the kind acts of strangers who help the women escape from their captors are even more amazing in this heart of darkness. Zuhour, who was sold as a

house slave with her three small children to a man who starves them, is one of the people who benefited from this kind act. In these stories, children are often used to make weapons or, in the case of older boys, sent to training centers where they quickly become ISIS supporters, which is just as scary as the battle skills they learn. Zuhour ran away because she was afraid that armed patrols would come to get her and her children. She went to a sewing shop inside a house and begged the seamstress to take them in. **"I would like to help you," the young woman says, "but my father is a member of Daesh."**(17) Zuhour nonetheless lends a hand. On three-week rotations, her father fights and returns home for a few days of relaxation. The tailor conceals her and her children on such days in her sewing room, the one place her father never enters. This goes on for two months until the ladies start dialing random numbers out of a Kurdistan phone book. The hostages often struggle with their inability to recall phone numbers from their seized devices. The first caller makes touch with Zuhour's uncle, who then makes contact with the beekeeper, who dispatches a female smuggler to masquerade as a client. A remarkable aspect of this tale is the bond Zuhour's family forms with Reem, to the point that the latter wishes she had escaped with them.

Mikhail also points out historical parallels between people being forced to move because of persecution of Jews, Christians, or Muslims. She keeps thinking about the best friend of her grandmother, who had to leave Baghdad after the Farhud, a pogrom in 1941 in which Jews from communities that had been there since the sixth century were killed during two days of riots. When Mikhail stops to think about her own life, she captures the unique beauty of the world around her. She shows herself to be a sharp observer of the strangeness and beauty of the world.

Mikhail was born in Iraq in 1965. She worked as a journalist for the Baghdad Observer. Due to increasing threats that she faced from the Iraqi authorities,

Mikhail fled first to Jordan, then to the United States. Her poetry collection *The War Works Hard* was shortlisted for the Griffin Prize. *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* won the 2010 Arab American Book Award for poetry. Dunya Mikhail has also been awarded the UN Human Rights Award for Freedom of Writing. The author currently lives in Michigan.

Sexual violence is a means of otherness and obliteration that has been practiced against Iraqi women as a result of sectarian conflicts, displacement, immigration as well as unemployment and financial decline that are caused by political unrest. A report submitted to the UN in 2019 confirms that an estimated 24% of Iraqi girls in the middle and south of Iraq are subjected to forced, temporary, and early marriages as a strategy of economic survival for many Iraqi poor families. It also shows that a number of women in the south of Iraq are victims of *fasliyya*, a tribal practice of marrying a woman to resolve a dispute. In Southern Iraq, as a case in point, eleven women were forced to marry in such an agreement in Basra in 2015.(Puttick, 21 November, 2015,<https://tbinternet.ohchr.org>) The report contends that no serious procedures have been taken by the Iraqi government to eliminate abuse and subjugation against Iraqi women.

In his novel *The Absent Present*, the Iraqi author Hameed Alkifaey sheds light on practices in which the cruelty of society against its women is manifested, in the social groups whose diverse authentications constitute the cultural texture of Iraqi community: bedouin, rural and urban environments, religious, tribal and civil, poor and wealthy. The narrator of the events, Nazim Mutashar, suffers a complex injustice. He becomes a vagabond because of his mother's early death and his father's cruelty. His sister, who likewise is not spared from harm, flees to Baghdad to save herself. His other sister Manal also falls victim of abuse in the name of honor. Nazim eventually overcomes the hardships, but fails to realize his ambition

of marrying Jamila Jalal, the intelligent girl who lifts herself from a strict conservative society to a free civil society. The most important theme in this novel, as a case in point, is that revolutionary and radical solutions do not accelerate progress in Iraqi society, but rather hinder it. Rejection of violence, compromising solutions, pragmatic thinking, and rejection of ideological extremism are necessary to bring about profound changes within the Iraqi society.

## **Conclusion**

The examination of women as subaltern in Iraqi culture and literature reveals the complex interplay between sociocultural traditions, historical transformations, and literary representation. Drawing on the framework of Subaltern Studies, this study underscores how Iraqi women have often been marginalized within patriarchal and colonial power structures, their voices rendered silent or mediated through male-centric narratives. Iraqi literature, particularly contemporary works, serves both as a reflection of this marginalization and as a medium for resistance, where women's experiences are foregrounded to challenge societal norms and reclaim agency.

In analyzing these texts, it becomes evident that Iraqi literature does not merely document the subaltern condition of women but actively critiques the systems that perpetuate it. The narratives often expose the intersectionality of oppression—linking gender to class, ethnicity, and geopolitics while advocating for the reimagining of women's roles in shaping Iraq's cultural and historical identity. By amplifying voices that resist subjugation and offering nuanced depictions of women's struggles and resilience, Iraqi literature contributes to a broader discourse on gender equity and human rights. This study not only highlights the enduring relevance of subaltern theory in literary and cultural analysis but also calls for more inclusive approaches to Iraqi women's narratives. It suggests that future

research should delve deeper into underrepresented perspectives, such as those of rural women, minority groups, and diaspora communities, to further dismantle the structures that silence them.

The growing body of literature that centers on women's voices offers a critical pathway toward rethinking their roles and contributions. By reclaiming narratives and challenging oppressive structures, Iraqi women's stories become acts of resistance and reclamation, illuminating the possibility of transformation within both cultural and literary domains. This exploration serves as a reminder of the power of literature to not only reflect societal realities but also to inspire and demand change. Through continued academic engagement with such narratives, we can contribute to a deeper understanding of gendered subalternity and foster more equitable frameworks for representation in Iraqi and global contexts.

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