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**“The World of Lonely Women”
in Novels by Contemporary Iraqi Female Writers**

Abstract

The aim of the article is to present the issue of loneliness of Iraqi women on the basis of selected novels written by Iraqi female writers in the 21st century. The first part of the article, which is preceded by an introduction to the topic, includes general information about the development of novels by Iraqi women writers since the second half of the 1990s and some remarks about their methods of portraying female characters. The second part of the article provides examples of lonely women in their narratives whereas the third part depicts a story of Riyām, the heroine in the novel *Riyām wa-Kafā* (Riyam and Kafa, 2014) by Hadiya Ḥusayn, in a more detailed way.

Keywords: Contemporary Iraqi Literature, Iraqi Novel, Arab Women Writers, Loneliness

In 1985 Luṭfiyya ad-Dulaymī, a well-known Iraqi woman writer, published her collection *The World of Lonely Women*, consisting of a short novel and four short stories, which was republished in 2013.¹ The short novel of the same title comprises a parallel story of two women. The first one is the narrator, who lives alone and is only visited by her friend ‘Ā’ida and by her beloved man who would like to marry her. Yet she refuses to marry him many times without giving him an explanation. In fact, she doesn’t want to tell him that she has a brain tumour which causes her severe migraines.² However, the narrator changes her mind and decides to live happily with the man after reading a diary written by an unknown woman which she finds on a bench in a street one day. The

¹ Luṭfiyya ad-Dulaymī, *‘Ālam an-nisā’ al-wahīdāt*, Dār al-Madā, Bayrūt 2013.

² Ad-Dulaymī, *‘Ālam an-nisā’ al-wahīdāt*, in: *ibidem*, pp. 7–13, 25–29, 33–39, 46–47, 57–59, 75–77, 79–80.

second heroine, 38-year-old "Miss M", mentions in her diary that she lives with her father and that she doesn't want to marry. In her youth, she was molested by her uncle who forced her beloved man to leave her. Over the years, Munā has been dreaming about a man whom she could love. Finally, her young neighbour Fu'ād, who temporarily lost his sight on the front of the war against Iran, tells her that he is in love with her. However, Munā decides to live alone because she is afraid that their marriage will ruin the perfect moment of their falling in love.³

In turn, in the first short story *The one who came*, the heroine Nihāl is a history teacher that grows weak when she visits a museum with her pupils and looks at the statues of the ancient gods of Mesopotamia. In the past, this strange weakness was why she gave up her Master's studies in the ancient history of Iraq. In contrast, her beloved Ġawād travelled to Europe after their engagement in order to see all the statues of a Sumerian deity in different museums, about which he had written his Master's thesis. His increasing fascination with the subject moved him away from Nihāl who had been waiting for him for two years. The emotional distance between them deepened also because of his experience of fighting on the Iran-Iraq front. Finally, Ġawād is killed in the war and desperate Nihāl sees his ghost in a museum, emerging from the statue of the Sumerian deity.⁴

The lonely sisters of the sun depicts the life of two sisters, Hudā and Salmā, in their family house after their parents' death, and their cousin Aḥlām. The three women are over thirty years old and work from the morning till the late afternoon. They spend their evenings at home, isolated from other people. Despite the fact that they live together, they feel lonely and long for men. Each of them experiences heartbreak and keeps this a secret from the others.⁵

In the third short story *Night of the phoenix*, the tragic fate of a girl named Budūr, who lives in a conservative rural community, is described. A local sheikh plays a large role in her family life: parents of the young heroine seek his help when her mother is unable to give birth to a boy and they allow the sheikh to beat their teenage daughter regularly after he informs them that she is possessed by an evil spirit. In fact, it is only an excuse to harass her body. Since her childhood, Budūr has been mutually in love with her cousin Mālik who returns to the village after many years of absence. Mālik proposes Budūr that she should escape with him and marry him, but he is murdered by her younger sister, who also kills the sheikh later on.⁶

Finally, the main character of the fourth short story *Dinner for two* is a young pregnant woman waiting for her husband to return from the war with Iran. The narrative focuses on her emotions and imaginations of the joyful return, but also on her anxieties and her awareness of terrible mass deaths of Iraqi soldiers on the battlefield. But instead of her husband on the threshold of their house, she sees his cousin along with a young

³ Ibidem, pp. 13–25, 29–32, 40–56, 59–75, 77–79.

⁴ Ad-Dulaymī, *Huwa al-laḡī atā*, in: Ad-Dulaymī, *'Ālam an-nisā' al-waḥīdāt*, pp. 83–110.

⁵ Ad-Dulaymī, *Aḥawāt aš-sams al-waḥīdāt*, in: ibidem, pp. 113–142.

