

National Consciousness in Postcolonial Iraqi Poetry

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Abstract

This thesis analyses how Iraqi national consciousness is represented in twentieth- and twenty-first century postcolonial Iraqi poetry through the work of Iraqi poets, Badr Shaker al-Sayyab (1926-1964), Nazik Al-Malaika (1923-2007), and Dunya Mikhail (b.1965). Acknowledged to be the founders of the Iraqi Free Verse Movement, both Sayyab and Malaika were supporters of the nationalist cause at a time when Iraq was attempting to come to terms with the realities of independence from colonialism. In ways similar to Malaika, Mikhail also wrote *Sihr Halal* poetry, chronicling the war and its destruction throughout Iraq during the Gulf War in the early 1990s. After being persecuted under Iraqi censorship laws, Mikhail immigrated to the United States and continued writing poetry, focusing on her experiences as a refugee, expressing how this affected her feelings toward her home country of Iraq. Specifically, this thesis analyzes the poems, “The Blind Prostitute,” by Sayyab, “I” and “Cholera,” by Malaika, and “The War Works Hard” and “America,” by Mikhail to demonstrate how each poet reflects their own sense of Iraqi national consciousness in their verse through the application of postcolonial theorist, Frantz Fanon’s theories of colonialism, post-colonialism, and nationalism. Overall, the main focus of this thesis is how the post-colonial experience of Iraq can be understood through Iraqi poetry and its influence on Iraqi national consciousness, through the often similar, yet different, perspectives of these three Iraqi poets. Most importantly, this thesis seeks to address the lack of research into how Arab literature has defined and shaped ideas of postcolonial Iraqi national consciousness.

National Consciousness in Postcolonial Iraqi Poetry

Introduction

Since the 1958 Revolution that defeated its colonial oppressors, Iraq continues to struggle to find its own cultural identity. As a society with its traditions deeply rooted in the past, Iraq has been subjected to enormous political and economic shifts, which have not only affected Iraq, but also the world in general. In postcolonial countries such as Iraq, according to Phebe Marr,

The movement toward social and economic reform was dominated first by a desire to be free of foreign—and in particular Western—political and economic control and to gain sovereignty over the country's resources. Second, was the urge for social justice, focusing mainly on a more equitable distribution of income and social benefits. Third was the drive to achieve greater national unity and integration and to bring various sectors of the popular under tighter government control. (169)

This thesis argues that one of the effects of the ongoing outside interference and manipulation of Iraq's national interests, coupled with the reactions from the Iraqi people to what they view as the subordination of their national interests to those of the Western powers, has been the development of a newer sense of national consciousness. This national consciousness can be described in terms of "a sense of belonging to a political or social community," that is either attached to a nation or indicates a wish to create a nation that is regarded as an independent state (Aziz 23). As this thesis asserts, this phenomenon

of striving for a new Iraqi national consciousness can be explored through literature, as writers such as Badr Shaker Sayyab (1926-1964), Nazik Malaika (1923-2007), and Dunya Mikhail (b.1965) worked to express their own views for an Iraqi national consciousness. Each poet addressed the concerns they viewed as most important for their country, while they additionally articulated their own responses to issues of national concern. Acknowledged to be the key founders of the Iraqi Free Verse Movement (1946), both Malaika and Sayyab were supporters of the nationalist cause at a time when Iraq was still trying to come to terms with the realities of its independence. For this reason, this study analyses Sayyab's poem, "The Blind Prostitute," (1954), along with several of Malaika's poems, including "Cholera," (1947) "Jamila and Us," (1985) and "Revolt Against the Sun" (1946) in terms of the poets' expressions of a sense of national consciousness. In ways similar to Malaika's work, the poet, Dunya Mikhail, wrote *Sihir Halal* (lawful magic) poetry, which included "free verse that contrasts with traditional forms," that is "center[ed] around ... private life, [while] addressed to a public audience, with women ... passing on culture" (Pierce 197, 199). Therefore, two of Mikhail's poems, "The War Works Hard" and "America" are also analysed to reveal how she, too, reflects a differing sense of national consciousness in her verse. In terms of methodology, the works of these poets will be considered in relation to World Systems Theory, as it presents the world as dominated by global capitalism. According to The Warwick Research Collective framework, just as one global force—international capitalism—has formed the basis for a world-system in terms of political and economic relations, so this has, in turn, also given rise to a world literary system (2015:6). World Literature is presented as offering "a new engagement with questions of comparative literary method"

(5), stimulated by globalisation. It is quite distinct from postcolonial studies or postmodern studies—or in fact, post-*anything* studies, in that these tend to look at differences and divisions, while World Literature is predicated on the idea that the world is one; however, in actuality, it is not united (5). However, the old idea of World Literature “has been reformulated quite self-consciously to carry the banner for a new, maximally encompassing project that transcends and supersedes the inherited (sub-)disciplinary formations, whether of comparative literature or postcolonial studies or the various ‘national’ literatures” (5). Global or World Literature, therefore, “pushes . . . in the directions of commerce and commonality, linkage, and connection . . . network and system” (6). In terms of postcolonial literature, through the close analysis of Iraqi poetry, in this thesis I link the postcolonial national condition of Iraq, as figured in its poetry as a national literature, to a sense of national consciousness that expresses the ongoing oppression of the Iraqi people. In this endeavor, I apply theories concerning colonialism, nationalism, and globalisation, in particular, World Systems Theory and Frantz Fanon’s theories of postcolonial national consciousness.

Through a comparison of the work of these Iraqi poets, I argue that the effect of global capitalism has been to create different, multi-layered, and competing tiers of nations, which are arranged in relation to each other according to each nation’s economic criteria. Therefore, this thesis necessarily argues that *globalism is capitalism*. As hegemonic capitalism and its influence spreads around the world, it raises the status and power of certain nations, usually nations that align with, in whole, or in part, Western values, while effectively subordinating other nations that do not. Both global capitalism and the postcolonial vestiges of imperialism have had the effects of producing, as well as

reinforcing, inequalities, especially in such subordinated nations. In terms of literary perspectives, according to the Warwick Research Collective (WReC), current theories of World Literature and its canon further serve to reinforce the hegemonic economic systems of globalism upon non-Western literatures. As Franco Moretti has argued:

International capitalism is a system that is simultaneously *one*, and *unequal*; with a core, and a periphery (and a semi-periphery) that are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality. One, and unequal: *one* literature (*Weltliteratur*, singular, as in Goethe and Marx), or, perhaps better, one world literary system. (149–50)

In ways similar to a one-world system of global capitalism, which is propelled by Western countries and their economic and political values, there also currently exists one world *literary* system, composed of many inequalities. Therefore, the current state of World Literature is not only a way of reading literature, but rather also a system, for which its base is composed of inequality.

The WReC argues that World Literature can thus be better redefined as “*Literature of the World-System*” (8) and can therefore be understood by the way it acts as a mediator for the world-system which helps readers to register the reality and impact of this system. As the current structure of World Literature implies, it mimics global political alliances and divisions, as well as other manifestations of the global capitalist world system, and it can “be conceived precisely through its mediation by and registration of the modern world-system” (WReC 9). Applying this methodology to Iraqi literature, as well as the nation itself, which can be said to be situated within artificially subordinated and peripheralized positionings as part of its postcolonial state, will allow

one to recognize the struggles of the Iraqi nation as it continues to attempt to define its national identity through its literature. In addition, reading Iraqi literature through this theory of Literature as a World System will provide deeper, more relevant, insights into the contemporary postcolonial condition of the experience of national consciousness of Iraq's citizens.

In terms of its history, Iraq has been troubled since the onset of colonial rule by Britain in 1920. In 1914, British forces invaded Iraq from its bases in India after the Ottoman Empire concluded an alliance with Germany (Abdullah 116). The end of the war, however, did not lead to the withdrawal of British power from Iraq; instead, Britain retained control of Iraq after the end of the war, as colonial power was effectively granted by the League of Nations, which gave Britain a mandate over the country of Iraq in 1920. Iraqi opposition to the British presence was, at first, quite limited, with different factions of citizens unsure of what their new masters' intentions were, while also hoping for some benefits derived from British rule. However, the Iraqi people soon came to understand that Britain was instead intent on exploiting the local oil resources, while establishing its own colonial government in terms of influence and authority, in ways designed to keep local citizens out. As a result, Iraqi resistance spread steadily, leading to serious rebellion, which, in turn, resulted in Faysal ibn Al-Husayn, a key insurgent, being "enthroned as the first king of modern Iraq on 23 August 1921" (Abdullah 130). Attempting to regain some independence for Iraq, in 1922, Husayn insisted on negotiating a new bilateral treaty; however, the terms did little more than ratify the old colonial mandate. Britain still controlled the key governmental functions, and retained "advisors," with the power of veto throughout nearly every government department (Abdullah 131). Most significantly,

Britain steadily made certain that Iraq's key assets would be managed primarily for the benefit of Britain, and not the Iraqi people. The Iraqi government was further pressurized to allow Britain a seventy five-year concession to develop and export Iraq's oil. This export was to be overseen by a new company set up for that purpose to be controlled by London. Notably, this deal did not allot any shares whatsoever in the company to Iraq (Abdullah 133).

At this point, with many Iraqis rising up against what they saw as the British effectively stealing their country, King Faysal came forth to lament that the people did not share a national identity, and that he was pessimistic about the future prospect of forming one. Indeed, given the fact that the country had so many divisions, tribally, religiously and politically, it is not surprising that Faysal found it hard to be hopeful (Abdullah 134). In addition, powerful British influence and control made for a depressing environment for those Iraqis who wanted freedom. Nevertheless, the opposition to Britain's dominance was something that many factions had in common, and their combined activities finally led to the Anglo-Iraq treaty of 1930, whereby Iraq received guarantees of complete independence. This did not, however, amount to the end of all British influence or authority in Iraq, as the deal confirmed that Britain would continue to maintain its colonial privileges and much of its old authority in Iraq (Abdullah 133). However, in 1932, two years after the agreement, Iraq obtained independence as a kingdom and was immediately accepted as a member of the League of Nations (Abdullah 136).

From the 1930s forward, Iraqi nationalist movements grew and were divided into those who were Pan-Arab nationalists (seeking a united Arab nation formed of all Arab

countries that were joined by language, religion, and geographic location) and state nationalists who simply wanted independence for their own countries. The pain of enduring overbearing foreign influence and the enormous resentment over the way Iraqi oil was being exploited culminated in a revolution in 1958, when the monarchy in Iraq was overthrown and a republic was declared (Abdullah 153). The speed of the coup “was unquestionably a reflection of deep-seated discontent among ... civilian politicians with the regime’s foreign policy and its slowness to reform” (Marr 153), and the virtually non-existent public opposition to it indicated the amount of popular support it enjoyed as well as the depth of suffering that the Iraqi people had felt under neo-colonial rule.

For the next twenty years there was no relative stability in Iraq; however, thereafter “the Ba’th [were] able to stabilize its regime” (Marr 232). In 1979, Saddam Hussein gained control as president. An authoritarian who ruled the country with an iron fist, there exist extensive accounts of how much the people suffered under him (Kayssi 339). Hussein was demonised by others; however, the major Western, anti-communist powers headed by the United States and Great Britain viewed him as a figure who could bring a level of stability to the geo-political problems of the region. As such, they were prepared not only to tolerate him, but also to offer Hussein practical help and support:

From 1979 closer links were established between the U.S. and the then new Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and during the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988) Hussein was armed and supported by the U.S. and the British and [. . .] Washington in particular did not want to see the Iraqi regime collapse. (Aarnivaara 19-20)

Nonetheless, after his ill-advised invasion of Kuwait in 1991, Western attitudes toward Hussein changed, and when he refused to back down in the face of hostile condemnation, military action ensued, now known as the First Gulf War, in 1991. While he was forced to withdraw from Kuwait, and sanctions were imposed upon Iraq, nevertheless, Hussein's rule survived.

More than ten years later, the West was persuaded to believe that Hussein had been developing "weapons of mass destruction" (WMDs), which he may have been planning to use against the will of the international community. This soon led to the Second Gulf War, in 2003, through which a coalition of Western forces deposed Hussein, and, ultimately, executed him. Since his execution, Iraq has suffered much political instability and violence; tribal, religious, and ethnic divisions continue to ensure that life in the country remains uncertain, while the rise of ISIS contributes greatly to this uncertainty (Abdulhamid ii). Importantly, as Lindsey Moore argues, this instability in Iraq needs to be understood in context as one of "the traumatic effects, 'remains,'" or leakage, into the current "Arab world's historical relationship with the West" (Moore 7). Today, in Iraq, there notably still remains a strong Western influence, both military and political, which serves as a reminder for the Iraqi people of colonialism.

The question of where one might position Iraq in terms of World Systems theory is open to discussion. Immanuel Wallerstein (1976) provides a useful list of criteria for considering relations between systems in World Systems theory, which include: 1) regions that are geographically placed with core regions on one side and peripheral in the other, 2) regions geographically placed between two opposing core regions, and 3) regions where institutions and activities are neither clearly core nor peripheral (462-463).

These criteria can be applied to Iraq, especially if one thinks in terms of its position between the two opposing super powers during the Cold War, as well as Iraq's often outdated traditional social structures situated alongside its hugely modern and commercial oil industry, in addition to the political and governmental structures which are being reworked according to Western standards. Wallenstein (1976) further denotes core countries as those with high levels of technology, profits, and wide wage scales, while peripheral countries are those that lack those very aspects. Semi-peripheral countries are those that fall outside of the definitions of the first two. Wallenstein insists that "it is not possible, even in moments of world contraction, for all semi-peripheral states to do well, certainly not equally well" (170). One notes as well that industrial development does not necessarily represent modernity, with contrasting rural and social stagnation representing backwardness; instead, these conditions are both products of the same system working unequally. In terms of World Literature, modernity is no longer defined as the developed world versus the undeveloped world, but rather is viewed as the ways in which any literature responds to the global system that surrounds it. Therefore, it would be wrong to think of modernity in a plural form; there cannot be more than one form of modernity because this is a comprehensive term embracing all cultures societies and literatures. For Theodor Adorno, modernity is tied in with "criticality," and thus "ought to be conceptualised as a cultural formulation of resistance to the prevailing—indeed, the hegemonic—modes of capitalist modernisation" (WReC 19-20); however, for the WReC, modernity is neither essentially linked with criticality nor dissent; instead, it simply helps to register the effects of the world-system of global capitalism.

