

## Sectarian conflicts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century novel literature of Iraq

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The Article analyses how the contemporary Iraqi novel literature illustrates sectarian conflicts. The Arab revolutions enabled writers to use literature to openly discuss this ever-present antagonism inherent in Arab societies. The article emphasizes that Iraqi authors analyse both internal reasons for persistent sectarianism and external, implying the American occupation of Iraq that has aggravated the situation in the country. The Iraqi novelists can offer no direct answer on how to escape the deadlock of sectarianism. There are no direct answers in the novel of A. Saadawi either. It should be pointed out that some characters consider his “humanoid” Shismu-Frankenstein creature to consist of pieces belonging to people of different races, tribes, social groups. The character could be interpreted as a protest against apathy, humility, cowardice, slave psychology of people who are not able to protect the treasure that is their lives. The author put Shismu under a constant threat of disintegration and it refers to the fact that the very process of consolidation of different pieces into a single entity that makes up the Iraqi nation has not yet been historically completed. The national feeling cannot yet trump narrow sectarian interests overcome their spiritual numbness, restore what has been destroyed in the souls of religious minorities that are psychologically traumatized, wounded by the sense of their inferiority and uselessness in the homeland. But until the last day of creation comes, while the last human is alive, it is too early to lose hope and close the book.

**Keywords:** sectarianism, Muslims, Christians, Sunnis, Shiites, religious minorities, terrorist attacks, occupation, emigration.

Similarly to Christianity, the division of Islam dates back to ancient times. Throughout the history, the schools (*madhhabs*, *taifa* factions) became increasingly political, developed their particular institutions and practices (marriage, acts of worship, celebrations, etc.) During the colonial period, national borders of multi-religious countries were delineated without due regard to the historical locations of religious groups. Created by Britain after the First World War, Iraq was a conglomerate of disengaged ethnic, tribal and religious elements [1, p. 76]. Seeking to “divide and conquer”, colonial rulers prompted and enabled claims of one religious group against others, offering them means for a military resolution. But is it fair to blame sectarian wars on external forces, especially when they act as democratizers, when these grains of wrath need a fertile soil, that is to say an internal conflict potential?

Arabic writers employ fictional prose as a clear and heart piercing way to explore the issue and find their own solutions to these accursed problems. The second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen two Iraqi novelists spearhead the Arabic literature, winning over

Arab and foreign, primarily English-speaking, readers. These are “Ya Maryam” by Sinan Antoon (born 1967) and “Frankenstein in Baghdad” by Ahmed Saadawi (born 1973). Covers of both novels have honorary “Arabic Booker” marks proving that they outshone over a hundred of competing books. “Ya Maryam” was short listed in 2013, while “Frankenstein...” even won this prestigious international award in 2014.

The novels’ story-lines revolve around the events that took place in Iraq in 2005–2006 (“Frankenstein...”) and 2010 (“Ya Maryam”) amidst the American occupation (March 2003 — December 2011). The American presence was an overarching constant for everything that happened in the country. They quickly took care of Saddam Hussein in December 2006 although, as E. Primakov wrote, “the execution of Saddam was clearly bound to exacerbate the Sunni-Shia conflict”, “which inevitably happened” [2, p. 271]. Authors confirm this prediction: for instance, Iraqi novelist, fictionist and critic Salam Ibrahim analysed novel “The Star of Bataween” (2010) by another Iraqi writer Shakir al-Anbari, citing 2006–2008 period [i.e. the period that followed the execution — N.S.] as the time when the sectarian war unleashed and militias came to power (armed guerrilla groups that took orders from certain political associations, “parties” and “movements”) [3, p. 187].

Arabic, including Iraqi, authors examine intercommunal differences to a various extent and from different perspectives. Before the Arab spring, three subjects — politics, religion and sex — were tabooed, and authors could only touch upon them, primarily through personal relationships<sup>1</sup> between people of different creed.

Following the Arab revolutions, these taboos became obsolete and authors started openly and painfully examine the poisons (*sumums*) of sectarianism<sup>2</sup>.