⁶ Ad-Dulaymī, *Laylat al-'anqā'*, in: ibidem, pp. 145–180.

man. The woman invites the men inside and gives them dinner which she prepared for her husband. She sits alone in a corner while the men eat and waits for him.⁷

All the above-mentioned works tackle the issue of female loneliness and reveal its different facets, such as: the loneliness of a sick woman; the loneliness of a woman stigmatized by her traumatic past experiences; the loneliness of a woman who lost her fiancé in the war; the loneliness of a woman who has not experienced relationship with a man or who is broken-hearted; the loneliness of a defenceless and sexually harassed girl; and finally, the loneliness of a woman waiting for her husband to return from the front. Some of these works concentrate on exploring the inner worlds of the heroines, while some other also depict the surrounding reality and clearly indicate the Iran-Iraq war context.

Despite the fact that the short novel and four short stories were written thirty years ago, they have not lost their validity. In today's Iraq which has been torn by political, religious and social conflicts, absorbing tens of thousands of victims, the world of lonely women is growing.

The aim of the article is to present the issue of loneliness of Iraqi women, on the basis of selected novels written by Iraqi female writers in the 21st century. The first part of the article contains general information about the development of novels by Iraqi women writers since the second half of the 1990s. Special attention is paid to their methods of portraying female characters. The second part provides examples of lonely women in their narratives. The third part of the article depicts a story of Riyām, the heroine in the novel *Riyām wa-Kafā* (Riyam and Kafa, 2014) by Hadiya Ḥusayn, in a more precise manner.⁸ In the second and in the third part, there are some references to the reflections on loneliness in the fields of philosophy and psychology. The conclusion consists of comments on all the parts of the article. Due to the limited size of the article, it doesn't comprise a description of historical, social and cultural factors which shape the world presented in all the mentioned works of fiction.

Portraying female characters in novels by Iraqi women writers

In his article, Nağm 'Abd Allāh Kāzīm describes several stages in the development of novels written by Iraqi women writers: the stage of their absence or silence in the 1920s–1940s; the stage of their “shy” and small presence in the 1950s–1960s; the stage of their strong presence from the 1970s until the mid-1990s; and finally the stage of their intense growth since the mid-1990s. He also points out that in 2012 there were 20 female authors in Iraq, who published 40 novels in the period of 1994–2012. Moreover, he notes

⁷ Ad-Dulaymī, 'Ašā' li-*itnayn*, in: *ibidem*, pp. 183–194.

⁸ Hadiya Ḥusayn, *Riyām wa-Kafā*, Al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li-ad-Dirāsāt wa-an-Našr, Bayrūt 2014.

that today not only do Iraqi women writers occupy a strong position on the Iraqi literary scene, but also their novels are present on the Arab publishing market.⁹

It should be emphasised that the novels by Iraqi female authors, written in the last of the aforementioned stages, have been strongly influenced by consecutive wars and their consequences: the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988), the first Gulf War (1990–1991), the period of economic sanctions (1991–2003), the US invasion of Iraq and its occupation (2003–2011), and finally by political and religious strife which has lasted for over a decade. As Ikram Masmoudi claims, “in the context of ongoing wars, occupation, exile and dispossession, this new generation of women writers uses fiction as an investigative tool to record the unique experiences of women facing these conditions. (...) As a result of the authors’ focus on these unique realities, a new type of narrative has emerged, bringing with it a new image of the Iraqi woman.”¹⁰

Indeed, researchers in the field of works by contemporary Iraqi female writers – both living in the country and abroad – notice common trends in their narratives. Ferial Ghazoul argues that these narratives show women’s experiences as representative of the whole of Iraqi society and that they complement the writings of male authors with new dimensions.¹¹ Similarly, Hanan Hussam Kashou states that Iraqi women writers present the history of ordinary and marginalised Iraqis, often “through the stories of lonely women who lost husbands and fiancés as well as family members in bombings,” and also “through the sub-narratives they use to approach the troublesome events faced by many Iraqis.”¹² These sub-narratives are “miniature stories” of other people, interwoven into the narratives focused on the main protagonists or stories of others which are told by literary characters. Very often female novelists “include real events and tragedies that took place in Iraq during the war, which become intertwined and part of the fictive story they are telling.”¹³

The main characters of the novels by Iraqi women writers are, therefore, women – mothers, wives, daughters, sisters who are deprived of the presence of men because

⁹ Nağm ‘Abd Allāh Kāzim, *Ar-Riwāya an-niswiyya al-‘arabiyya fī al-‘Irāq. Min al-ḥudūr ilā az-ẓāhira*, Rābitat al-Mar’a al-‘Irāqiyya, Viewed 29 August 2016, <<http://www.iraqiwomensleague.com/mod.php?mod=articles&modfile=item&itemid=12831#.VbkHR7X4izc>>. See also: Māğida Hātū Hāšim, *Ar-Riwāya an-niswiyya al-‘irāqiyya al-mu‘āšira. Al-Ḥiṭāb al-muğāyyir li-al-inhimām bi-al-ğasad wa-tašazzī al-huwiyya*, Ġā’izat Nāzik al-Malā’ika li-al-ibda’ an-niswī, Viewed 29 August 2016, <<http://nazikprize.crd.gov.iq/pdf/Monetary/1/11.pdf>>. The author lists three stages of this development: the founding stage in the 1950s–1970s; the after-founding stage from the 1970s to mid-1990s; and the stage of contemporary novels since the mid-1990s.