As aforementioned, Moretti argues that these core, peripheral, and semi-peripheral areas are all linked together and form part of the same global system where “this system is structured not on difference but on inequality” (WReC 7). Of course, Moretti emphasizes as well that international capitalism is a single worldwide system, one which produces inequality rather than equality (54). Therefore, just as there is one world system (capitalism), this structure of inequality, for the purpose of this study, can also be applied to the current one world literary system, which also links separate and different parts, but which is still nevertheless unequal. This inequality has therefore given rise to a great deal of suffering among the countries that remain at the wrong end of the table, in terms of wealth and development. It is the contention of this thesis that this suffering can be explored, in different locations and by different communities, through the various national literatures. At this point, however, it should be noted that under the World Literature framework as outlined by the WReC, these literatures can be also considered as the products of the same system, with the same underlying forces acting to produce them, and they can be as well classified as belonging to the core, the periphery, or the semi-periphery. Thus, World Literature as it stands is not a way of reading literature, but rather a system which is based on inequality, not difference. The view of World Literature that I put forth here is in distinct contrast with that of David Damrosch, who instead views World Literature as indeed “a mode of reading, a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our time and place” (5). Viewing world literature as a method of reading allows for the study of national literatures with independent features, while nevertheless viewing them from a critical standpoint as all products of the same system. This distinction between my and Damrosch’s views is important, as his begs for a

reading which looks to gain insights mainly from the similarities between the different national literatures and the experiences they describe, rather than their differences, as my argument asserts.

In terms of the Iraqi national poetry this study first focuses on its production during the mid-1940s, when Iraqi poet, Sayyab, was about twenty years old, and when he began to gain notice for his political views and activities. In 1946, he was arrested as a result of his participation in an organised protest on behalf of Palestinian Arabs, in opposition to British policy towards the region, and this, in turn, led to his being given a prison sentence. This injustice appears to have triggered his deeper, stronger feelings about political issues and questions of Arab nationalism, feelings which previously had not been particularly notable (El-Hage 9).

In contrast to the wider nationalism of Sayyab, Yasir Suleiman states that Malaika's themes in her poetry can be described as more "personal," rather than designed for "national interest" (93). Nevertheless, Suleiman accepts that Malaika's works, in later periods, definitely moved towards an occupation with the kind of political and nationalist concerns that were also important to her fellow Iraqi citizens. In fact, many critics have indeed identified a strong commitment to nationalism within Malaika's poetry. For instance, Fadel Jabr, when considering the political setbacks that faced many Arab nations, asserts that the Arab poets of the 1960s "reflected the political turmoil" that they experienced, a turmoil that arose from the failure to achieve levels of independence and development which they sought for themselves, particularly in Palestine, and also the disastrous military defeat of Egypt by Israel (354). As this study and other scholarship have argued, Malaika was one of these poets. For example, the cause of the Palestinians'

struggle to regain a land of their own was important to Malaika. Suleiman writes of Malaika's "deep sense of commitment" to the cause of Arab nationalism, which found its foremost expression in the movement for unification of the Arab peoples and freedom for Palestine and describes her as a "committed champion to the cause of Arab nationalism" (94).

However, Malaika's strong feelings of nationalism did not place her within the same category as Sayyab, and there were key differences in their political understanding of their nation's condition, or more importantly, how to improve it. According to Suleiman, Malaika never shared the same belief in communism as Sayyab did, and, in fact, her relationship with that ideology was confrontational (98). Kevin Jones discusses the fact that women poets who were contemporary with Malaika did not, as a rule, openly treat political subjects in their work; Malaika was the exception, and she even published an overtly anti-communist poem entitled, "Three Communist Songs," in which she attacked their ideology (325). She came to the conclusion that the ideals of true Arab nationalism could never be attained through communist ideas, and believed that communist views were, in fact, opposed to the goals of the Arab nations for real independence, as they first and foremost saw the various countries as communist, with their national identities second. In this regard, Malaika moved ahead of Sayyab, who eventually came around to the same understanding, but only after a long involvement with the Iraqi Communist Party and experiences that he found distressing.

Mikhail's nationalist sentiments began as a teenager, as she explored her experience of the Iran-Iraq War, while continuing to chronicle war and destruction in Iraq throughout the Gulf War in the early 1990s. Shortly afterwards, she was persecuted under

Iraqi censorship laws, so she immigrated to the United States, where she continued writing poetry. It was then that her national experiences as a refugee and a migrant appear in her poetry to show how these factors affected her feelings toward her home country.

Part of the aim of this study, in its exploration and comparison of some of Iraq's leading poets, and their expressions of Iraq's experiences and damage as a post-colonial country, is to reveal how a current World Literature framework places Iraq within it as a semi-peripheral country. In doing so, the insights gained from this study of national consciousness in Iraqi poetry can be further applied to other countries that have been placed in a similar position.

These Iraqi poets clearly identified Iraq's economic and political inequality through their work and the resultant suffering, all of which serve as key features of the postcolonial experience. In addition, the themes of these poets' work address the poverty, unemployment, displacement, and political upheaval of the Iraqi nation and its people. Through the Iraqi peoples' continued inequality and suffering, it is evident that the effects of colonial rule have not yet dissipated or been banished in the postcolonial period, but rather continue on. One of the features of the current World Literature view, according to the WReC, is that it is situated in contrast to the implications of many post-colonial frameworks. For instance, Ella Shohat (1992) argues that the "post" in the term "postcolonial" inaccurately connotes the condition of the aftermath of colonialism, suggesting that the colonial era is somehow now in the past and the nation (or the world) has moved on, to a new and different era:

The "colonial" in the "post-colonial" tends to be relegated to the past and marked with a closure—an implied temporal border that undermines a

potential oppositional thrust. For whatever the philosophical connotations of the “post” as an ambiguous locus of continuities and discontinuities, its denotation of “after”—the teleological lure of the “post”—evokes a celebratory clearing of a conceptual space. (Shohat 106)

Instead, it must be considered that the experience of colonisation has effects that continue to ripple long after the political act of declaring independence, and that are expressed in new ways. Shohat argues further that “when lines in the sand still haunt Third World geographies, it is urgent to ask who we chart the meaning of the ‘post- colonial’” (99). Accordingly, Moore asserts that, “in the aftermath of invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, this urgency became more acute specifically in relation to the Arab world to which she [Shohat] alludes (4). The two postcolonial Iraqi wars, the rise of the so-called, “Islamic State,” (also known as Da’ish), and other radical, violent movements are testament to the continuing aftereffects of colonialism. Notably, the trauma caused to those who have suffered under colonization and war is becoming increasingly recognized, as it “initially applied only to those suffering from symptoms directly related to their experience of the horrors of war” (Baaqeel 60). However, as aforementioned, one persistent area of postcolonial suffering that has not yet been fully addressed is an understanding of the national consciousness of individuals and societies. Such national consciousness as postcolonial phenomena would have severe effects on any individual or society, and for these reasons, in this study, the analysis of the works of Sayyab, Malaika, and Mikhail is further performed through Frantz Fanon’s understanding of national consciousness.

Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) was a French West Indian political philosopher concerned with the social, cultural, and personal consequences of decolonisation (Gordon 2). His most influential work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), focuses on his belief in the necessity of violence by activists during periods of neo-colonial struggle. However, this analysis will focus on Fanon's idea of national consciousness. Importantly, Fanon explicitly emphasised that national consciousness is not nationalism (199). Instead, it is the recognition of the need for social and political change that arises following the discovery of national identity and/or a nationalist uprising. In *The Wretched of the Earth* Fanon explains that:

Nationalism, that magnificent song that made the people rise against their oppressors, stops short, falters and dies away on the day that independence is proclaimed. Nationalism is not a political doctrine, nor a program. If you really wish your country to avoid regression, or at best halts and uncertainties, a rapid step must be taken from national consciousness to political and social consciousness. (163)

Hence, for Fanon, national consciousness was something that developed in light of the need for social and political change following a period of colonial struggle. For the reasons outlined above, Fanon offers an important perspective on national consciousness, as his ideas are reflective of how the situation unfolded in Iraq from the mid-twentieth century onwards. This, Pramod K. Nayar explains, is because Fanon emphasised the importance of taking the cultural characteristics of the nation under consideration when exploring topics relating to national consciousness (4). In Iraq, as in many former colonial nations, the colonial oppressors sought to estrange the people from their native culture, so

as to destroy the link between the two (Fanon 169). However, Fanon argues that the development of a sense of national consciousness allows colonial nations to begin the process of anti-colonial struggle (Nayar 4). As such, the reclamation of national consciousness allows colonial nations to free themselves from colonial oppression (Nayar 10-11). Fanon also emphasises the importance of communication as an aspect of anti-colonial struggle. In “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” he explains:

The battle against colonialism does not run straight away along the lines of nationalism ... It so happens that the unpreparedness of the educated classes, the lack of practical links between them and the mass of the people, their laziness ... their cowardice at the decisive moment of the struggle will give rise to tragic mishaps. (Fanon 117)

Hence, communication among the people is the key to successful anti-colonial struggle. In consideration of how Fanon views that national consciousness is expressed by both the colonised and formerly colonised in poetry and literature, in *The Wretched of the Earth* he argues that the native poet has a critical role to play in the production of national culture (Hayward 100), as “Arab poets speak to each other across the frontiers, and strive to create a new Arab culture and a new Arab civilization” (Fanon 172). In his work, Fanon explores how the literature of a colonised nation develops as part of a growing “national consciousness”: during the first stage of literary activity, the higher orders of society seek to appeal to or denounce their colonial master (Ngara 108). Fanon calls this stage as “the period of unqualified assimilation” (179). Next, Fanon asserts that “this literature of just-before-the-battle [...] is symptomatic of a period of distress and difficulty” (179) and the native poet must progress from the “pre-liberation” movement of “denouncing [...] [the]

oppressor to the liberation” movement, where the role of the writer is to “act as a mediator, allowing the people to connect to their suppressed history” (Hayward 100). Later, the writer then “turn[s] himself into an awakener” of his nation; “hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature [...] to compose the sentence which expresses the heart of the people, and to become the mouthpiece of a new reality in action” (Fanon 179).

In his essay “On National Culture” Fanon clarifies that:

The continued cohesion of the people constitutes for the intellectual an invitation to go farther than his cry of protest. The lament first makes the indictment; then it makes an appeal. In the period that follows, the words of command are heard. The crystallisation of the national consciousness will both disrupt literary styles and themes, and also create a completely new public. While at the beginning the native intellectual used to produce his work to be read exclusively by the oppressor, whether with the intention of charming him or of denouncing him through ethnical or subjectivist means now the native writer progressively takes on the habit of addressing his own people. (193)

However, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon argues that “the native poet [...] must not dwell nostalgically” on their national history and culture. Instead, the poet needs to “negotiate” the nation’s pre-colonial history through the filter of the nation’s “colonial past and call everything into question” (Hayward 100). This is done by addressing his or her own people, thereby making them “the subject, not the object,” of their native art (Hayward 100). Therefore, Fanon concludes, it is only from the post-liberation movement

that formerly colonised peoples can speak of a national culture (Hayward 101), and this culture can be expressed in subjective native literature and poetry. As Aziz points out that language is the basis for national consciousness (49), it is thus appropriate to explore the potential existence of a sense of shared Iraqi national consciousness through analysis of its national literature. As such, in order to provide insights into the work the Iraqi poets Sayyab, Malaika, and Mikhail, I analyse national consciousness as presented in several of their poems in the following chapters.

The first chapter focuses on the poetry of Badr al-Sayyab. As a dissident and a member of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), Sayyab was both inspired and mobilised to develop a sense of national consciousness as part of his opposition to colonial rule (Musawi 55). He expressed this sense of national consciousness in his poetry, most notably, “The Blind Prostitute,” which was published in 1954. Sayyab’s poems display the national sentiment which developed in Iraq as a consequence of the devastation wrought by colonialism, capitalism, and the Second World War. Here, it is argued that his poem, “The Blind Prostitute,” thus serves as an allegory of Iraq and was intended to remind Iraqis of how the nation had come to be in its present circumstances. Therefore, “The Blind Prostitute” was written to represent the sense of nationhood experienced by Iraqis at that time, when the country was struggling to align a sense of national identity with its virtues and vices. National consciousness, in the poem, accordingly, has four key responses: 1) fight, 2) flight, 3) adopt, and 4) adapt. The first key to developing national consciousness is, as Fanon considers, that violence is an integral part of the colonial system: he writes in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) that “if we examine this [colonial] system [. . .] we will be able to reveal the lines of force it implies” (29). The second key

could be psychological, as Fanon describes the citizens as “men who are in fact exiled to the backwoods, [...] [who] become ‘Maquisards’[...] [and who] discover that the mass of the country people have never cause to think of the problem of their liberation” (100). This could also be considered a feeling of alienation—not only psychological, but often actual physical alienation. Many writers and others have been (or at least felt) obliged to leave their homeland in the wake of colonisation, but this does not always mean a joyful move from oppression to freedom: in fact, “being in exile is painful in part because of the agency you’ve given up” (Creswell qtd. in Saad 2014). However, the poem notably displays Sayyab’s national consciousness through the last two key responses to colonization, adopt and adapt, which are exemplified through the characters of the “passersby,” who reflect the influence of neo-colonialism, as well as through the character of Salima (the prostitute and protagonist) and her friends, who are forced to do what they can to survive. In addition, the character of Salima is further utilized by Sayyab as a national allegory. Sayyab thus finds his own voice among these debates on the effects of colonialism, adopting a humanistic stance, hoping to inspire his country with a compassionate, while frank, account of what he sees happening in his country.