Let us cite two examples from “Frankenstein...” that show how these “toxins” can poison everyday life. Hadi al-Attag is a Muslim suspected of connection to the elusive Frankenstein — Shisma. At some point, secret service officers came to interrogate him. One of them saw a plaster figurine of Virgin Mary in his house and said, “Virgin Mary figurines are forbidden. Break it with your own hands.” But Hadi, tortured by interrogators and exhausted, could not do it. Than the officer himself hit the figurine several times with a pistol handle and broke off its head [6, p. 219].

Another fragment features Christian deacon Nader Shumani who decided to move from Baghdad to his relatives in more tranquil Aynkawa but kept postponing his departure until he found out that someone poured glue, the kind that is used to glue metal and glass together, in the keyhole of his front door. He changed the door lock but soon it was ruined in the same way. The clergyman understood that “someone was after his house and would do everything to drive out the owner. There had been many cases as such over

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that love and marriage between people from different communities is a popular subject among Iraqi novelists. For example, the love between Jusef, a Christian, and Dalal, a Muslim, in “Ya Maryam” that could not end in marriage but not because of their different religions. For her father, it was a considerable age difference (Jusef was 20 years older) and Jusef having no college degree. Love-sick, Jusef was even ready to convert to Islam if her relatives were to demand it although he felt that it would break his religious sister Hinna’s heart, “kill her and destroy the whole family” [4, p. 66].

Samia, the wife of Jamil (Jusef’s brother), was Lebanese, probably a Maronite Christian, as the spouses moved to Lebanon and lived in Bikfaya, traditionally an area of Lebanese Maronite compact settlement.

Jusef’s another brother Ilyas married an Armenian [4, p. 52]. Daughter of Saadun, a Jusef’s friend, Sundus was married to a Shia man. “Was it an issue 15 years ago?” [mid-90s — N.S.] her father wonders [4, p. 81].

<sup>2</sup> This expression belongs to Kuwaiti writer Saud Al Sanousi, the winner of Arabic Booker 2013 [5].

the past three years [that is since 2003 when the American occupation started — N.S.]. No one could protect him there; there was no power to rely on in turbulent conditions in the capital. Moreover, his daughter was being harassed. Baghdad was less and less safe. A father of one of the families in his congregation was abducted and only released after a large ransom was paid. Nater Shumani did not have a lot of money and he was afraid for his daughters and the whole family. He felt that he no longer could take this harassment” [6, p. 242–244].

Maha, a Christian and a protagonist of “Ya Maryam”, repeats the Christian deacon’s sentiment, “Muslims do not want us to live among them and they behave towards us as if we were foreigners” [4, p. 141]. “Muslims just want the country to be theirs only” [4, p. 26].

Muslims display obvious self-interest, greed, a predatory desire to take everything for themselves. However, it is worth noting that Christians themselves sometimes show hostility and malevolence rather than noble mercy and care when dealing with their brothers in faith. “Ya Maryam” mentions a symbolic heated argument between Maha’s mother who moved from the capital to tranquil Aynkawa and a local Christian who blamed Christians from Baghdad for moving to Aynkawa and pushing the housing prices up and “competing with locals in everything. Christians even divorce” [4, p. 138]. And Maha angrily blocked on social networks those who wrote “sectarian slogans against Christians” on the walls of their houses [4, p. 112].

Undoubtedly, here one can see how tired people are of constant threat to precious precarious peace, an established lifestyle and routine and they seek fellowship that can support and encourage them, but it can also kindle annoyance and intolerance when people are overcrowded and pressured.

There are more examples of loyalty and friendliness among Christians. “Ya Maryam” protagonist Yousef came to a church and was held up by a security guard who decided against searching him when Yousef said that he was a Christian who came for the mass. “Please, come in, brother”, the guard said “respectfully”, pacified [4, p. 96].

A reporter of an Iraqi channel contacted Maha and asked her to tell about a church attack that she had witnessed. “At first Maha was unsettled and she asked him how he had got her phone number. But she was pacified when he responded that he had received her number from the church, adding, “I’m a Christian, sister” [4, p. 149]. In other words, a common religion acted as an entry code that opened a door for communication and mutually reassured its parties.