¹⁰ Ikram Masmoudi, *Portraits of Iraqi Women: Between Testimony and Fiction*, “International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies” 2010, 1–2/4, p. 60.

¹¹ Ferial Ghazoul, *Iraq*, in: Radwa Ashour, Ferial Ghazoul, Hasna Reda-Mekdasi (eds.), *Arab Women Writers. A Critical Reference Guide. 1873–1999*, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo 2008, p. 201.

¹² Hanan Hussam Kashou, “War and Exile in Contemporary Iraqi Women’s Novels” (PhD Diss., the Graduate School of The Ohio State University, Columbus 2013), p. 4.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 299. It is worth mentioning that the fictional works of Iraqi female writers are not the only way of recording war experiences of Iraqi women. In the *Introduction* to her study *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present* (Zed Books Ltd., London 2007, p. 1), Nadjie al-Ali “puts the life stories and experiences of Iraqi women at the centre and attempts to construct an alternative history of histories.”

they have gone to war, been imprisoned or killed. These women are struggling to ensure their families' daily survival in the conditions of chaos.¹⁴ Descriptions of their ordinary activities performed during the war offer the reader – as Natalya Minoff notices on the basis of Miriam Cooke's *Women and the War Story* – “insight into the authentic female experience of war.”¹⁵ At the same time, in the face of the collapse of the social system and traditional family relations, women have to perform new roles within their households and thus gain a stronger position in the Iraqi society. This change of social roles is clearly recorded in the works by Iraqi female writers.¹⁶

Moreover, Iraqi women writers do not hesitate to describe their heroines' traumatic and very intimate experiences, such as rape and torture in prison, or to depict their sexual relations, which were concerned taboo subjects in the earlier periods.¹⁷ What is important, their protagonists often appeal to the reader with their own voices, because many of these writers employ first-person narratives, internal monologues, forms of a diary or letters, and other genres of autobiographical writing.¹⁸ As a result, the novels written by Iraqi women authors do not idealise female protagonists in the shadow of war and exile. These heroines are no longer, as Liqā' Mūsā Fiṅṅān says, women who seek only to pursue their own dreams against the rules of the patriarchal society (like for example heroines in the novels written by Syrian and Lebanese female writers in the 1960s),¹⁹ or the women who are guided by an ideology.²⁰ They are multi-dimensional characters.

It is worth mentioning that male characters in these novels, in the opinion of Hanan Hussam Kashou, “act as supporting, secondary protagonists providing particular information about the war and about hardships and tribulations of war.”²¹ “The men are not, however, considered the enemy” by Iraqi women writers, “the real enemy is the chaotic nature of war and the lawlessness of it, which produces the beastly features of man.”²²

¹⁴ Hussam Kashou, “War and Exile”, p. 8.

¹⁵ Natalya Minoff, “(En)gendering New Roles: War and Exile as Agents of Female Empowerment in Contemporary Iraqi Women's Literature” (A Senior Honors Thesis for the Department of International Literary & Visual Studies, Tufts University, Medford 2013), p. 25.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 34. Cf. The real stories of Iraqi women about their living during the time of Iran-Iraq war in Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, pp. 148–153.

¹⁷ See ‘Abd Allāh Ḥabīb Kāzīm, Rawā’ Nu’ās Muḥammad, *Mutaḡayyirāt as-sard fī ar-riwāya al-‘irāqīyya 1990–2010. Al-Kitāba an-niswiyya. 1990–2010*, “Maḡallat Kullīyyat at-Tarbiya” 2014, 15, pp. 14–25, Viewed 20 August 2016, <<http://www.iasj.net/iasj?func=fulltext&aid=91183>>; Hātū Hāšim, *Ar-Riwāya an-niswiyya al-‘irāqīyya al-mu’āšira*, pp. 4–16.

¹⁸ Cf. Liqā' Mūsā Fiṅṅān, *Al-Ḥarb fī ar-riwāya an-niswiyya al-‘irāqīyya bayna 1980 wa 2003* (Kulliyat li-Tarbiyat al-Banāt, Ġāmi‘at Baḡdād), p. 21, Viewed 25 August 2016, <<http://iwsaw.lau.edu.lb/files/Leqaamoussafenjan.pdf>>.

¹⁹ About the heroines in the novels of women writers such as Imilī Našr Allāh or Laylā Ba‘labakī see: Nedal al-Mousa, *The Changing Image of the Heroine in the Arabic Female Bildungsromane*, “Middle Eastern Literatures” 2006, 3/9, pp. 257–270; Joseph Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1995; Miriam Cook, *Arab Women Writers*, in: Muhammad Mustafa Badawi (ed.), *Modern Arabic Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992, pp. 450–451.

²⁰ Mūsā Fiṅṅān, *Al-Ḥarb fī ar-riwāya an-niswiyya al-‘irāqīyya*, p. 17.