The second chapter in this study turns to the work of Iraqi poet Nazik Malaika. Malaika’s sense of national consciousness notably comes to the forefront in her poems, “I” and “Cholera.” Her poem, “I,” in particular, exemplifies this. Repeatedly being asked who she is, the speaker of the poem finally states, “Myself asks me who I am / I am as perplexed as it / I gaze at darkness / Nothing would give me peace” (25-27). The speaker’s inability to define her real self leaves her perplexed and robs her of any peace, staring into darkness—from which no illumination is expected. It may be true, as Shammari (21)

claims, that Malaika's later works are more optimistic and express love, but the search for answers to important questions and the pain that grows until they are found (if they are ever found) provide through her poetry with a valuable tool for understanding the state of the Iraqi nation and its suffering. However, her poem, "Cholera," was written as a response to the 1947 cholera epidemic in Egypt, which nevertheless led her to develop an entirely revolutionary form of poetry—free verse—to convey the emotional and ideological impact of her epidemic on her sense of national consciousness (*Al-Ahram Weekly* 7). Although most of Malaika's poetry is devoted to her personal emotions, a few of her poems do express a sense of national consciousness (Handal 9). For instance, her poetry exemplifies her support for Arab nationalism, as embodied by her need to make sense of the atrocities she had witnessed (Suleiman 93; Shammari 419). In fact, in her work, *Issues of Contemporary Poetry* (1962), Malaika explained that one of her motivations for creating free verse poetry was a desire for independence (Furani 124). This motivation for developing a form of free verse poetry also reflects Malaika's desire for Arab, and by extension, Iraqi independence, from colonial and authoritarian forces.

Finally, the last chapter in this study analyses national consciousness in Dunya Mikhail's poetry as reflected by her experience of conflict whilst living in Iraq (during both the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War) and her later experience as an immigrant in a foreign country, the United States. In her poem, "The War Works Hard," Mikhail considers the lengths the Iraqi people went to in order to reconcile their sense of national consciousness with the devastation being wrought around them. Later, after moving to the United States, Mikhail's sense of national consciousness changed. First, her sense of national consciousness became more overt, as she no longer had the need to censor

herself, such as she had done when writing in Iraq (Boumaaza 38). Second, after her move to America, Mikhail expressed a sense of pride in her Iraqi heritage due to her exile from her home country. Thus, Mikhail's understanding of the nature of national consciousness can be considered to be both abstract and meaningful (Gupta 91-92).

While the Iraqi poets, Sayyab, Malaika, and Mikhail, each have a distinct sense of national consciousness, this does not mean that their works have not been criticised. Significantly, in his lifetime, Sayyab was one of the most prominent critics of Malaika, as he claimed that she was not the originator of the Iraqi Free Verse Movement. Instead, he concluded that free verse poetry had originated with the two-hemistich format developed by Ali Ahmad Bakathir in the mid-1930s (Badawai 226; Jabri 40). Such criticism of Malaika's status as founder of the Iraqi Free Verse Movement was not limited to Sayyab, however, as many of his and Malaika's contemporaries felt that he, not Malaika, was the founder of the movement (Jabri 40). Nevertheless, both poets' concern with national consciousness makes it useful to analyse their works in contrast to one another. Similar to Sayyab, Mikhail also challenged contemporary critics' opinions about contemporary Iraqi poetry. For example, she resented her critics' persistent insistence that she and other members of the war generation of Iraqi poets would form a post-war generation of poets once the Iran-Iraq War was over (MacPhee and Naimou 13). Mikhail asserted that, if hostilities continued, a post-war generation of Iraqi poets would be wiped out (Mikhail 1). These examples are evidence that both Sayyab and Mikhail did not always agree with critics' opinions.

There has, in fact, been general criticism of all three poets. For example, one criticism of the works of Sayyab is that he fails properly to acknowledge or deal with his

feelings of alienation or explain death in his poetry (Salama 2). This likely indicates that Sayyab was not able to reconcile his sense of nationalism with his self-imposed alienation from Iraqi society as an Iraqi dissident. Sayyab also criticised his own work when he referred to other Communist poets as propagandists (Creswell 40), indicating that he felt that some of his poetry was written to overtly promote the Communist cause, rather than as a reflection of his own political and nationalist sentiments. Malaika's work has also been criticised on the basis that it is only personal and emotional, not nationalist, in nature. For this reason, prominent Arab nationalist scholars such as Umar al-Daqqaq do not mention her in their work on nationalist poetry (Suleiman 93). Emily Drumsta suggests that such criticism may have its roots in the idea, prevalent in the Arab world, that women writers are better at conveying weepiness in their poetry, but that they are unable to compose works of praise, satire, or odes (1). Malaika, however, "reconfigures" this stereotype in her poem, "Revolt Against the Sun" as "a distinctly political act" (Drumsta 1). In her poem, she "reclaims the (feminized) space of elegy in order to affirm a strong and willful poetic voice" (Drumsta 1). Finally, while Mikhail is widely regarded as a war poet, this notion is challenged by Tasnim, who argues that: "her poetry seems to be not about the wars but about how life is caught up and lost between them" (1). It is true that Mikhail's poem, "America" could be read in this manner. Nevertheless, the topics of war and nationalism frequently both appear in and inspire Mikhail's poetry. It is thus my assertion that these three poets write nationalist poetry, often in ways where they are willing to challenge those critics that say otherwise.

All of the texts referred to in this study were written in Arabic and appeared in the following publications: *Diwan Bader Shaker al-Sayyab*, consisting of two volumes of al-

Sayyab's collected poems; *Diwan Nazik al-Malikia*, consisting of two volumes of Malikia's collected poems; and *al-Harb ta'mal bi-jidd* (*The War Works Hard*), which consists of Mikhail's selected poems, and which was first published in Arabic in 2000, and then translated into English in 2005.

The selected poems referred to in this study have primarily been translated from Arabic. As a writer who is bilingual in Arabic and English, my interpretations of Iraqi poetry provide unique insights into the complex mix of political, emotional, national, and gender issues that characterize both Iraqi literature, in particular, and Arab literature, in general. For example, most of the original poem, "The Blind Prostitute," is in the form of an epic narrative, composed of five hundred lines of free verse, which details the tragic life story of the prostitute, Salima. While only two hundred lines in translation are used in this study from *Placing the Poet: Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab and Postcolonial Iraq* (1998), by Terri DeYoung, a few stanzas from other English sources, such as the articles, "Semiotic Analysis of Place and Time in Poems of Badr Shakir al-Sayyab" (2016), by Razi Boezar, Mohammad, Shayegan Mehr, and Fariborz Huseeinjanzadeh, and "The Poetics of Revolution: Cultures, Practices, and Politics of Anti-Colonialism in Iraq, 1932-1960" (2013), by Kevin M. Jones, are used.

Additional works that can be found in English translation include the poem, "I," by Nazik Malaika, in the book, *The Contemporary Iraqi Poetry Movement: The Future of the Past* (2012), by Khaloud Al-Muttalibi; the poem, "Cholera," in *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology* (2001) by Nathalie Handal; and the poem, "Revolt Against the Sun," found in the article, "Adaptations and Evocations of Orientalism in Nāzik al-Malā'ika's Poetry" (2018), by Muneerah Bader Almahasheer. The poem, "Jamila and

Us,” can be found in *Tablet & Pen: Literary Landscapes from the Modern Middle East (Words Without Borders): Literary Landscapes from the Modern Middle East* (2011).

Working on Iraqi poetry in translation is an opportunity “to embark on [an] enriching journey into an often marginalized and misunderstood nation” (Alfieri 1). This study will not refer to the principles of the poetic aesthetics between the two languages of Arabic and English, as this study uses English sources where possible. Therefore, consideration of the questions of translation is not a focus for this study.

Contribution to the Field

This study demonstrates further how key features of the colonial experience are expressed in contemporary Iraqi poetry. In her 2012 essay “Poetry in the Service of Nation Building? Political Commitment and Self-Assertion,” Leslie Tramontini explains that in Iraq, literature, especially poetry, is acknowledged both to reflect the values of society and plays a significant role in forming it through voicing aspirations for social and political change (461). This poetic development began during the British occupation of Iraq in the early twentieth century. According to Tramontini, poets developed various strategies to deal with memory and the poetics of homeland by fusing nationalist and Islamic sentiments into a kind of “romantic nationalism” (2016:55) where poetry in Iraq “serves as a vehicle for circulating ideas, slogans, and political aims” (461). This was due to rising anti-colonial sentiment in Iraq in the mid-twentieth century (Tramontini 461-462). Tramontini states further that “the anti-colonial power struggle for self-affirmation

and the instability that has followed led to a reassessment of personal heritage, and language became the unifying bonds, the most important symbol of Arab national identity” (462). This came about because, in Iraq, there was a widespread confidence in the “power of language to change the world”: this belief made poetry “political” (Tramontini 462). For this reason, poetry is an important “tool” for Iraqis engaged in political struggle (Tramontini 462).

One of the reasons why poetry was such a powerful tool for Iraqis engaged in anti-colonial struggle in the early and mid-twentieth century is because it linked Iraq’s past to its present,

Constituting a strong link between what the community used to be (past greatness), what it actually is (present desolate situation), what it should be in the future, the notion of homeland created an identity narrative in which political agency was made moral responsibility. (Tramontini 2016:55)

This identity narrative was particularly popular in the 1940s and 1950s, as poetry was used as a “discursive strategy,” which allowed “Iraqi poets to reclaim their identity by memories” of their shared “great past and heritage” (Tramontini 2016:55). Such a strategy was so effective because the poet served as a traditional authority figure which could be co-opted by modernist poets to tackle the moral problems of their day, and to speak freely about nationalist ideas, thereby creating a sense of national consciousness (Tramontini 462). Yaseen Noorani points out that this led to Iraqi national identity becoming an alternative to European colonialism (238). Therefore, poetry was used in

colonial and post-colonial Iraq to give the Iraqi people an alternative source of identification to the dominant ideology of European colonialism.

In general, according to Elleke Boehmer, poetry that focuses on the post-colonial experience is “rather than simply being the writing which ‘came after’ empire, is that which critically scrutinises the colonial relationship ... that sets out in one way or another to resist colonial perspectives” (3). A “key aspect of all colonial writings,” however, is the act of ““writing back” to the imperial culture” (Villar-Argaiz 66). Another key aspect of Iraqi post-colonial writing is that these texts start at the very moment the colonial subject uses the medium of text to challenge imperialist practices, “Postcolonial writing [...] is initiated at the that very moment when a native writer formulates a text committed to cultural resistance” (Kiberd 6). However, Iraqi poets tend to offer a more emotional understanding of the colonial experience. This is because, according to Mona Mikhail, traditionally, Arab poetry has been used as a medium to express emotions, as well as lampooning the current political climate (595). Thus, the post-colonial poetry of Iraq embodies many of the key features of traditional Arab poetry, while containing messages which appeal to anti-colonial sentiment.

The Iraqi poets, Sayyab, Malaika and Mikhail, notably all allude to suffering as a key feature of the postcolonial experience and demonstrate how it is related to social and political upheaval. It is equally clear that the effects of colonial rule in Iraq have not yet disappeared, nor have they been banished, as the world has moved into a postcolonial period; therefore, the problems sown in earlier years are still relevant today. Two Iraqi wars and the rise of the so-called “Islamic State,” and other radical, violent movements are testament to this. Exploring the works of these poets the question of how Iraq has suffered

provokes many emotions, leading the poets to question the ways in which their emotional reactions relate to their individual senses of a national consciousness. For example, in his poem, “The Blind Prostitute,” (1954) Sayyab presents a prostitute as a national allegory, showing the interplay between the colonisation of the country and the effects it had on various strata of society, while exploring the pain caused through his representations of different individuals. In contrast, Malaika has been considered a more personal writer, and thus her own doubts and fears merge with those of the people, making her poetry personally appealing. In comparison, Mikhail’s nationalist sentiments and experience in Iraqi in exile are particularly evident in her poems, “The War Works Hard” and “America.” In this study, I analyse Mikhail’s poems in ways which not only explore her sense of a national consciousness, but also the ongoing effects of the global capitalist system. These analyses of the work of some of the Iraqi nation’s leading poets, as well as their ongoing suffering as a post-colonial country, is read here through a current World Literature framework which positions Iraq as a semi-peripheral country. In this manner, the insights gained from this study of the expression of national consciousness in Iraqi poetry can be further applied to other countries that have been placed within a similar position.

National Consciousness in Postcolonial Iraqi Poetry

Badr al-Sayyab

Chapter 1

This study analyses Iraqi national consciousness through the poetry of Badr al-Sayyab (1925-1954), with a particular emphasis on reading his poem, “The Blind Prostitute,” (1954) as national allegory. Sayyab is often considered to be “one of the prolific poets of modern Arabic poetry, who brought the movement of ““modernism” to Arabic literature” (Qaisi 178). His work was inspired by having been born in the small village of Jaykur in Southern Iraq. Given his rural upbringing, much of his poetry explores conflicts between the town and country “with unpatrolled intensity and depth” (Moreh 154). This can be described as his profound expression of his national consciousness, as the Iraqi people had to come to terms with the implications of colonisation, the decisions it would ask them to make, and the subsequent dilemmas they would face. These phenomena can be explored through literature, as Sayyab expresses his nationalism, by delving into the issues that he sees as shaping his country and his fellow

Iraqis, while articulating his own responses. Situated as politically left-wing and a member of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), Sayyab was particularly concerned with the problem of “poverty in the country and injustice in the town” (Moreh 154). This concern propelled his main focus on his nation and the land. For these reasons, in his poem, “The Blind Prostitute,” Sayyab portrays not only the conflicts between town and country, but also the larger tragedy impacting Iraq. In addition, the poem notably represents a marked change in Arab poetry since it is the first poem to discuss women “as victims in such a comprehensive manner” (Moreh 154). The character of the prostitute, then, who is the main protagonist of the poem, becomes a symbol of nation for the purpose of confronting the effects of colonialism, while providing a method to fight against these, as well as a means for projecting a sense of national consciousness moving forward.