It is worth noting that other religious minorities had their life threatened as well as Christians. Maha’s husband Assyrian Luey mentions it, “We are not the only ones who suffer. Look at what became of Sabeans and Yezidis in the north. Islam won’t let anyone be” [4, p. 25].

However, Iraqi authors show that the Muslim majority itself suffers from the conflicts between communities as well as Christians.

“Ya Maryam” describes Jasem, a character who cares for palm trees in private estates of Baghdad. For many years, he had been going from one house to another caring for palm trees that grew in their backyards. But everything changed. “Sometimes, when I knock on doors, I see new people who have never been there before. When I ask them about the owners, they don’t respond. I don’t ask again or enter. I know one of us has been killed. It would be better for me to go back to my own kind and work in palm gardens in the south where it is safe.” “Even palm trees are divided into Sunni and Shia now”, Jasem concludes

his sad story explaining how delusional sectarianism tainted even innocent unresponsive flora. But left without care and nourishment, palm trees can only yield “withered and dry” dates [4, p. 84]. These are the “fruits of labour” of those who benefit from sectarianism.

Iraqi authors do not intend to kindle sectarianism with their works. “Ya Maryam” essentially pursues an objective dispute, be it verbal or internal within senior Yousef or his young niece Maha, about a situation in the country and the life of religious minorities in Iraq. In line with this generation dispute, Maha goes for invective “attacks” on hostile Muslims, she cites the historical right of Iraqi Christians to live in their country, exposes passive authorities and frustrating results of seven years’ American occupation. Her uncle Yousef counters all points. He holds on to “his years, his riches” saying that he has “a lot to remember” and his past binds him to the life in his motherland, reconciles him with reality and gives him hope for the future although this resilience is normally typical for young rather than senior people. It’s no coincidence that Yousef’s same-age friend Saadun asks, incredulously, “Where do you get all this optimism?” [4, p. 81]. He himself has no illusions left on his chances to ever “free himself from these rotten institutions, thieves and stranglehold of men in turbans” [4]. Yousef’s faith that “turbans will be overthrown” goes to his friend and he entertains the possibility, yet responds, “turbans will be overthrown and maybe we will be sated with death” (especially considering a “physiological” choice of verb) [4, p. 81] showing that this character and the author understand that this will inevitably cost many lives.

“People in turbans” kept harassing other communities. Maha recalls as back in 2007 a nearby An-Nur mosque sheik Hatem ar Razzak proclaimed himself “an Emir of the district”. He started shouting with a loudspeaker that zimmah people<sup>3</sup> had to pay a poll tax of 25 thousand dollars monthly or convert to Islam openly in a mosque. Maha’s father said, resentful, “This is going too far! Should we circumcise too?” [4, p. 119].

But S. Antoon is, above all, saddened that “there were those who listened to him and obeyed his orders,” that “verbal threats were followed by handwritten messages left at door steps.” The second of two such messages addressed to Maha’s family was signed “The Army of Muhammad” with an obvious intention of concealing the lucrative motives behind supposed religiosity [4]. Then bullets and grenades hit the houses of infidels, then they set fire to an Assyrian church, attacked the Church of John the Baptist and demolished the cross from its dome. Doors of the houses of baptized people were marked with red “infidels” inscriptions [4, p. 121].

But what about the law enforcement? “Complaints to the police and appeals of church representatives to the government for aid were in vain.” “Many Christians left for Syria and Jordan” [4].

The Iraqi executive branch was the most criticized by the public. Trying to remain even-handed when arguing with Maha, Yousef admitted that “only a strong state defends minorities” [4, p. 25], yet still insisted that “many more mosques were burned and tens of thousands of Muslims migrated.” His like-minded friend Saadun predicts an even darker future with no prospects. “It’s been almost a year, and they have yet to form a government!” “If the turbans are overthrown, the country [in the absence of a stable power. — N. S.] will be torn between Iran, Bedouins and Americans” [4, p. 81]. In other words, weakness and a failing national government can even result in a loss of sovereignty.

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<sup>3</sup> *Zimmah (hist.)* — Jews and Christians who were under the protection of Muslims.