²¹ Hussam Kashou, “War and Exile”, p. 9.

²² Ibidem, p. 117.

Images of lonely women

In this article, with regard to the female characters in the fictional works by Iraqi women writers, the term "lonely women" means both: women who live alone and those who feel lonely.²³ The emotional loneliness of these protagonists, living in the time of wars and economic hardships, stems usually from "the absence of a reliable attachment figure (e.g., spouse)" and is accompanied by such feelings as "anxiety, desolation and insecurity."²⁴ In the case of these Middle Eastern women, subjected to strict patriarchal norms, this absence is being especially strongly felt, because such relations as marriage serve "a broad social integrative function that diminishes feelings of both social and emotional loneliness."²⁵ Lonely women are both main characters of the novels by Iraqi female writers as well as secondary characters. They are also individuals who are just mentioned by protagonists, and thus their stories which are incorporated into these novels as sub-narratives embody the fate of thousands of Iraqi women.

In the fictional works by Iraqi female authors, since the mid-1990s until now certain images of lonely women have repeatedly appeared. One of these images is a widow who "becomes a symbol and a feature of Iraqi women living an isolated life."²⁶ No wonder, considering that a significant proportion of the society has been made up of widows in the war-torn Iraq in the last four decades.²⁷ Among the widows, there are older women who lost their husbands many years ago, for instance a woman described in the novel *Ġāyib* (Absent, 2004) by Batūl al-Ḥudayrī. Her story is told to the main character Dalāl by her aunt Umm Ġāyib who works as a seamstress. The old widow is one of her customers. She confesses to Umm Ġāyib that due to her overwhelming loneliness she keeps imagining that the rustle of the curtains in her bedroom, which is caused by

²³ The author of this article is aware of the fact that, according to the entry 'loneliness' in *Encyclopedia of Human Relationships* (Susan Sprecher, Harry T. Reis (eds.), Sage Publications 2009, p. 985), "loneliness is the distress that results from discrepancies between ideal and perceived social relationships. This so called cognitive discrepancy perspective makes it clear that loneliness is not synonymous with being alone, nor does being with others guarantee protection from feelings of loneliness. Rather, loneliness is the distressing feeling that occurs when one's social relationships are perceived as being less satisfying than what is desired." However, the author of this article assumes that being/living alone in the time of war, when social relations are inevitably disturbed, means feeling lonely.

²⁴ Ibidem. The emotional loneliness is the only one considered in this article, but there are, of course, also its other forms listed by researchers on loneliness. See more: Brita Nilsson, Unni A. Lindström, Dagfinn Naden, *Is loneliness a psychological dysfunction? A literary study of the phenomenon of loneliness*, "Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences" 2006, 20, p. 95.

²⁵ Nilsson, Lindström, Naden, *Is loneliness a psychological dysfunction?*, p. 95. About remaining without husband in the period of economic sanctions on Iraq, despite of increasing social pressure to get married, see: Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, pp. 195–197.

²⁶ Hussam Kashou, "War and Exile", p. 259.

²⁷ See: Aseel Kami, *The Daily Struggle of Iraq's Widows of War*, "Reuters", Viewed 29 July 2016, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/11/09/us-iraq-widows-idUSTRE7A841T20111109>>. Cf. Nadjé al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, pp. 200, 251, who writes that "(...) there are approximately 25,000 widows in Iraq, although estimates in 2006 go up to 1 million."

a breeze, is the rustle of her late husband's *dishdasha* as he comes into her bed in the darkness of the night.²⁸

Sometimes these widows are middle-aged women who raise their children alone. One of them is Samīra, the heroine of the novel *Al-Layl wa-az-zamān* (The night and the time, 2006) by Badī'a Amīn. In the first pages of the novel, the reader finds Samīra as Hanā' and Sa'd's mother who, after a discussion with her husband, takes them away from Baghdad, bombed by the Americans in the late 1990s. She flees with her children to their relatives living in a safer place, the town of Ba'qūba. Later on, the husband disappears from Samīra's life and emerges only in her memories about their happy past. The same thing happens to her sister Aḥlām and her children who get killed in the bombing of the Baghdadian shelter of 'Āmariyya. The heroine travels with her children to London where she stays with their relatives for some time. Then, Samīra returns to live in Baghdad where she has to face another tragedy. She is informed about her son's fatal illness caused by depleted uranium which was used by the Americans in Iraq. The distraught mother accompanies Sa'd, lying in a hospital bed, in the last moments of his life.²⁹

Among the images of lonely heroines in the novels by Iraqi female writers, there are also women waiting for their missing husbands. For example, the main character in the novel *Ḥadīqat Ḥayāt* (Hayat's garden, 2003) by Luṭfiyya ad-Dulaymī lives with her daughter Maysā' in a house with a garden in one of the Baghdadian neighbourhoods during the American bombings at the end of the 20th century. Although many residents of her district have left their houses, Ḥayāt has stayed. For many years she has been working as an Arabic teacher in the morning and as a seamstress in the evening in order to make her and Maysā''s living. She has also been waiting for her husband Ġālīb who has been missing for many years, since the Iran-Iraq war, while her delicate and alienated daughter has also been waiting for her fiancé Ziyād who emigrated to Europe in search of a better life after his family members' death. Despite these two women's hard life, the end of their story seems to be optimistic. One day Ḥayāt recognises her husband in the picture of a vagrant met by another protagonist in the novel – the photographer Ġassān on a street of the Iraqi capital. She goes with her friends to look for him.³⁰