In its treatment of the figure of woman as abject, Sayyab’s poem, “The Blind Prostitute,” is fundamentally an allegory of Iraq, as it laments the effects of colonization in Iraq and its subsequent suppression of an independent Iraqi national identity. In terms of Iraq’s history, dominated by the Ottoman and the British Empires in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Iraq’s sense of a national consciousness and identity has repeatedly been challenged and altered by outside global forces. Nevertheless, poems such as Sayyab’s began to assert a configuration of national consciousness that did not come to fruition in Iraq until the post-World War II period, after Iraq had experienced the negative impacts of its colonial/post-colonial conditions, which were further worsened by the forces of capitalist globalisation. In this study I argue further that the poem, “The Blind Prostitute,” is not only an allegory for the nation of Iraq, but it was also intended to remind the nation’s citizens of how Iraq arrived at its current abject condition. In 1954,

when the poem was written to represent the national consciousness of Iraq, the country was then struggling to align both its identity and economic desires with its virtues, while grappling with its vices. As the government remained conservative, the campaign for reform became louder, highlighting the country's internal divisions. Although Iraq eventually drifted into a form of neo-colonialism, many Iraqis still desired independence.

Therefore, in his poem, "The Blind Prostitute," Sayyab uses the abject condition of the prostitute as well as her friends in order to explore the effects of the Iraqi government's instability on the Iraqi people who were experiencing the great pains of widespread violence, exploitation, abuse, displacement, and poverty from the effects of colonialism. In this manner, the abject state of the prostitute and her friends are thus an allegory of the state of the nation of Iraq. While Sayyab's projected consequences of national decline are devastating, his poem is nevertheless necessarily illustrative of the state of national consciousness in his times, which stand in sharp relief in terms of the pitiful condition of the country as it then stood, in relation to the memories of a better past, and thus the nation's right to something better. As aforementioned, there are four key responses to configure a national consciousness: 1) fight, 2) flight, 3) adopt, and 4) adapt. In the poem, the last two, adopt and adapt, are exemplified through the characters of the "passersby," who, in the allegory of the poem, represent the influences of neo-colonialism on Salima (the prostitute) and her friends, who are all forced to do whatever they can to survive. In an allegorical manner, the character of Salima thus represents the nation of Iraq itself.

In addition to defining a national consciousness, Sayyab finds his own voice among these debates, adopting a humanistic stance, hoping to inspire his country with a

compassionate, but frank, account of what he sees. Given his powerful, moving, and evocative use of language in the poem, with its expert construction of national allegory and its use of free verse, and considering the political temperature of the time, one can view “The Blind Prostitute” as a work of art which expresses the feelings of a man who has become torn by his country’s exploitation. While resisting the temptation to be sentimental, jingoistic, self-righteous, or vindictive, the poem displays instead dignity, even in its use of a harsh realism, while still expressing a genuine compassion for the Iraqi people who are living under the harsh conditions of colonialism.

This chapter thus analyses Sayyab’s poem, “The Blind Prostitute,” through the lens of Marxist theory and its surrounding discourse. Marxist theory is more than a fitting choice due to the poem’s alignment not only with Marxist theory due to Iraq’s colonial/postcolonial economic conditions and encroaching global capitalism, but also the poet’s own political affiliation with the Iraqi Communist party. In addition, Marxist theory is often viewed as the appropriate tool with which to challenge colonial discourse due to its economic impetus. In *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Karl Marx argued that overlying the overt political structure of a society was its “superstructure,” which aimed to legitimise the ruling or dominant class of that society, in ways that made it appear natural that this class should have all the power in that society. Thus the actions of that class would be legitimised and go unchallenged. David Lisman (73) notes that “art in general, and literature in particular, in this sense are part of the superstructure” (74). He adds that arts and literature are considered to be a part of a society’s superstructure. Marx thus saw the economy as the main driving force of society. As such, while he believed that art could remain relatively independent of the state, it was

the economic situation the society found itself in and the economic forces at play that determined the kind of art that society produced (Lisman 74). Terry Eagleton explains that although Marxism is not designed to act as a critical tool for literature, by applying its theory to individual works, it can be argued that literature could be considered to be a part of a superstructure such as Marx describes, and therefore these political theories could be useful in understanding art in relation to its economic and social backgrounds (1, 42).

The Marxist theory of superstructure has thus frequently been applied as a means to analyse literature, and therefore can be as well applied to the poem, “The Blind Prostitute,” especially when considering the poem as an allegory of the effects of colonialism. Sayyab published “The Blind Prostitute” in 1954, at a time when Iraq was still struggling to find its way as an independent nation. At the time, however, Iraq was still under the control of British colonialism, as the United Kingdom was still the ruler of the former, and the then fragmented, British Empire, was now gone, which, nevertheless, continued to oversee many of the political and administrative functions of Iraq. This importantly meant that Iraq was denied control over its key source of economic wealth—the extraction and export of petroleum. Bahooora asserts that, in Sayyab's “The Blind Prostitute,” “the prostitute and her sacrifices for her nation and fellow countrywomen is a central theme of al-Sayyab’s modernist poem” (56). “The Blind Prostitute” thus provides Sayyab's clear evaluation of his country’s situation as well as an equally clear message for his people by using the main character of Salima, the blind prostitute of the title, as an allegory for the nation. In this case, Salima is representative of both the Iraqi people and the effects of their oppression by colonial powers. For these reasons, the application of a

Neo-Marxist framework for the analysis of “The Blind Prostitute” is a well-considered choice since the poem is an example of the Iraqi nation’s disgust with capitalist imperial politics.

In terms of the poem’s politics, the critic Frederick Jameson provides a useful method that can be applied to the political dimensions of Sayyab’s “The Blind Prostitute.” Jameson argues that third-world texts, even those that deal with private subjects, “Necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual’s destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*” (Jameson 69). This is exemplified in the interrelationship between poetry and politics that can be traced back to the beginnings of literature as an art form, and this connection is particularly evident in the case of Sayyab, who was greatly affected by wars, conflicts, and revolutions, particularly in the 1940s and 1950s. Jameson thus asserts that third-world literature needs to be considered with Fanon's prophecy of social and national consciousness at the forefront (81). However, Aijaz Ahmad challenges Jameson’s understanding of third-world literature in term of “all” literature by all third-world authors inevitably draws on the theme of national allegory (3), concluding that Jameson’s analysis is one-dimensional (24). However, in contrast, I suggest that Ahmad’s analysis of Jameson’s is problematic, in that Jameson asserts that geography does inform poetry and prose, he does as well take into consideration several aspects when analysing third-world literary production. Jameson, in fact, argues that third-world poetry and prose can be analysed on a national level by considering four key points: (1) what the protagonist desires, (2) the nature of its allegory, (3) the role of the third world cultural producer, and (4) what the text has to say

about the future (71). He states that these four key points “will touch, respectively, on the libidinal dimension of the story, on the structure of its allegory, on the role of the third-world cultural producer himself, and on the perspective of futurity projected by the tale's double resolution" (Jameson 71).

Jameson’s outline for analysing literature at the national level can be readily applied to Sayyab’s poem, “The Blind Prostitute,” while relating to the core argument of this chapter, that the main character, Salima, is used as an allegory to represent the nation of Iraq, a fact which the poem introduces from the start, as the opening lines set the scene: “Night closes in once again, and the city and the passersby / Drink it to the depths, like a sad song” (1-2). The reference to “night” in the first line of the poem can be understood to be a direct reference to the dark political forces of colonialism then dominating Iraq. Here, Sayyab suggests that the force of colonialism covers Iraq in the same way that the night covers the land in darkness. While the word, “night,” represents the dark, sinister impact of the colonial exploiters, “the city” in the first line, represents Iraq itself. Sayyab refers to Iraq as a city as in the past because Iraq was not then yet a unified country, as “during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the land that was to become the territories of the modern state of Iraq were gradually incorporated into the Ottoman Empire as three provinces, based on the towns of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra” (Tripp 8). However, the region was dominated by Baghdad, which continued to have the most powerful influence over the country, even in the 1950s. As such, Sayyab’s contemporary readers would have understood that the word, “city,” as referring to Iraq as a whole. Another key term that appears in the first line of ‘The Blind Prostitute’ is “passersby,” which is used to depict the people of Iraq as a group. Notably, the

“passersby” are not given any individual identities here or throughout the rest of the poem, indicating that they should be considered as a group, and not individuals. Hence, the Iraqis are viewed together with “the city,” which is also covered by the night. Thus, it can be said that the terms, both “the city” and “the passersby,” are used at times synonymously. The “city,” however, more often refers to Iraq as a nation, while the term, “passersby,” is more personal, indicating the people of the city. In this manner, Sayyab’s poem, “The Blind Prostitute,” can be read simultaneously as an expression of Iraqi national consciousness, a national allegory, colonial oppression, and through Marxist theory. In the section that follows, I describe the differences between third-world and world-systems and the impact these have on literature in relation to Sayyab’s poem.

Third World and World Systems

The notions of third-world and world-systems as they relate to literature reveal a crisis in analysis. The Warwick Research Collective (WReC) argues that, given the current crisis of culture, both the output and attribution in literature has gone beyond the need to identify where the work was conceived or executed, as well as the identity and purpose of the author, and the means of production and distribution (4). This view is particularly relevant in the contexts of Ethnic and Women’s Studies, Cultural Studies, and Postcolonial Theory (WReC 3-4). In these contexts, the notions of both World Literature and Global Literature have emerged as important foci of academic discussion and research. While the concept of Global Literature is often thought to be intricately linked to globalisation, this is problematic, according to (WReC):

But where “global literature” might be understood as in the first instance an extension of postcolonial studies—as *postcolonial studies under the sign of*

“globalisation theory”—in fact—“world literature” is in the first instance an extension of comparative literature, and might be understood *as the remaking of comparative literature after the multicultural debates and the disciplinary critique of Eurocentrism.* (WReC 4)

The term “global” is typically used in “discussions of contemporary social processes” as these motivate the “production, circulation and reception of literature (as they do culture in general)” (WReC 4). These relate to the new framework, which focuses on World Literature as globalisation that is an underlying condition for reengagement with World Literature in the sense that it is: “The sociological product or warrant for a fresh engagement with questions of comparative literacy method (which is what really characterises the new discussion of World Literature)” (WReC 5). As such, World Literature is any literature that challenges a Eurocentric or Western world view. Therefore, World Literature is predicated on the idea that the “world is one” (although it is not united) (WReC 4). Furthermore, David Damrosch argues that understanding foreign literature in such terms is challenging because the concept of World Literature transcends postcolonial studies, national literatures, and even the cultural borders of the “Cold War, [and] the opposition between ‘East’ and ‘West’ [and] ... the ‘Three Worlds Theory’” (5). Thus, the notion of World Literature has transformed how academics think about non-Western poetry and prose.

An additional, important aspect of the concept of World Literature is how it relates to Marxist theory, which is particularly relevant in the context of this study. First, Marxist theory highlights the inequalities of capitalism, something identified as relevant to the discussion of World Literature and culture by Jameson who explains that literary

output has “dramatically inserted into the corrupt and westernized money economy of the new post-independence national or comprador bourgeoisie” (Jameson 81). Marxist understandings of culture are further relevant in the context of theories of World Literature as they relate to the theory of combined and uneven development which “has a long pedigree in Marxist sociology and political economy and continues to stimulate debate across the social sciences” (WReC 6). Marxist theory additionally has a longstanding argument on the cultural dimensions of uneven development, which are best described by Leon Trotsky’s formulation concerning the “amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms” (Trotsky 432). Trotsky’s theory of “uneven and unequal development,” were used to explain that as capitalism spreads and grows, situations arise where “capitalist forms and relations exist alongside ‘archaic forms of economic life’ and pre-existing social and class relations” (432). In this manner, capitalist development promotes unevenness in terms of the world-system.

This insight suggests that World Literature, such as the works of Sayyab, illustrate both combined and uneven development through the simultaneous use of traditional themes, national allegory, and modernist composition (WReC 6). Sayyab's “The Blind Prostitute” therefore focuses on the themes of suffering, or the real consequences of political oppression on ordinary men and women, which is essential for understanding the significance of the combined and uneven movement that Marxist theory inspired.

However, in line with his use of national allegory, Sayabb understood how important it is to spend more time considering the victims of colonialism, so that readers could personally respond to issues of colonialism. Sayabb’s focus on the individual, as well as the collective, provided further justification for the readers’ responses, in that

national literatures require reaction, activism, and ultimately, revolution. Accordingly, Boullata asserts that it was not feasible for a modern poet to write about themes such as freedom unless he was prepared to leave the traditional forms of poetry behind and take on a newer, more liberating style that would allow him to express himself fully and without any artificial restraint (51). Sayyab, in particular, thus notably adopted free verse as a vehicle for his poetry. Although it would be a stretch to claim that it was only free verse that made his work modern, as well as socially and politically revolutionary poetry possible, nevertheless the modern Iraqi poets such as Sayyab employed free verse in a manner that began a powerful movement.

The poet's use of free verse further supports the application of World Literature theory when unpacking Sayyab's poem because, as Franco Moretti writes,

International capitalism is a system that is simultaneously *one* and *unequal* with a core, and a periphery (and a semi-periphery) that are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality. One, and unequal: *one* literature ... or, perhaps better, one world literary system ... which is different from what Goethe and Marx had hoped for, because it is profoundly unequal. (149–50)

World systems are therefore not constructed around national differences, but rather theories of inequality. On the basis of this hypothesis, according to the WReC, “we propose [...] to define ‘world literature’ as *the literature of the world-system*” (8), meaning the capitalist world system as hegemonic capitalism and its influence spreads around the world (8), it raises the status and power of certain nations, usually nations that align with, in whole, or in part, Western values, while effectively subordinating other nations that do not. Both global capitalism and the postcolonial vestiges of imperialism

have had the effects of producing, as well as reinforcing, inequalities, especially in such subordinated nations. Therefore, the current state of World Literature is not only a way of reading literature, but rather also a system, for which its base is composed of inequality. Moretti writes that “World Literature is not an object; it’s a *problem* and a problem that asks for a new critical method” (149). Casanova agrees, explaining that because this new problem has been identified “it is necessary instead to change our ordinary way of looking at literary phenomena” (xi). Therefore, the aforementioned interpretations of World Literature are Marxist in the sense that the WReC, Jameson, Moretti, and Casanova all hint toward the uneven development that “characterises the new discussion of ‘world literature’” (WReC 5) that this thesis addresses. Therefore, this thesis will demonstrate that current theories of World Literature can be registered in ways that position such nations, such as Iraq, as subordinated within the hegemonic capitalistic system of globalism that has been transposed onto and recognised as a theory for World Literature.