S. Antoon's characters Yousef, Saadun and Maha, together with the author himself, try to explain the sectarianism in Iraq. Saadun words this tough question saying, "By heavens, how could it be that this sectarianism had already existed but we failed to see it?"

After all, he saw the example of his own daughter, who had lived 15 years with a Shiite in a happy marriage [4, p. 81]. And Saadun words the assumption implying an affirmative answer: "And what if all of this has arisen recently because of interference and hatred of external forces?" [4]. When Yousef tried to clarify whether sectarianism had existed for a long time, he replied confidently, "No, there have always been Sunnis, Shiites, Christ and Islam, but without blocks, parties, militias and cars stuffed with explosives" [4, p. 82]. But the reader might ask: does all this have an "autochthonous" origin in Iraq, has it not been imported from the West?

Maha's inquisitive mind wonders too. Browsing Facebook, she is surprised to see that a "happy Iraq" started and ended at different times for different Iraqi people. Some people are nostalgic for the royal regime, and Maha poses an "inconvenient" question: was it not the time that the Assyrians were massacred? And what about the "emergency" eviction of Jews from Iraq and "the massacres and common graves of Kurds and Shiites?" in the subsequent years? [4, p. 139–140].

One day before his death at the hands of terrorists, who opened fire on praying people in a church, Yousef dreamed that his home became a museum; visitors were coming and misinterpreting the history of the house and its inhabitants. Yousef protested, claiming his rights as an owner. However, no one paid attention to him. This dream can be interpreted as a symbolic rejection of a peaceful life in a common house — a multi-religious Iraq, personified by politically correct pacifist Yousef. The story of Yousef's family distorted by guides is a distorted history of the country, a rejection of peaceful intercommunal coexistence. Perhaps, it was not completely conflict-free, but in any case it prevented a war from breaking in the streets, churches and under house windows (the explosion of a booby-trapped car parked near the house where pregnant Maha lived with her husband caused her to lose an unborn child due to stress). Yousef's death at the end of the novel confirms the reasoning behind this interpretation.

A. Saadawi's novel is less focused on sectarianism, but one character, a "senior astrologist", makes a hard and fast rule: "Only Allah is beyond sectarianism and parties" [6, p. 318]. Thus, all participants in sectarian conflicts are to take the blame and responsibility.

The idea of guilt and responsibility is also reflected in S. Ibrahim's statement that the American occupation intended to create a new sectarian Iraq and did not attempt to stop a wave of murders based on identity documents, that is, based on a religious identity [3, p. 188] (the Iraqi author means the sectarian war in 2006–2008). A character of "Frankenstein ..." editor-in-chief of the famous metropolitan magazine Baher al-Saidi, repeats that sentiment stating that the American embassy in Baghdad aims to "establish in Iraq a balance of violence between Sunni and Shia militias to ensure a balance during the talks on the country's future. The US army is neither capable nor willing to put an end to violence, so it tries to at least balance out the number of victims on each side to secure a successful political process" [6, p. 195]. Their mission has had another consequence: when Americans entered Baghdad, it turned into a city "infected with death" [6, p. 12].

In general, "Frankenstein..." mentions the American occupation authorities and the US Army in more than 50 parts proving how active the American military presence is. Moreover, the American occupation gave an additional "overtone" to Iraqi intercommu-

nal rivalries: Iraqi Christians were accused of collaborating (based on common religion) with the Americans. But S. Antoon says through Maha's character, "Hasn't the majority of political elites come with the occupation? Don't all these religious and sectarian parties collaborate with it?" [4, p. 112]. For his part, A. Saadawi introduced in his novel a character of professional photographer-operator Farid Shawwaf, who spends all his time with the Americans, accompanying the American military missions around the country. After spending a year with them, the Iraqi finally confirmed his decision to go to live in America, although there is no evidence that he was poor in his homeland.