In the above-mentioned novel of Batūl al-Ḥudayrī, a young orphan girl Dalāl is brought up by her aunt Umm Ġāyib and her husband Abū Ġāyib in one of the Baghdadian blocks

²⁸ Batūl al-Ḥudayrī, *Ġāyib*, fourth edition, Al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li-ad-Dirāsāt wa-an-Našr, Bayrūt 2009, especially p. 50.

²⁹ Badī'a Amīn, *Al-Layl wa-az-zamān*, Manšūrāt Ittihād al-Kuttāb al-'Arab, Dimašq 2006. The author of the article mentioned this novel also in: Adrianna Maško, *Nawiązania do "Eposu o Gilgameszu" we współczesnej powieści irackiej*, in: Adam Bednarczyk, Magdalena Kubarek, Maciej Szatkowski (eds.), *Orient i literatura. Między tradycją a nowoczesnością*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń 2015, pp. 43–45. About the impact of depleted uranium and American bombing campaign in 1991 on public health in Iraq in the embargo period see: Nadje al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, pp. 210–211.

³⁰ Luṭfiyya ad-Dulaymī, *Ḥadīqat Ḥayāt*, Manšūrāt Ittihād al-Kuttāb al-'Arab, Dimašq 2003. The author of the article mentioned this novel also in: Maško, *Nawiązania do "Eposu o Gilgameszu"*, pp. 40–43. A fragment of the novel in English see: Shakir M. Mustafa, *Contemporary Iraqi Fiction: An Anthology*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse 2008, pp. 22–30. See also: Kashou, "War and Exile", p. 147.

during the period of economic sanctions and US airstrikes in 1998.³¹ Abū Ġāyib is arrested by the secret police on charges of smuggling works of art. After his disappearance, the heroine and her aunt have to live on. Dalāl’s new livelihood depends on sorting waste³² while Umm Ġāyib, who used to work as a seamstress, suffers from the loss. For days she redraws the shapes of clouds on a sheet of paper which she sticks onto the window.³³ As it was noted by Hanan Hussam Kashou, the name of the aunt’s missing husband, that is “the name Ghayib (absent), becomes the representation of the fate of many Iraqi men in particular, but all Iraqis as well.”³⁴

The loneliness of women living without their husbands is also shown in the novel *Manāzil al-waḥṣa* (The houses of alienation, 2013) by Dunā Ġālī. In this case, however, the man neither disappears nor dies, but leaves his wife in a difficult situation and goes to Amman, from where he regularly calls her. He makes this decision because his mental health has been deteriorating after he was abducted by kidnappers. The lonely heroine has to face the reality of US-occupied Baghdad, where she cannot go out of her house without fear of being killed by the American soldiers or militias that fight with them. Thus, she lives in a closed and dark house, listening to the sounds of bullets outside, with her 30-year-old son Salwān who has been coping with mental illness for many years.³⁵

Among the lonely heroines in the novels by Iraqi women writers, there are also middle-aged women living alone. One of them is Ilhām in the aforementioned novel *Ġāyib* by Batūl al-Ḥuḍayrī. She is a friend of the main character Dalāl and lives in the apartment upstairs. Ilhām works as a nurse at a hospital where she takes care of children dying as a result of injuries sustained in bombings and explosions. When the heroine finds out that she suffers from breast cancer, she undergoes chemotherapy, but doesn’t inform her superiors of the fact in order not to lose her job. One day she is arrested on suspicion of committing a crime, and Dalāl never sees her again.³⁶ Natalya Minoff draws attention to Ilhām’s words during one of her walks with Dalāl on Abu Nuwas Street, near the Tigris River. Ilhām compares herself with the statue of Scheherazade. She tells Dalāl that she is empty inside just like the bronze statue. In Minoff’s opinion “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.”³⁷

³¹ About the situation of Iraqi women in this period see: Louise Cainkar, *The Gulf War, sanctions and the lives of Iraqi women*, “Arab Studies Quarterly” 1993, 2/15, pp. 15–37.

³² Cf. Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, p. 200: “While those whose husbands were killed in battle received a small government pension, those whose husbands died at the hands of the former regime for political reasons received no benefits and were left to fend for themselves.”

³³ Al-Ḥuḍayrī, *Ġāyib*, especially pp. 257–259. Cf. Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, p. 187.

³⁴ Kashou, “War and Exile”, p. 304.