The WReC point out that Jameson’s work is particularly relevant in this context, in the sense that he is primarily concerned “with the relationship between capitalist modernity and literary form” (21). While analysis of Jameson’s scholarship is often mainly focused on his understanding of national allegory, the WReC are more interested in his commentary on the “crisis of representation” in non-metropolitan cultures that, according to Jameson, both were and remain

Locked in a life and death struggle with first-world cultural imperialism
... a cultural struggle that is itself a reflection of the economic situation of

such areas in their penetration by various stages of capitalism, or as it is sometimes euphemistically termed, modernism. (Jameson 68)

Thus, the concept of World Literature, according to Jameson, illustrates the conflict between national culture and the encroachment of modernity. Therefore, it can be argued that Jameson's theory of national allegory can relate to the context of Iraq as well as be linked to both World Systems and World Literature as interpreted by WReC. This is because in his essay, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986), Jameson explicitly highlights Iraq as an example of a country where Western forces, particularly those of the United States and the British Empire might replace its national culture with their own (65). Consequently, national allegory occurs in Iraqi literature to create a link between the personal experience of the "individual" and the experience of the nation's people in a hostile world system (Jameson 69). Regarding Sayyab's poetry, Badawi states that "it is impossible to disentangle the individual predicament of the suffering poet from the commitment to a social or national ideal" (253). Also, by exploring Sayyab's literary output through the lens of his "wealth of adjectives and complex metaphors" (DeYoung 200), as well as national allegory, it is possible to identify his (and by extension, Iraqi literature's) route to national consciousness, a point highlighted by DeYoung: "In Arabic literature during the modern period, poetry has been closely identified with the rise of nationalism" (304). It is thus clear that Jameson's ideas as outlined above fit in with the current debate within Postcolonial Studies and theory as explored by the WReC. In what follows, the above-mentioned theories are applied to a discussion of Sayyab's poem, "The Blind Prostitute."

“The Blind Prostitute”

Before unpacking Sayyab’s poem, “The Blind Prostitute,” with the application of postcolonial and Marxist theory, and while analysing the poem as national allegory, it is first necessary to ground the work within its historical context. In “The Blind Prostitute,” Sayyab tells the story of Salima, the main character. Her miserable situation is described in some detail, as “a woman who works as a prostitute in an enclosed, restricted red-light district in post-war Baghdad” (DeYoung 233). The poem was written in the wake of the November 1952 demonstrations in Iraq, which Sayyab was involved in due to his membership to the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) (Colla 252-254). This experience and his decision to publish “The Blind Prostitute” led to a literary conflict between Sayyab and the ICP, as the party was opposed to him publishing the poem. Instead, in his memoirs, Sayyab recalled that they wanted him to publish the poem, “Weapons and Children,” instead since they believed that the text of “The Blind Prostitute” was too experimental (Colla 256). However, Sayyab nevertheless rejected the ICP’s advice and published the poem. He then wrote the following note explaining his decision:

An understanding of nationalism has been lost on our local sectarian (i.e. communist) and chauvinist parties [such as the ICP]. Nationalism must be populist, and populism must be nationalist. The descendants of Muḥammad, ‘Umar, ‘Alī, Abū Dharr, the Kharajites, the first Shiites and the Mu‘tazilites ought to live a life befitting them as humans and as the heirs to the glories of the Arab nation. Thus, isn’t it shameful for us Arabs that our daughters have become prostitutes sleeping with men from every race and colour? (Colla 256)

Sayyab reminded Arabs that they were descended from great forefathers, such as “Muhammed, Umar, Ali, Abu Dharr,” and that they should be constructing a life and a national identity that could reflect the honour and glory that those men deserved through their later generations. His verdict on what has become of these people is stark and speaks of unmistakable regret and sorrow, as well as righteous indignation: “Is it not a disgrace upon us, the Arabs, that our daughters have become whores who sleep with people from every race and colour?”

To Sayyab, the daughters of the Iraqi nation were viewed like prostitutes, going with men “from every race and colour,” and the fact that the women were given to men suggests that they were dominated both socially and sexually, a condition which is revealed by Ritu Tyagi, as she writes that “nationalist discourses are largely male-centric and control women by capturing them in traditional stereotypes” (47). She notes further that the discourses inspired by nationalism tend to control women by presenting them in traditionally stereotypical ways (here, as sex objects and prizes for men to enjoy). She goes on to consider how, for many black women, it would not seem logical or sensible to try to separate purely feminist issues from others (such as racism) because for many of these women, the two oppressions are usually experienced simultaneously and tend to reinforce each other. The Combahee River Collective states that “for a Black woman the issue of race and sex are not separate from each other. Rape, for example, by White men lead to racial, sexual as well as political oppression” (Tyagi 48). Here, something similar could be said for the women in Iraq (as represented in the poem); their exploitation as women viewed as sexual objects goes hand in hand with their lack of respect or position in society. Nevertheless, further analyses will reveal that Sayyab is far from viewing his

women characters in such a way, and that he does, in fact, have a far deeper appreciation for their suffering—both as victims of colonialism and of male imperialism. Importantly, as Bahooora states:

In the writings of Iraqi men intellectuals, the struggle over women’s rights and bodies was a struggle over what it meant to be modern in an anticolonial context. Socially committed urban intellectuals envisioned being modern in part through the social uplift of marginal figures primarily peasants and women in the countryside. (45)

Here, Bahooora notes that for writers and thinkers who wanted to embrace modernism and “progress,” one of the ways they tried to do that was by treating socially marginalised members of society in a more respectful and considerate way. However, this suggests that perhaps this new treatment of the prostitute was a means to an end for the writers; they wanted to use the prostitute's case and condition to make their own point, as well as use it as a gateway into “modern” society and acceptability. It is against this background that this study considers the significance of the prostitute in Sayyab's poem.

Sayyab broke with the ICP in June 1954, the same year he published “The Blind Prostitute” (Davis 210). He then went on to join the Ba’th Party, a mix of nationalist sentiment and left-wing socialism, thus shifting his political allegiance (Jones 10). Colla explains that Sayyab’s aforementioned note was an attack on the ICP, based on his disagreement with the idea that the mixing of different racial groups would be harmful (256). The view of the ICP was Pan-Arab, or a general coalition of all Arab states under a united front, and it did not want to stress individual nations’ rights and identities as separate from the other Arab nations. Sayyab, however, wanted a strong, independent

Iraq. Sayyab's verdict is that in this ideological clash the real meaning of nationalism—that it should be both Pan-Arab and nationalistic at the same time, and that one aspect should support and enhance the other—is lost. As Sayyab became more committed to poetry, he wrote that communism forced inferior poets on the people, and these poets just followed the official doctrine of the party. Sayyab, however, rejected this situation. He wrote that: “Communism and poetry are opposed to one another and can never be reconciled” (Colla 257), and then he went on to publish “The Blind Prostitute,” a work that was then viewed as his definitive break with communism and the ICP.

The poem has been described as a “complex work full of stylistic and political ambiguities, such as the shifting use of the second and third person” to refer to the prostitute, Salima, the main character, representing her movement between “subject and object” (Davis 210). Sayyab also used the poem to “attack the corruption and moral decay brought about by colonial rule.” This is symbolised by “the sexually transmitted diseases Salmina contracts and her desire for revenge” (Davis 210-211). As such, Davis concludes: “‘The Blind Whore’ [the source’s term for “The Blind Prostitute”] self-consciously challenges the viability of binary opposites as vehicles for enhancing an understanding of Iraq’s colonial predicament—as the human condition more broadly defined” (211). While critics such as Majid Samarra’i view the poem in “strictly nationalist terms, or the Iraqis against the British, Sayyab also used the poem to explore the topic of sexual oppression, which is caused by domestic culture and society, not just colonial rule” (Davis 211). Essentially, “The Blind Prostitute” is an ode to the victims of Arab society (Boezar et al., 657). In “The Blind Prostitute,” the speaker asks: “From what forest did this night come? / From what caves? / From what wolf’s den? / From what nest

among the graves did it rise, flapping its wings, dark brown like a crow?" (6-7). Here, Sayyab suggests that prostitutes and other abject peoples are "victims of oppression and beliefs and desires, and everything that is related with people's lives depend. And it seems that people are living in caves and tombs or wolves den" (Boezar et al., 657). To highlight the ignorance of the public at large to the plight of prostitutes (and, by extension, the state of Iraqi national consciousness), Sayyab begins his poem by alluding to darkness and blindness: "Night closes in once more" (1), and "The street lamps, like oleanders, have blossomed" (3). The poem begins with a gloomy description of the city at night, painting a picture that is used as a background to the appearance of Salima, the prostitute. His use of the words "once more" (1), suggests the idea that this is repeated every night; indeed, the last lines of the poem speak directly to Salima, saying, "The night has passed; you must wait for another" (472). However, there is also light in this city. The street lamps have been lit and are compared to "oleander flowers" suddenly "blossoming." This image is well-chosen; first of all, because it is very visual, suggesting the small flowers of light standing out in the darkness, but also because the oleander is a poisonous plant, or shrub. The attraction is dangerous, like the night itself. Thus, Sayyab uses the "night" and "light," to indicate that such darkness does not only belong to the town and its red-light district, but also covers the whole of Iraq (Abouhaghne 213). Since "The Blind Prostitute" was written in what was, at the time, a third-world country, one that had a strong colonial past and influence, the poem would thus have to be interpreted, according to the definition offered by Jameson, as a national allegory. Abouhaghe and Boezar, et al., suggest that

In this way the dark night cover[s] the town, so the embarrassed ones use the light of lanterns of the road that are shining like Oleander flowers and the prostitutes who are the victim tired and disappointed in their nests are waiting for “blind wolves.” The poet, by portraying [the] brothel mentioned the violated classes of society, who are not born just to suffer from pain. (Boezar et al., 658)

The Iraqi people have eyes, and they can use the light, but what do they see? They are blind to the political necessities that confront them, preferring instead to live by night, not making use of their powers of sight, and therefore they are condemned to suffer the consequences, which is to be ruled over by others.

In “The Blind Prostitute” Sayyab writes,

The policeman passes wretched and the wanderers are tired

Sleep like a caged bird, appeared in their eyes

They are smiling and presentations on their face

With a face apparently happy, are crying

With the eyes of others and laughter rustling

And if the bare breasts owners

Are pieces of dead soldier is decorated with flowers

And if they are stairs of lust, full of gaps

Until they are destroyed, fragments of such dogs. (Boezar, et al., 658)

Within the poem, Sayyab argues that the whole city is a brothel. For example, a bird seller mentioned in the poem is suggested to be a victim, as he passes through the alley when Salima hears his voice, and upon witnessing his approach she is reminded of her memories of her happy and innocent teenage years (Boezar et al., 658). She remembers the bird seller, as his father was a farmer who hunted birds on the side to feed his hungry family. One day, the blind prostitute “went to look for the father and found him dead because he had been accused of stealing wheat from a landlord” (Abouhaghe 419). These memories then torment the existence of the blind prostitute further (Abouhaghe 419). She laments:

O memories, why do you visit those who are blind, those unable to sleep?

Do not tarry; the torture is that you pass so slowly.

Tell her how he died; how he became smeared with blood- he, the ripe
grain and the evening-

As the peasants’ eyes twitch humiliated in their sockets,

And the mumbles: “He caught him stealing,” and the lips jerk,

Dishonoring her dead. Then she cries out: “O God, O God,

If it had been anyone but the Shaykh!” And she fell down, fastening
two lips

Upon the dead man, swearing vengeance for him in pain, sorrow and hurt.

The whispers of the ripe wheat, the brooks and the palm trees seemed like

The echoes of the dead, murmuring: “ He caught him stealing” through
the fields,

Where the threshing floors open the veins of the dead, ever widening.

(141-151)

Because “The Blind Prostitute” is a long, epic poem, it thus relies on literary references to allude to how Salima understands and visualises the victims of Iraqi society (Boezar et al., 658). In particular, Sayyab uses memory. Indeed, memory is seen as a kind of torturer: “O memories, why do you visit those who are blind, those unable to sleep? / Do not tarry; the torture is that you pass so slowly” (141-142). Therefore, it can be suggested that through Salima's memory, Sayyab “has created a relationship between beloved and country in a way that love of one of them relates to another one” (Boezar et al., 658). The time spent is agony for those who have to endure bitter memories of the cruel times before, reliving the moments that brought them to their present sad condition.

While the poem tells the story of Salima, the blind prostitute, it also alludes to the Biblical myth of Cain and Abel (also part of the Qur’an) and Greek legend (DeYoung 234-235). However, “The Blind Prostitute” challenges the adequacy of the linear narrative for conveying the poet’s message (Davis 211). For this reason, the poem is overlaid with Qur’anic and other symbolism that is not congruent with Ba’athist ideology and historical memory. As such, Sayyab’s use of mythological themes and allegories indicates that the poet “does not see his poem as the culmination of hope in a (nationalist) future. Rather, the poem represented Iraqi intellectuals’ deep frustration with the difficulty of escaping the clutches of monarchy and the British” (Davis 211). Sayyab thus

uses Qur'anic and mythological allegories to explore how human nature is founded in murder and destruction: "Cain! Conceal the blood of the crime with flowers and veils" (9). The character of Salima observes that the human race is the descendant of Cain, the son of Adam, who infamously murdered his own brother, Abel. Sayyab also borrows from mythology to drive home his analysis of the situation and his judgement of the people. For example, in "The Blind Prostitute," he relates the "passers-by" to Oedipus when he writes,

The grandsons of Oedipus, the Blind, and his sighted heirs.