Thus, the text analysis of novels "Ya Maryam" by S. Antoon and "Frankenstein in Baghdad" by A. Saadawi shows that the Iraqi novel literature is highly reflective of a painful, chronic problem of sectarian conflicts in Arab societies. Previously, this issue was concealed rather than exposed due to censorship. When the Arab revolutions dismantled these limitations, writers started focusing on these conflicts between communities. Exposing the everyday dualism and ambivalence of common truths, they try to comprehend and convey both internal reasons for this persistent phenomenon (historical, political, religious, psychological), while doing everything to avoid prejudice and apologetics, and external factors. The latter incarnate forces that, acting contrary to the national interests of the country, deepen its sectarian split and do not take into account demographic repercussions (mass population exodus). In fact, they perpetuate this obvious symptom of social backwardness, which does not allow Iraq to free itself from this pluperfect burden.

Do Iraqi authors know the way out of this age long dead-end? The death of Yousef during the church attack, Maha's final decision to leave Iraq immediately after graduating (she is a medical student), the moving of all the still living relatives of Yousef and Maha either to safer regions, or to Europe and America, more than ten years' residence of the author himself in the United States proves that by the time he finished the novel (2012), this way was not clear to the Iraqi writer. At the same time, the review of literary critic Mai al-Hajj on the novel by S. Antoon is titled "Ya Maryam" is a cry that reveals the sufferings of minorities". [7] This "cry" intends to draw the public attention to the issue, not let it be forgotten.

There are no direct answers in the novel of A. Saadawi either. It should be pointed out that some characters consider his "humanoid" Shismu-Frankenstein creature to consist of pieces belonging to people of different races, tribes, social groups, "an exemplary Iraqi citizen that Iraq had never managed to create starting from King Faisal and till the American occupation" [6, p. 161]. Shismu getting the "will to live" by the end of the novel and his willingness to literally take it (he took organs and pieces of flesh for his "repair" first from corpses and then by killing people), not at all impeccable in a moral sense, can, on the other hand, be interpreted as a protest against apathy, humility, cowardice, servile psychology of people who are not able to protect the treasure that is their lives. The author put Shismu under a constant threat of disintegration and it refers to the fact that the very process of consolidation of different pieces into a single entity that make up the Iraqi nation has not yet been historically completed. The national feeling cannot yet trump narrow sectarian interests overcome their spiritual numbness, restore what has been destroyed in the souls of religious minorities that are psychologically traumatized, wounded by the sense of their inferiority and uselessness in the homeland. But until the last day of creation comes, while the last human is alive, it is too early to lose hope and close the book.



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## Отражение проблемы межрелигиозных противоречий в иракской крупной прозе XXI века

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Рассматривается вопрос о том, как в современной иракской романистике освещается проблема межрелигиозных противоречий. Автор отмечает, что после «арабских революций» у писателей появилась возможность открыто говорить языком художественной прозы об этом неизжитом антагонизме. Подчеркивается, что иракские авторы анализируют как внутренние причины жизнеспособности феномена конфессионализма, так и внешние. Автор приходит к выводу, что тема межобщинных противоречий, а также перспектив решения конфессиональной проблемы в Ираке занимает весьма значительное место в современной иракской литературе. Иракские авторы анализируемых сочинений Синан Антун и Ахмад Саадави стремятся показать, что пагубное вмешательство внешних сил еще со времен английских колонизаторов 1920-х годов и особенно американская интервенция 2003–2011 гг. привели страну к катастрофическому

положению, в условиях которого обострилась и межконфессиональная вражда. Оба писателя приводят многочисленные примеры деятельности американской администрации, ее воинского контингента в Ираке и негативные последствия американского присутствия в стране. Авторы проводят мысль о том, что, пока такого рода негативное внешнее воздействие будет продолжаться, разговор о межконфессиональном мире не имеет перспектив. Констатируется, что иракские писатели не замалчивают и наличие внутреннего потенциала конфликтности в межобщинных отношениях. Здесь и давние, с исторических времен, обиды, неприязнь и опасения, и банальные вневременные корысть, зависть, злопыхательство. Иракские прозаики показывают, что от «яда» конфессионализма в разной степени страдают представители всех общин. Автор статьи делает вывод, что иракские прозаики не видят возможности избавиться от бремени конфессиональной розни, о чем свидетельствует, в частности, финал произведений, которым посвящено исследование.

*Ключевые слова:* конфессионализм, мусульмане, христиане, сунниты, шииты, религиозные меньшинства, теракты, оккупация, эмиграция.

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