³⁵ Dunā Ġālī, *Manāzil al-waḥṣa*, Dār at-Tanwīr li-aṭ-Ṭibā‘ wa-an-Naṣr, Bayrūt 2013. The author of the article mentioned this novel also in: Adrianna Maško, *Religious Conflicts after the 2003 Invasion of Iraq Reflected in Contemporary Iraqi Prose Works*, “Hemispheres. Studies on Cultures and Societies” 2015, 2/30, pp. 80, 82–84.

³⁶ Al-Ḥuḍayrī, *Ġāyib*, p. 96. See also: Kashou, “War and Exile”, p. 300.

³⁷ Minoff, “(En)gendering New Roles”, p. 37.

Another example of a woman living alone is Ḥayāt, who is in her late thirties, in the novel *Sayyidāt zuḥal* (Ladies from Saturn, 2009) by Luṭfiyya ad-Dulaymī. The action of the novel takes place mainly during the period of fighting between the US occupation forces and radical militias resisting them. During the day, Ḥayāt often walks on the streets of Baghdad, watching the massive destruction of her city. At night she hides herself from bombings and potential attackers in the basement of her house. In this place, she feels safe because it seems to her that the faces of her dead relatives look at her from the mirrors which hang there. In the basement, she reads their diaries and describes her war experiences and stories of her female friends who also live without men in the same street. Writing down these stories is a kind of therapy for her; it alleviates her loneliness and anxieties. From Ḥayāt's tales emerge scenes from her past, including pictures of her life with her husband, whom she did not love. During the rule of the former Iraqi regime, the devastated man divorced her after he had been mutilated by unknown oppressors in revenge for his activities in the name of human rights. However, despite all the suffering and the nightmarish reality of war, Ḥayāt has not lost hope because she fell in love with a man waiting for her abroad.³⁸

Young and unmarried women, living alone or with their female relatives, are also the heroines in the novels by contemporary Iraqi women writers. In the aforementioned novel *Sayyidāt zuḥal* by Luṭfiyya ad-Dulaymī, the female friends of the main character Ḥayāt live in a “community of lonely women” and spend a lot of their time in her house. As we learn from the chapter *The book of girls*, they meet again in Amman where they seek refugee status. Each of them left Baghdad with memories of traumatic events: Rawiyya, despite the increasing radicalization of society after the US invasion of Iraq, refused to wear hijab and for that reason she received letters with death threats; Manār, in spite of radical militias' threats, did not stop supplying hospitals with medicines received from foreign organisations, as a result she was raped by unknown attackers in her own house and her family was murdered before her eyes; Hāla was arrested by the American soldiers on suspicion of concealing terrorists and she was raped by one of them during her interrogation.³⁹

Finally, one needs to mention images of lonely women living in exile, loaded with a baggage of painful memories which they have brought with them from their homeland. As Ikram Masmoudi claims, “they are the survivors, the ones testifying to their experiences; and from their testimonies, we can just catch a glimpse of the hidden aspect of their lives as wives who lost their husbands under torture, or lovers who were separated by wars, or single women standing on their own, refusing to commit in circumstances dictated by

³⁸ Luṭfiyya ad-Dulaymī, *Sayyidāt zuḥal*, second edition, Dār Faḍā'at li-an-Našr wa-at-Tawzī', 'Ammān 2012, especially p. 29. For a more detailed description of the novel see: Kashou, “War and Exile”, pp. 135–142.

³⁹ Ad-Dulaymī, *Sayyidāt zuḥal*, part 8. See also: Kashou, “War and Exile”, pp. 142–143. About different acts of violence targeting women after the American invasion in 2003, see: Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, pp. 225–230, 239–243; Nadje al-Ali, Nicola Pratt, *Conspiracy of Near Silence. Violence Against Iraqi Women*, “Middle East Report” 258(2011), pp. 34–36; Nadje al-Ali, Cynthia Enloe, Nicola Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?: Women and the Occupation of Iraq*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2008, chapter *The Use and Abuse of Iraqi Women*.

exile and transiency.”⁴⁰ One of them is Sarāb, the heroine of the novel *Sawāqī al-qulūb* (Streams of hearts, 2005) by In‘ām Kaḡaḡī, who lives in the Iraqi diaspora in Paris in the 1980s. Although Sarāb makes an impression of a strong and charismatic woman who works as a translator in the French capital and is esteemed by Iraqi immigrants, she carries her secret. She reveals it to the main character of the novel whom she falls in love with that Sarāb is the name written in her forged passport which helped her flee from Iraq, but her real name is Rūzā Sam‘ān. As a member of the Iraqi Communist Party, she was arrested and raped in a Baathist prison.⁴¹

Similarly, Adība in the novel *Nisā’ ‘alā safar* (Women on a journey, 2001) by Hayfā’ Zangana, also belonged to the opposition of the former Iraqi regime in her youth and for that reason suffered torture in prison. She managed to flee the country and settle in London. For many years she has been unsuccessfully looking for her husband who was an oppositionist like her. In her psychotherapy sessions, she realises that she has repressed the terrible truth: when she was in a prison cell, a shapeless object in a bag was thrown into it and it was the body of her husband.⁴²