Jocasta is a widow as before, and on the gate of Thebes

Still the terrible Sphinx casts shadows of fear

And death pants in an eternal

Question, the same as before, but its ancient meaning has died -

Because the answer rotted too long on those lips. And what is the answer?

"I" said some of the passers-by. (21-72)

In these lines, Sayyab further compares the human race to Oedipus, who, in the Greek legend, killed his father and married his mother. Therefore, the message of the poem appears to be that "humanity rests on a black history of filial murder and incest" (Salama 16). In the poem the passers-by are the descendants of Oedipus ("the Blind and his sighted heirs"), and as such can be seen to have inherited trouble and disaster from their history. The city of Thebes and Baghdad (both of which are metonymic for Iraq), are thus portrayed as sharing an identity. The linking of "blind" with the "sighted," suggests that, with or without eyes, their fates are connected. The blindness of their "grandfather," Oedipus, goes well with the darkness of the night. Both have, in a way, trapped the

people, Oedipus through his inheritance, and the night by colonising their country.

“Jocasta is still a widow,” shows that nothing has changed to bring hope, and the Sphinx is still there at the gate of the city, causing fear and dismay to those who encounter him. This symbolizes again the state of entrapment of the people. Here, the Sphinx is like the colonial power, who decides the fate of the people, having the power of life and death over those he rules. In ways similar to how the Sphinx asked a riddle that led to the death of the people who could not answer it, so, too, “death pants an eternal question” to the Iraqi people.

Sayyab not only explores this theme of death in this poem, but he also considers it in detail in another of his poems, “The Gravedigger” (Salama 16). Thus, much of Sayyab’s poetry is about death and unthinkable cruelties which he alludes to through linguistic forms and protagonists such as his “Blind Prostitute” (1954), “Gravedigger,” (1952) or “Detective” (1954) (Salama 202-203). For this reason, many of Sayyab’s critics argued that he was obsessed with death. However, Salama disputes this, suggesting that in Sayyab’s poetry death is an allegory for the death of Iraq and the corruption of the nation under colonial rule (Salama 203). Hence, Sayyab uses mythical themes to explore the darker side of humanity, and by extension, the darker aspects of colonial rule and influence over the country.

By alluding to both Oedipus and Cain, Sayyab is emphasising an unnatural family relationship, which points toward “a colonial context and the “unnatural” hatred” displayed by the “western coloniser” to “his fathers’/brethren among” the colonised, i.e. the Arabs (DeYoung 235). This is because the coloniser denies his descent from Arab culture, thereby creating an unnatural family dynamic, thus explaining Sayyab’s allusions

to Cain and Oedipus. The linkage between Greek mythology and religious stories continues throughout the poem as an allusion to the prostitute's both natural and now unnatural state of being. For example, when he describes the prostitutes who inhabit the grim landscape of this Baghdad/Babylon, Sayyab uses a series "of binary oppositions, which compare them to the inhabitants of the ""natural" world" such as "(butterflies, bird and flowers)" (DeYoung 235). This contrast between the prostitute's innocent past and degraded present culminates in "The Blind Prostitute" with the manner in which Sayyab expounds on the unnatural family dynamic (between Salima and her father). The strength of the harsh images that are used certainly make it impossible for the reader to pass over certain passages without reacting; for example, a very powerful image occurs in the stanza where Salima describes herself as a flower from the swamp, gulping down the blood that oozed from what was around her:

O, if only the dead had eyes, [made]from the dust motes of the abyss,
They would see my misery,
Then my father would see his pure blood swallowing up oozing drops of other
blood,
Like mud in a swamp. No other father would drive away the suitors
Because this one's mother or that one's mother's grandmother was a slave,
Or because the wife of that one's maternal uncle was the daughter of the maternal
aunt of these!
You drunkards, I won't refuse any customer at all
Except guests without money.
I am a flower of the swamps, I gulp mud and clay

And shine with the light of morning. (399 – 408)

She is a flower, she declares, but “of the swamps.” Yes, her beauty is there, to some extent, attracting the men who wish to use her, but like a flower that exists (it would be too positive to say 'lives') in a foul swamp, she “gulps mud and clay,” meaning that she now lives off the baseness of others. From her father's maddening refusal to accept that anyone could be worthy of her, she has gone to the other extreme and will accept absolutely anyone—the only condition being that they can pay. The pride of her father and his failure to provide for her emphasises the social aspect of her oppression, and this is immediately reinforced by the economic tragedy that she experiences, reducing her to do anything she can to survive. The previous two features of social and economic structures are now tied together into a political issue. Sayyab therefore addresses the question of Iraqi national consciousness which, as noted previously, has been described as one of the main responses to colonial and imperialist oppression, as Iraq's “direct confrontation with European colonialism lead to increased levels of national consciousness” (Tramontini 2012:460)

This shows how Sayyab's use of female immorality is symbolic of the moral decay of the land/nation of Iraq as a whole. The use of classical mythology together with modern themes is further symbolic of Sayyab's own rural origin and later exposure to city life and radical politics (Jones 206). Hence, the use of myth and an unnatural family dynamic could be viewed as a means for Sayyab to come to terms with the link between his rural origins and a modernised, radicalised present.

Sayyab continues to make the point that colonialism has harmed Iraq immensely, as well as those who accepted it, thinking that it could profit them as a country, but who

were wrong. To accomplish this, he draws on another character from literature, Faust, to illustrate this point (DeYoung 236). According to the old German legend, Faust sold his soul to the devil, Mephistopheles, in return for twenty-four years of unlimited power. Sayyab writes,

Money, the devil of the city, is Faust's new lord:

He has so many servants the cost has come down -

Bread and rags are the portion meted out

For his cringing servants, not pearls and youth,

And the crooked whore, not Helen, and cursed thirst,

Not the knowledge of winged joy, of sin of punishment (77-82).

Here, Sayyab links the city in “The Blind Prostitute” to Faust, as the character who loved his worldly possessions more than anything else, leading him to be completely corrupted by his worldly desires. Faust went as far as to sell his own soul in order to enjoy temporary earthly presence. By evoking him, Sayyab is making the point that Iraq is doing the same. In return for his deal with the devil, Faust received youth, money, whatever deep knowledge he sought and the love of a beautiful woman, Helen. In return, however, the people of Iraq received no such rewards for their deal with the devil of wealth. Instead, they received only poverty, which Sayyab refers to as “bread and rags.” Additionally, instead of the love of a beauty, Helen, Iraq receives “the crooked whore,” and instead of knowledge they receive thirst, denying them their basic needs. For these reasons, Sayyab is suggesting that Iraq has it worse than Faust, indicating that to be on

the side of colonialism is even worse than dealing with the devil. The misery of the city is brought out through these images, and intensely portrays the bitterness that Sayyab feels about what his country has done. In this manner, Sayyab uses myth, religious figures, and metaphor to allude to the condition of Iraq under colonialism.

“The Blind Prostitute” and Marxist Theory

As aforementioned, this study reads the “The Blind Prostitute” through Marxist theory and the work of Jameson, while also considering the work of Frantz Fanon. Since Eagleton explains that the core idea behind Marxist and Neo-Marxist literary criticism is that literature and art form part of the superstructure of a society (ix), the literary output of a society, to a certain degree, reflects the society in which the author lives and works. Crucially, according to Marxist theory, the literature can be said, to some extent at least, to “reflect” the society in which the author lives and works. This includes, importantly, the powerful influences of the economy, and also the interests of the ruling classes, whose position is supported by the superstructure, and who strive for legitimacy. For these reasons, both Marxist and Neo-Marxist literary criticism can offer insights into Sayyab’s poem, “The Blind Prostitute.”

According to Neo-Marxist literary criticism understanding the postcolonial condition of Iraq means understanding the social, political, and economic drivers of the country. While traditional Marxism sees economics as the main driving force behind society, history and social change, Neo-Marxism favours a more interactionist approach to cultural output, which suggests that society is influenced by a variety of factors

(Pepper 66). This approach applies to Iraq now, just as in the 1950s, as it then had the legal status of an independent kingdom, but continued to be affected by decades of colonial control and influence. This was because many parts of Iraqi society had benefited from cooperating with the British, which meant many people were keen that Iraq did not lose the institutions and structures put in place or promoted by the British. This concept was described by Frantz Fanon in his article, “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” wherein he states that “the national bourgeoisie of under-developed countries [...] is completely canalized into activities of the intermediary type” (120). That could lead to “catastrophic reactions, and will oblige it to send out frenzied appeals for help to the former mother country” (120). As such, at the time Sayyab was writing Iraq was a neo-colonial state, where Iraq had inherited colonial structures which were now being managed by indigenous leaders, rather than outsiders. This system thus profited the ruling class and bureaucracy. Consequently, Iraq was in the same position it had been under colonial rule, although the foreign leaders had been replaced by local masters. Fanon asserts that “nationalization quite simply means the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period” (122). These issues had a personal impact on Sayyab, as his life played out in the colonial and postcolonial context. Sayyab’s political beliefs were “first and foremost nationalist, finding expression in the execution by the British of the leaders of the anti-colonial Rashid Ali Al-Kilani Movement of April-May” (Jabri 40). Also, the household in which the poet grew up idolised Arab nationalist leaders, having portraits of the Egyptian Saad Zaghlul and the Turkish nationalist and moderniser, Mustapha Kemal Ataturk on display (Jabri 40). After Iraq gained independence, Sayyab continued to experience the “political disappointment

associated with repressive Arab regimes as he experienced incarceration, exile” and politically instigated poverty before Iraq was released from British control in 1958 (Jabri 40).

For the reasons outlined above, Sayyab’s poetry inevitably has a political dimension. Fanon points out that “the national middle class will have nothing better than to take on the role of manager for Western enterprise, and it will in practice set up its country as the brothel of Europe” (123). In the 1950s, Sayyab was aware that there was a need to challenge the power and influence Britain continued to enjoy over postcolonial Iraq. These needs are central to the composition of “The Blind Prostitute.” For example, the opening lines set the scene, introducing some key concepts: “Night closes in once again, and the city and the passersby / Drink it to the depths, like a sad song” (1-2). The term, “the night,” in the first line of the poem can be read as a direct reference to the dark political forces of colonialism that continue to dominate in Iraq, covering it completely in a similar way to how the night covers the entirety of the land in darkness. As this is the first image evoked in the poem, understanding it allows the reader to appreciate the rest of the poem. Through this metaphor, Sayyab quickly introduces the reader to the harm of colonial influence.

In the poem, the people are viewed together with “the city,” which is also covered by the night. Thus, it can be said that “the city” and “the passersby” are similar in nature. The city, however, refers to Iraq as a nation, while the “passersby” is more personal, and can be seen as symbolic of the people of the city as a group. It is important to make the point here that the “passersby” is not a literal device and does not refer to all the people of Iraq, only those who cooperate or tolerate and accept the colonial nature of the regime

they live under. The people who cooperate with the colonial regime, referred to as “the passerby” by Sayyab then “drunk up” the night, thereby enjoying it to the full. However, as indicated in the second line of “The Blind Prostitute,” this relationship is neither beneficial nor healthy. In addition, Sayyab’s use of the phrase “to the depths” reminds English-speaking readers of the popular saying, “to the dregs,” with the dregs meaning the last, bitter impurities in wine. Moreh observes that Sayyab’s feelings about the city are influenced by his “nostalgia” for his hometown in the countryside (154). Although in one of the poems he published in his anthology, *Asatir*, Sayyab acknowledges that, originally, he yearned to live in the city, writing, “O Country, I do not despise your abode, if I could only find love! Indeed, the Paradise of love is where Eve is, though it blazes like Hell” (Moreh 154). However, Sayyab soon came to see the city as a sad and lonely place, comparing the “sadness” of the people in the city to the dimness of the “street lamps” (Moreh 154).

In the poem, Sayyab further links the negative influence of colonialism to the geographical confines of the city. For example, the poem makes it implicit that the “night,” which is representative of colonialism, has a negative connotation, writing, “From what forest did this night come? / From what caves? / From what's den? / From what nest among the graves did it rise, flapping its wings, dark brown like a crow?” (6-8). Here, the harsh terms Sayyab uses to evoke the harm of colonialism suggests that he believed that it was a terrible influence on the city (i.e., the country of Iraq) and its people. Because of its materialist nature, most Marxist thinkers would certainly agree that colonialism is a force that harms countries and people (Radzins 723) and therefore is as negative as Sayyab suggests. In “The Blind Prostitute,” the “night,” or colonialism is

compared to a monster, or a nightmare that comes from dead bodies in graveyards or from a cave outside the city. These allusions prove that Sayyab strongly believed that colonialism was a force for evil.

Sayyab's relationship to Marxist ideas can further be viewed in how "the night" is related to the story of Cain and Abel. For example, in "The Blind Prostitute," he writes, "Cain! Conceal the blood of the crime with flowers and veils" (9). The figure of Cain, who killed his brother out of jealousy, is used as another metaphor for the night here as, like the night, Cain tried to hide his real nature and the effect of his actions. As such, Sayyab hints that the night is not just dark and sinister but is also a murderer and criminal. This aspect of the poem also conforms to the idea that colonial powers such as Britain attempt to disguise the true objective of their actions by presenting themselves as a force for progress. Instead, the true motive of imperialism and empire is to exploit the colony's resources in order to gain money and power. This motive for colonialism is, as far as possible, hidden. Another aspect of the postcolonial nature of Iraq that Sayyab appears to be hinting at in these lines of "The Blind Prostitute" is that this concealment continues long after the colonisers have supposedly left. In Iraq, in the 1950s, it was apparent that although it had gained its independence, it was still under the influence of Britain. This would remain the case until 1958 (Jabri 40). While the new Iraqi government had pretended to be something quite new and independent, the reality was that it was just an extension of the old colonial system that it was supposed to have replaced. After introducing the "night, the city and the passersby," Sayyab then introduces the main character, Salima, the blind prostitute: "From the shops and cafes,

pulsing with light / Comes a blind woman, like a bat at the height of day; / this is the city / And night has made her more blindness” (11-13).

The prostitute is blind. Ironically, she comes from the brightly lit cafes and shops, but she herself cannot gain any advantage from the light. Likening her to “a bat” is a reference to her blindness, but also suggests that she is in an unnatural environment (light), while painting her in an unfavourable light. Significantly, she is identified with the city, indicating that the country, too, is in some way blind, and we are told that night makes her blindness worse. Of course, taken literally, this is not possible—a blind person cannot become “more blind” because it is dark, and it can be assumed that, at night, a blind person would be less affected and inconvenienced than someone with sight, who is affected by the darkness. However, other commentary on the poem emphasises that:

The poem portrays the city as blind as a bat in daylight but unlike the bat, the city becomes more blind at night—the nightfall adds to its blindness. Men in Baghdad visit the ugly, rotten prostitutes in the company of the city’s devil, Mammon—the God of Greed (Gohar 33).

This aspect of the poem, as highlighted by Gohar, suggests that Sayyab is in fact using “The Blind Prostitute” to comment further about the state of Iraq and how colonialism makes people blind to moral decay. As such, Sayyab is suggesting that the immorality the night brings places Salima in a worse position than she was in before. Instead of being a physical affliction, her blindness is both moral and spiritual. Thus the more she practises her trade, the worse her position becomes, and now she can see less than ever a way out for herself. These moral doubts also affect the “passersby” referred to in previous lines of the poem, who are Salima’s customers. For example, Sayyab writes of “ribs curving

around fears and doubts,” (15), a line that suggests that these men are haunted by feelings of fear and weakness. Also, in the following line, Sayyab describes these men as with “tired eyes, searching for a dream in other eyes” (16). Hence, these men are tired, lack vitality, yet still long for a “dream,” or something that will give them a purpose to continue living.

The prostitute can offer the “passersby” a purpose, although it is temporary and will not satisfy them indefinitely. The men are therefore, “dead men, afraid of the resurrection” (18). They have no spirit of life, as they cannot look forward to the “resurrection,” when all the dead will be raised up and judged due to their immoral lives. They fear both the reality, and the daylight, as it will expose their desires as wicked. They “take refuge in graves from the graves” (19), indicating that their efforts to evade the truth and the light are futile. To escape from the grave, they hide in graves. Their inner darkness and morally dead condition are clear to see. However, they refuse to face it. To understand the hidden meaning of “The Blind Prostitute,” then, it is necessary to agree with Neo-Marxist literary theory that literature is reflective of the society it comes from. Therefore, it is possible to interpret the poem as a commentary shaped by the relationship Iraq has had with its colonisers. Because the people have not resisted the foreign powers that have exploited Iraq, they now lack strength and find themselves unable to take any decisive action. In this regard, Fanon also made the telling observation that “if nationalism is not made explicit, if it is not enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs, in other words into humanism, it leads up a blind alley” (165). In this method of reading, Salima, the prostitute, is further a representation of the city. As she lives in the dark and is disfigured,

she represents the state Sayyab believed Iraq was in during the 1950s. Also, the more Salima practices prostitution, the blinder she gets. Her physical decline thus conveys Sayyab's belief that colonialism is a blinding force which corrupts those it has dealings with and exploits.

However, Gohar further notes that the prostitute Salima's name becomes "Sabaah," which means "morning" in Arabic (33-34). Sayyab writes, "She has lost even her name, concealed by another, borrowed one, / Ever since she became blind, she has been Sabah. / What a bitter irony!" (219-220). Since her blindness had first afflicted her, and during her life as a prostitute, Salima has been known as Sabah. There is a double irony here as Sabah means "morning, dawn, or light," references that are all completely inappropriate now because she is both physically and morally blind, living and working in the night, and situated far from the morning. Sayyab also puts forward the argument that the position Salima finds herself in is a social tragedy, by referencing "the lamp she keeps alight in her room for visitors who never come," an allusion to the fact that "Iraq is rich with oil," but this wealth does not benefit the ordinary people (Gohar 34). As the night ends and the opportunities for Salima to make money evaporate, an anonymous speaker comforts Salima with the words, "this night has passed / there is another to come" (472), referring to the lost idealism of Sayyab when he moved to the city from the countryside and, by extension, the lost idealism of the Iraqi people living under colonialism (Gohar 34). However, this sentiment does not refer to all Iraqis, as some of the populace had become complacent and had attempted to accommodate the neo-colonial regime as much as possible. Sayyab views those who accept or collude with the colonial regime in Iraq as fearful of the truth and the light. Instead, he uses "The Blind

Prostitute” to argue that they need to stand up and fight for their freedom, their land and culture, as well as Iraq’s independence and nationhood. In the poem he emphasises that fellowship with the night, or conspiracy with the colonial power that oppresses them, has made those who have made peace with the regime to avoid this truth. Sayyab points out that they “take refuge in graves from the graves,” (19) meaning that their solution is, in fact, hopeless. For this reason, those colluding with the regime do not have a viable alternative to finding their national voice.

Jameson makes a similar argument, suggesting that when third-world texts speak about personal topics, they are creating a national allegory (69). This is because third-world nations are struggling against the limit put in place by first world imperialism (71). These arguments are particularly relevant to Iraq in the 1950s, as the British had attempted to replace Iraqi culture with its own. Hence, in the 1950s, the national culture had become personal. In “The Blind Prostitute,” Sayyab thus conveys a mixture of pride and shame about Arab blood and Arabic culture. For example, Sayyab appears to express shame at how his fellow countrymen treat the prostitute:

“Father . . . help me!” but you will not listen to her cries.

If you were just the blood and sweat to spray upon her forehead

And change her into a real woman and not just a commodity for sale,

[Then] you would have crowned her brow with glory and heroic deeds.

(97-100)

Here, one can assert that Sayyab uses his own voice after expressing the prostitute's attempts to reason with her visitors to express disgust at how they treat her as a commodity, not a woman. However, Sayyab switches to Salima's voice to express her pride in her Arabic heritage to suggest that this is her greatest asset:

[Whoever] makes love to a dark Arab girl will not die a loser

Your skin is like the color of wheat, O Daughter of the Arabs

Like the dawn between the grape arbors

Like the surface of the Euphrates reflecting

The mildness of the earth and rapacity of gold

Do not leave me, for the morning reveals my lineage:

Descended from a conqueror, a holy warrior, and a prophet!

I am an Arab: My nation is their blood

The best of all blood, as my father used to say

In the filthy parts of my body, in my revealing breasts

Flows the blood of the conquerors.

So come and defile it, O Men Ah, the sex of men..

For yesterday the soldiers ravaged it

Crawling from the seas like a herd of squirming worms.

(386 -398)

Sayyab is suggesting here that Salima recognises her Arab blood is her greatest asset. These passages further express what Jameson understands to be national allegory, as Sayyab appears to be hinting that the way in which the prostitute is obliged to share her body with her clients is similar to the way that Iraq had been forced to share its land and assets with the British. Therefore, “The Blind Prostitute” can be considered an example of how the personal becomes political in third-world poetry and prose.

In terms of national consciousness, Fanon states that “nationalism, that magnificent song, that popular resistance to colonialism, in the aftermath of decolonisation it becomes a barrier made the people rise against their oppressors, stops, starts, falters, and dies away on the day that independence is proclaimed” (163). In his essay, “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” Fanon argues that while nationalism plays a critical role in mobilising and orchestrating progress, instead, the colonial past is often used by the new political elite to divert attention from their failure to transform the state into an independent nation, as they are “reassessing the history of independence and recalling the sacred unity of the struggle for liberation. The leader, because he refuses to break up the national bourgeoisie, asks the people to fall back into the past and to become drunk on the remembrance of the epoch which led up to independence” (Fanon 135-136). Therefore, Fanon suggests that nationalism, in this context, is a way of highlighting the problem to avoid regression. Thus, he explains that nationalism “is not a political doctrine, nor a program. If you really wish your country to avoid regression, or at best, battles and uncertainties, a rapid step must be taken from national consciousness to political and social consciousness” (Fanon 163). This is evidenced in “The Blind Prostitute,” when Sayyab highlights the plight of a prostitute and other members of the

city's underclass in an allusion to the people and the nation as a whole. It is clear that, in the poem, Sayyab was keen to emphasise the adverse social conditions present in Iraq at that time. For example, Salama (19) notes that in the ending lines of "The Blind Prostitute," Sayyab references hunger and poverty: "Light and the children are the lot of the rich / Hunger, disease, homelessness are the lot of the workers" (465-466). This example proves Fanon's hypothesis that "nationalism must be taken from national consciousness to social and political consciousness" (163). He explains that "the battle line against hunger, against ignorance, against poverty, and against unawareness ought to be ever present in the muscles and the intelligences of men and women" (164). "The Blind Prostitute" thus represents a reaffirmation of Sayyab's support, not only for Iraqi nationalism, but also for social justice, the reformation of unfair social conditions and corrupt practices that create a vast divide between rich and poor, and the needs of poor people.

Kinana Hamam considers that literature can be an outlet, through which the struggles, dreams, and fears of a nation can be formulated and expressed, with the goal of envisioning a better society (25). Therefore, it is worth considering this claim as applied to Sayyab's poem, "The Blind Prostitute," as in what ways he considered Iraq to be a nation, and how this poem reflects nationalist concerns. As a background to this question, there importantly was not only one form of nationalism that was popular in the Arab world at that time. Here, it is important to point out that there are differences within Pan-Arabism. Some Pan-Arabists endorse the view proposed by Sartre, that a poet has a responsibility to engage with the political and social issues of his day, and be influenced by them, and should, at the same time, also influence them. In contrast, there is the

alternative form of Pan-Arabism that argues that the intervention of the poet or writer should be governed or directed by the political movement that he or she supported (Klemm 51). This latter view would not allow for an individual poet to express their concerns on an individual basis. Instead, they would have to support the popular movement. Therefore, this take on Pan-Arabism would not at all suit Sayyab and the purpose of his poetry. And, in this respect, Fanon's ideas also would not be agreeable to Sayyab, as they endorse the idea that the political movement governs the goals of the poet. For example, Fanon claimed that expression by the people would only be successful if they were "organised and educated" by their leaders. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, he writes of how central figures needed to inform and educate the people for them to be able to achieve political change (145). The popular goal of a Pan-Arab front found support from Fanon. He suggested that different poets from the Arab world were able, across national boundaries, to communicate together in the name of Arabism (not nationalism). Fanon writes:

The living culture is not national but Arab. The problem is not as yet to secure a national culture, not as yet to lay hold of a movement differentiated by nations, but to assume an ... Arabic culture when confronted by the all-embracing condemnation pronounced by the dominating power. (Fanon 172)

However, Sayyab was not convinced by this line of thought. Instead, he agreed with Sartre that Arab writers and poets ought to feel an obligation to their own people and country, especially in a time when he felt that his country had been corrupted and abused by the effects of colonialism. For example, by 1954, he felt extremely disillusioned with

the ICP, as he believed they did not take nationalism seriously. In fact, he went so far as to claim that communism and real poetry were irreconcilable, as a reaction to the poor-quality poets (in his opinion), who were sponsored and supported by the party to write on their behalf. In addition he rejected the ICP's request that he publish another poem instead of "The Blind Prostitute" (Colla 256), thus emphasising that his creative choices were more important than his allegiance to the ICP and, therefore, their political cause.

Conclusion

The arguments presented in this chapter assert that Sayyab's poem, "The Blind Prostitute," when analysed in relation to Marxist theory and the work of Jameson and Fanon, indicate that the poem presents left-wing political views as well as Sayyab's despair at the state of Iraq under British influence. This despair is presented through an allegory that represents the plight of Iraq in the 1950s. In the poem, Sayyab uses diverse images, such as the time of day, the state of the prostitute, and allusions to mythical and religious figures, to convey to the Iraqi nation the political and cultural dilemmas of their day. This is because, while Sayyab was a modernist, he composed "The Blind Prostitute" as the need to break free from capitalist exploitation in order to gain socialist freedom as well as to protect the Iraqi national consciousness from becoming completely lost by the attempts being made to Westernise the nation.

In contrast to the poetry of Sayyab, in what follows in the second chapter, I explore the work of the Iraqi poet, Nazik Al-Malaika. In some ways similar to Sayyab,

Malaika also explored nationalist themes, as well as her growing sense of national consciousness in her poetry. However, in contrast, in his lifetime, Sayyab questioned her claims as being the originator of the Iraqi Free Verse Movement, which combined the metrical rules of classical Arab poetry with the flow of the vernacular, arguing that the first poet to write in free verse was in fact Ali Ahmad Bakathir (1910-1969), who had developed a two-hemistich format in the mid-1930s (Badawai 226; Jabri 40). Also, it is more often Sayyab who is widely viewed in the Arab world to be the founder of the Free Verse Movement in Iraq (Jabri 40). However, although the two poets, Sayyab and Malaika, disagreed over certain stylistic manners, their works can nevertheless be considered together on the basis of their shared concerns about Arab and Iraq national consciousness, as well as the future of Iraq and the Arab world. Each poet's involvement with the Iraqi Free Verse Movement further indicates their shared interest in melding Arab tradition with modernity.

National Consciousness in Postcolonial Iraqi Poetry

Nazik Al-Malaika

Chapter 2

Introduction

This chapter analyses the poetry of Iraqi author, Nazik Al-Malaika (1923-2007), focusing on her attempts to link her expression of individual consciousness to a sense of national consciousness through her work which explores the ongoing impact of colonialism in Iraq. Born in Baghdad, Malaika studied Comparative Literature in the United States. After completing her studies, she returned to Iraq to write and teach (Bushrui and Malarkey 437). The author of several collections of poetry, *Night's Lover* (1947), *Shrapnel and Ashes* (1949), *Tree of the Moon* (1968), and *For the Prayer and the Revolution* (1978) (Muttalibi 21), Malaika's work has been described as a "struggle to attain an understanding of a wide range of issues through the exploration of the meaning of her own identity, as an open-minded woman, in the context of nature and different aspects of life" (Khamisi 74). Critics have also noted that Malaika's work further treats "the role of Arabic language and the glorious Arab past as the two main ingredients

which underpin the Arabic quest for unity and the construction of an all-embracing national identity” (Suleiman 94).