The Story of Riyām

In this part of the article, a story of Riyām, the heroine in the novel *Riyām wa-Kafā* by Hadiya Ḥusayn, is presented in a more detailed manner, with reference to protagonist’s own reflections on loneliness. Riyām is a 35-year-old woman who decides to write an autobiographical novel on the basis of her diaries before she passes away.⁴³ Such an idea comes to her mind one night when she looks at the sky: “the stars have their way, so why have I lost my way? How have the years floated me on a horseback, pushed by a mad wind, so that I cannot collect the time and I am rushing into the desert of lonely life? I am alone, the time passes me by, leaving me a little space of its vast, mysterious existence; a space that I am trying to extend, although it will not save me from the dreadful fate (...).”⁴⁴ Thus, she is aware of her “loneliness through subjective time, lying there, enveloped by the cold blackness of the night.”⁴⁵

In her memories Riyām returns to her childhood when she lived with her mother, sisters, grandmother, father and his favourite second wife in their house. She describes relationships between the family members and the humiliation of her mother which

⁴⁰ Masmoudi, *Portraits of Iraqi Women*, p. 71.

⁴¹ In‘ām Kaḡaḡī, *Sawāqī al-qulūb*, Al-Mu‘assasa al-‘Arabiyya li-ad-Dirāsāt wa-an-Našr, Bayrūt 2005.

⁴² Hayfā’ Zangana, *Nisā’ ‘alā safar*, Dār al-Ḥikma li-aṭ-Ṭibā‘ wa-an-Našr wa-at-Tawzī‘, Al-Qāhira 2001, p. 316. See more detailed description of the novel in: Agnieszka Graczyk, “Motyw destrukcji i transgresji w twórczości pisarki arabskiej Haify Zangany” (PhD Diss., Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań 2014), p. 31, 65–67. See also: Masmoudi, *Portraits of Iraqi Women*, p. 73.

⁴³ Ḥusayn, *Riyām wa-Kafā*, pp. 10–11.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

⁴⁵ Ben Lazare Mijuskovic, *Loneliness in Philosophy, Psychology and Literature*, Universe, Bloomington 2012, p. 55.

she had patiently endured for many years because she did not give birth to a son. The mother focused her attention on taking care of her daughters: Hind, Šābrīn and Riyām and sewing clothes. After her husband's and his second wife's death, Riyām's mother lived with her unfavourable mother-in law, who took care of her grandson, for some time. Then, the mother decided to move out with her adolescent daughters and worked at home as a seamstress supplying shops with clothes. In this way, she earned their living.⁴⁶

This happy period of their life ends with Šābrīn's suicide caused by her breakdown after being molested by her uncle. Even though her death is a hard blow for her mother and sisters, they try to live on and do their jobs. At that time, Hind marries their neighbour Sāmī while the mother decides to return to the family house after many years of living in rented houses. However, this plan was interrupted by her death.⁴⁷ So, Riyām stays alone in their rented house, as she does not want to live with her sister and her husband who starts to harass her. She seeks "solitude" because she "is overwhelmed with the presence of the 'others'⁴⁸: "(...) It was hard for me when I found myself facing the walls and bitter memories, but slowly I got used to it. I began to work longer. During the day, rarely did I make a break in order to fall asleep at night, so that I would not be haunted by ghosts and would not think about thieves (...)." ⁴⁹

Although she feels sad and lonely after the loss of her beloved mother, Riyām decides to realise her dream and live in the old family house where she continues to work as a seamstress. Soon, Hind joins her, after her husband gets arrested for fraud.⁵⁰ However, their living together does not work well anymore because of Hind's dominant character.⁵¹

At that time, their cousin Fāṭima starts to help them at work and moves into their house. One day she tells Riyām the story of her lonely life: her husband disappeared during the war with Iran and the two families refused her to marry again. Fāṭima describes her situation in the following way: "I am a prisoner, Riyām. I am neither married nor divorced. I am also not a widow in the ordinary sense of this word. (...) And so, men control us in our lifetime and after their death."⁵² When Fāṭima also says that she lost her chance for having children, Riyām reflects on herself: "I pay attention to her last words and I count my years. I feel a twinge of hidden pain, but I do not fall into the trap of hopelessness, because there are still years ahead of me. Despite the defeats, that I lived through, I do feel satisfaction."⁵³

Her defeats include not only the loss of her beloved mother and sister, but also the loss of men whom she was once in love with. The first one was Rīḥān, a boy from the neighbourhood, with whom she spent time when she was a teenager. The other one

⁴⁶ Husayn, *Riyām wa-Kafā*, pp. 13–37, 49–52.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, pp. 87–110, 123–138.

⁴⁸ Mijuskovic, *Loneliness in Philosophy*, p. 61.

⁴⁹ Husayn, *Riyām wa-Kafā*, p. 135.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, pp. 143–160.

⁵¹ Ibidem, pp. 171, 208–209.

⁵² Ibidem, pp. 155–156.

⁵³ Ibidem, p. 157.

was Nağm, whom she met in the shop of her mother's colleague, Mr. Muhtār, some years later. However, both men left her: the first one returned to his relatives in southern Iraq, and later he was killed by oppressors of the former regime; the second one left to kill his mother, who had abandoned him and his father and ran away with another man.⁵⁴

But even these losses do not stop Riyām from longing for a man, because she needs to establish a relationship with someone who "will alleviate the dreadful burden of nomadic isolation."⁵⁵ She admits to herself: "I feel emotional emptiness without borders which cannot be filled by sewing or writing. So what should I do to fill this spiritual emptiness?"⁵⁶ In this situation, Riyām starts to observe her lonely neighbour who comes to her house one day and asks her if she would agree to take care of his dogs during his week-long travel. But he does not return and policemen enter his house instead of him.⁵⁷ Then, Riyām asks herself: "Why do men leave my life in a dramatic way? Who plays this vicious game with me? Or maybe it is bad luck which haunts me? Or maybe someone draws lines of our fates without our knowledge?"⁵⁸

One night Riyām sleeps on the roof of her house. In her vision she sees her mother who tells her to fulfil her dreams. The next day Riyām leaves Hind a letter and walks out of the house: "And I left. I have been haunted by the feeling that my story has not begun yet. Here, I put my feet on the path of the beginning, away from the family house and the ghosts of the dead ones."⁵⁹ Thus, Riyām realises that she has to get rid of the burden of grief "which is produced from traumatic loss"⁶⁰ in order to begin her life again.

Conclusions

The dramatic events that have been tearing Iraq for many decades might have impeded its development in many areas, but not in the field of prose fiction which is flourishing now in comparison to its earlier periods. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in the case of works by female authors. Just as their male counterparts, Iraqi women writers both in the country and abroad feel a moral obligation to record these events, especially after 2003, since they are no longer restricted by state censorship.

Contemporary Iraqi female writers tell dozens of stories and their protagonists embody the stories of tens of thousands of Iraqis, especially during the rule of Saddam Hussein and after his overthrow. They pay special attention to experiences of women because they are convinced that their stories are worth telling and that their experiences from the

⁵⁴ Ibidem, pp. 38–46, 53–57, 73–86, 114–115.

⁵⁵ Mijuskovic, *Loneliness in Philosophy*, p. 27.

⁵⁶ Ḥusayn, *Riyām wa-Kafā*, p. 170.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, pp. 170–185.

⁵⁸ Ibidem, p. 204.

⁵⁹ Ibidem, p. 210.

⁶⁰ Robert Weiss, *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1975, p. 16.

time of wars and economic sanctions differ from those of men. In this way, women's stories complement the complex picture of Iraqi people's suffering.

Loneliness is one of the experiences which Iraqi women writers often deal with. In fact, it is a common human experience, but in the face of difficult circumstances such as war or emigration, it becomes even more painful, and what is more, it is extremely widespread in the Iraqi society. In such circumstances, millions of women lose their loved ones who die at the hands of oppressors, on the war front, during bombings and explosions or flee abroad without a chance to come back. In these situations, women who were not alone before, suddenly have to live a lonely life. In many cases, they also have to take over the function of the head of the family and to earn theirs and their children's living.

The Iraqi female writers describe the daily struggle of these women who are elderly and young widows living alone or with their half-orphaned children and women who have been waiting for their missing husbands or fathers for years. They are represented, for example, by Samīra in the novel *Al-Layl wa-az-zamān*, Ḥayāt in the novel *Ḥadīqat Ḥayāt* or Umm Ġāyib in the novel *Ġāyib*. However, the Iraqi female writers are also interested in the lives of young and middle-aged single and divorced women. These women, despite the surrounding chaos and destruction which they have to cope alone with, still dream of a peaceful life and love. The vicissitudes of their life are symbolised by the stories of such heroines as Ilhām in the novel *Ġāyib*, Ḥayāt in the novel *Sayyidāt Zuḥal* and Sarāb in the novel *Sawāqī al-qulūb*.

Riyām in the novel *Riyām wa-Kafā* also belongs to the second group of the heroines. Notwithstanding, unlike many of them, she shares her thoughts on loneliness in her internal monologues with the reader. Riyām reveals that her loneliness stems from the fact that she has been orphaned and that she has been involved in unhappy love affairs. She doesn't hide her weaknesses and her fear of being lonely in her everyday life. At the same time, Riyām represents the type of an independent heroine who has the courage to make choices about her life in spite of different kinds of social constraints.

In Riyām's story, historical and political references are not so clear as in the stories of the women mentioned in the second part of this article and the war doesn't seem to constitute the event which causes irreversible changes in heroine's life. However, these references are indicated by the stories of secondary characters, such as Rīḥān who is murdered because of his opposition activities during the time of the former regime, or Fāṭima who mentions that her husband has been missing since the war with Iran. Thus, Hadiya Ḥusayn focuses more on presenting the story of the heroine and her family than on depicting external circumstances. Nevertheless, this story symbolises the fate of Iraqi people as well.