Notably, Malaika was one of the first Arab poets, along with Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, to experiment with free verse and to achieve success in this genre (Bushrui and Malarkey xxiii). According to Nathalie Handal, Malaika’s “contributions to the evolution of Arabic poetry and literary thought have definitely made her the most prominent Arab woman poet of the twentieth century” (9). Although most of Malaika’s poetry revolves around personal emotions and metaphysical meditation, a few of her poems are devoted to the topic of national consciousness (Handal 9). Malaika’s poems also notably contrast with Sayyab’s more narrative style. While Sayyab was quicker to embrace modernism, Malaika’s later poetry, in contrast to his, is far more modernist in character (ArabLit 1). Nevertheless, Malaika’s work can also be read as both a product and reflection of an Iraqi national consciousness that resulted from the ongoing experience of the effects of colonialism through neo-colonialism, followed by the apparently endless influence of an exploitative capitalist system. In this manner, the poet’s personal experiences and meditations mirror the national consciousness of the nation. What follows will reveal the character of Iraqi national consciousness in the mid-twentieth century, while taking into consideration how Malaika’s work expresses her personal sense of national consciousness through free verse. This chapter will also argue that Malaika’s emotional life was closely related to her sense of national consciousness, as she blends both emotional and national themes in her poetry.

Iraqi National Consciousness

It is first necessary to discuss the nature of Iraqi national consciousness in the twentieth century. While not explicitly addressing Iraqi nationalism, Frantz Fanon theorized that, in the post-colonial landscape, there were many anxieties surrounding ideas of cultural nationalism and the rise of native consciousness. Fanon was a revolutionary Marxist who emphasized that it was important to pay attention to the cultural characteristics of indigenous culture when considering national consciousness (Nayar 4) because colonialism seeks to “carry out the cultural estrangement . . . characteristic of the colonial epoch,” so that the past of the colonised is distorted, disfigured, and destroyed (Fanon 485). However, Fanon eventually moved to consider the universal characteristics of indigenous cultures (Nayar 4). Significantly, Fanon’s “self-reflexive” viewpoint was that it was the development of a national consciousness that allowed former colonies to engage in anti-colonial struggle (Nayar 11). In these efforts, Fanon asserts that “if we follow up the consequences to the very end we see that preparations are being thus made to brush the cobwebs off national consciousness, to question oppression, and to open up the struggle for freedom” (191). Fanon argued that colonisers seek to destroy the national cultures they encounter, so the development of a national consciousness is the best way of defeating the negative forces of colonialism. However, Fanon was also concerned about “exactly how the national community must be imagined—as revolutionary, enabling dissent and multiple voices, transcending the binaries instilled by colonialism” (Nayar 7). Fanon’s concern is especially relevant here because when a nation is experiencing decolonization, it is only through anti-colonial struggle and cultural nationalism that the colonized develop a sense of self independence

from the nation that colonized them (Nayar 10). As such, “national consciousness is a key concept of decolonization because it rejects the colonial culture and seeks to return to a local, native one” (Nayar 99). Therefore, it is the development of a national consciousness that allows those who have been colonized to reclaim a sense of their own national culture.

Fanon’s work is useful for the purpose of this study in terms of its application to what happened in Iraq following the end of the First World War in 1918, which led to the end of Ottoman rule. Afterwards the British Empire stepped in, administering Iraq as Mandatory Iraq, until the Kingdom of Iraq was established in 1932, when the British Mandate officially ended (IBP 75). Although Iraq had achieved independence by the late 1940s, during her childhood, Malaika would have been aware of widespread dissatisfaction with British rule, where “during the 1920s, [Iraqi] poets had protested about the inflated number of British advisors in government ministries and condemned proposed treaties with Britain, especially the 1930 treaty” (Bashkin 158). In short, Iraqi poets believed that the British Mandate meant the enslavement of Iraq to British interests. Therefore, Iraq’s state as a British colony in the 1920s and 1930s conflicted with the Pan-Arabic world view which endorsed full Iraqi sovereignty and independence (Bashkin 158).

Lindsey Moore theorises that “a postcolonial lens,” or a particular manner of thinking about postcolonialism, has led Arabs to view the West in a reactionary fashion, leading to present day Islamic extremism. Moore points out that “anti-democratic forces, such as Islamic State (also known as Da’ish [...]) or the Islamic state of Iraq and Greater

Syria), exploit this fact already” (7). Such feelings of disenfranchisement continue to affect the colonised long after the colonial state has ceased to be. In fact, one feature of the post-colonial condition is the loss of identity and the need to come to terms with this. Also, former colonies may attempt to continue on in the same manner as when they were a colony, in some instances for a long time after they cease being colonial states: “this same preoccupation is the permanent motivation of the colonialist countries when they try to obtain from their former colonies, if not their inclusion in the Western system, at least military bases and enclaves (Fanon 80). Importantly, for Fanon, the middle classes of colonial states were particularly likely to fall under the influence of Western ideals:

A [colonial] bourgeoisie, dynamic, educated and secular has fully succeeded in its undertaking of the accumulation of capital and has given to the nation a minimum of prosperity.... The get-rich quick middle class ... [serve to] ... retard the country's evolution. (141-142)

In doing so, the indigenous population of former colonies continue to experience oppression, confusion and discrimination long after they ceased to be colonial subjects (Aegerter 72). Fanon further illustrates that the cause is the consequence:

Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: "In reality, who am I?" (Fanon 200)

It can be argued that Malaika was personally affected by the post-colonial condition. For example, in her poem, “I,” the speaker’s identity is endlessly questioned and re-evaluated, along with her purpose: what should be clear is in doubt, and the apparent way forward produces no answers. The result is a gnawing emptiness and an inability for the speaker to reconcile her desires with her experiences. In the poem, the main question is: Who Am I? The poet thus rhetorically asks the “night,” the “wind,” and “time,” as well as herself, who she is:

Time asks who am I?
I, like it, am a giant, embracing centuries
I return and grant them resurrection
I create the distant past
From the charm of the pleasant hope
And I return to bury it
to fashion for myself a new yesterday
whose tomorrow is ice (Al-Muttalibi 19).

The above example points to the poet’s sense of self and how it was informed by her experience of colonialism as well as her connection to ancient Arab culture. In the aftermath of colonialism, Malaika is aware that she (and, by extension, Iraq) cannot return to these, now nostalgic, dreamt-of pleasant times, thus leading her to a sense of pessimism and despair. Here, Malaika’s expression of an inner emotional experience of national consciousness and the colonial past is apparent, feelings which she returns to repeatedly in her poetry.

Malaika's National Consciousness

Most critical treatment of Malaika's work tends to conclude that her work revolves around personal issues, rather than nationalist interests. For example, analysis of Arab nationalist poetry by scholars such as Umar al-Daqqaq fail even to mention Malaika's work on the basis that they "generally locate it in the realm of the 'personal' rather than in the arena of issues that are traditionally regarded as of nationalist interest" (Suleiman 93). However, it has also been observed that Malaika had "a deep sense of commitment to Arab nationalism," as she supported the cause for "Arab unity and the liberation of Palestine" (Suleiman 94). Therefore, it is evident that, as an Iraqi poet and intellectual, Malaika was necessarily thoroughly familiar with Iraqi national tradition.

Several factors influenced Malaika's development of a national consciousness. Perhaps the most significant of these were the events of the Second World War. The Second World War impacted lives across the globe, inspiring poets and writers, who attempted to make sense of the atrocities through verse and prose (Shammari 419). It is significant that, in the aftermath of the Second World War, both Arab writers and their Western counterparts changed their writing style (Starkey 79). For example, in Iraq, poets such as Malaika, Sayyab, Shathel Taka, Abdul Wahab al-Bayyati, Saffa al-Haderi, Akram aal-Witri, and Abdul Razak Abdul Wahid all adopted a more modern style of writing, inspired by English authors and poets (Shammari 419). Some examples of English poets and authors that inspired modernist Iraqi poets of the 1940s included John Donne, T.S. Eliot, Lord Byron, and John Keats (Shammari 419). Iraqi poets read works by these authors to try to understand English culture and Western artistic movements

such as Romanticism (Shammari 419). Reading such works led Iraqi and other Arab authors to become profoundly influenced by Western writings and artistic movements (Badawi 224). For example, Sayyab admitted that he was inspired by both the works of T.S. Eliot and what he had learnt about the writer as a person, indicating the extent to which modernist Iraqi poets came to be inspired by their Western counterparts (Shammari 419). Similarly, Ghazoul notes that, in ways similar to her contemporaries, Malaika was also open to influences from other cultures and movements, such as Western poetry, as well as her knowledge of foreign literature, art, and intellectual movements. However, for Malaika, these influences intermingled with her understanding of Arabic civilization in addition to her psychological and historical interaction with Western poetry: “her knowledge of foreign literatures, arts, and intellectual movements did not occupy an empty space, but interacted with the elements of Arabic civilization she had absorbed” (Ghazoul 185).

Another event which profoundly informed Malaika’s growing national consciousness was the news that the cholera epidemic that had blighted Egypt in the autumn of 1947 had arrived in Iraq, an event which had a profound emotional impact on the poet (*Al-Ahram Weekly* 7). For example, in her autobiography, Malaika recalled the events of Friday 27 October 1947:

I woke up ... and lay in bed listening to the broadcaster on the radio, who said that the number of the dead in Egypt had reached 1,000. I was overwhelmed by a profound sadness and deep distress. I jumped out of bed, took out a pen and paper, left the house, which was always noisy and

busy on a Friday, and went to a construction site close by. Since it was a holiday, the whole place was deserted, and I sat on a low fence and began to compose 'Cholera', a poem that has subsequently become well-known. I had heard that the corpses of dead people in the Egyptian countryside were being carried crammed together on horse-drawn carts, so I wrote I imagined something in the sounds of these horses: 'The night is silent/Listen to the effect of groans/In the depth of darkness, below the silence, on the dead.' (*Al-Ahram Weekly* 7)

Due to the profound emotional effect the cholera epidemic personally had on Malaika, she felt the need to change the poetic scheme of her poem. In this manner, and through the work of other Iraqi poets, free verse poetry became a genre in Iraq, permanently freeing Arabic poetry from the rigid structure imposed by traditional rhythmic forms and rhyming schemes, only retaining the *tafila*, one of the most flexible metric divisions (*Al-Ahram Weekly* 7). In her poem, "Cholera," Malikia writes:

It is dawn.

Listen to the footsteps of the passerby,

in the silence of the dawn.

Listen, look at the mourning processions,

ten, twenty, no ... countless. (Handal 167)

Malikia's emotional reaction and her need to change the poetic scheme of Arabic poetry are apparent in this stanza. As the poem refers to the cholera epidemic that blighted Egypt, the speaker expresses her emotional response by describing "the mourning processions." She depicts the atmosphere and the "dawn," which indicates the beginning of a phenomenon or period of time. "Dawn" is likely used here as a metaphor to represent the beginning of the epidemic, and it was "in the silence of the dawn" that the free verse movement in Arabic literature first began to appear in postcolonial society. Rajeev Patke describes it as a phenomenon linked closely with the experiences of the postcolonial world and places this comment in the context of poetry as a means for nationalism and independence to find cultural expression where "the ideology of cultural nationalism subscribes to the belief that writing forces collective identity when it is intensely of, and responsive to, a specific environment, and the needs and aspiration of its inhabitants" (138). Patke asserts that "poetry is an attempt to construct knowledge about how the past, the present, and the future interrelate for societies and individuals yet to free themselves from colonial formation" (10). According to Ma'ani, modern Arab poets make a connection between the new, developing political scene and the feeling of many Arab poets that the classical poetic form no longer lent itself to modern issues, understandings and challenges, and so the poet needed a new power of expression "to express themselves freely" (81). It is also notable that Malaika's use of free verse to compose her poem, "Cholera," was inspired by European poetic experimentation and traditions (*Al-Ahram Weekly* 7).

Malaika further challenged convention, while reflecting her sense of national consciousness through her lack of poetic conformity. Because her poetry was

revolutionary in nature, this raises the question of whether it lacks conformity in execution (Elgebily 52). As such, two types of revolutionary creative writings have been identified by critics. The first of these advocates absolute conformity in poetry and art, in accordance with the principles of Marxism, which dictates that poetry is a tool to be used to direct and enlighten the masses to encourage them to support the ruling regime (Elgebily 52). The second type, which Elgebily (52) dubs the “Jean Paul Sartre” school of revolutionary poetry, liberates poetry from any sort of creative limitations. Malaika can be aligned with the latter group of revolutionary poets. This is because she believed that forcing poetry to meet ideological guidelines was an absurdity as it “demands stipulating what is irrelevant to the poem, the subject, and thus imposing an irrelevant dimension to the poem” (Elgebily 52). In this sense, Malaika and Sartre were united in believing that revolutionary poetry should be an act of individual expression, not an act of revolutionary conformity. As such, the second form of revolutionary poetry requires the poet to conform to the ideological value of revolutionary thought and a revolutionary vision; however, the poet is not required to fully conform on an ideological level, as poetry is a personal task, not a philosophical text (Elgebily 52). These sentiments are echoed by both Malaika and Sartre when each, in turn, rejected conformity. As such, both perceived conformity in its ideological sense, but argued that when the poet reflects his or her “vision of the world,” they are operating at a deeply humanistic level (Elgebily 52). Hence, Malaika’s revolutionary sentiments are informed by revolutionary thoughts and a sense of national consciousness but reflect what she personally thought of these, and not necessarily contemporary ideologies on the subject.

It is therefore clear that nationalist themes inspired many of Malaika's poems. For example, several poems written by the poet in the 1960s convey her sense of national consciousness. In her poem, "A Song to the Arab Encampments," (1963) Malaika uses intertextuality to demonstrate her belief that the past achievements of the Arab race will only be fully valued and recognised if unity between the Arab countries is achieved (Suleiman 96). To emphasise this, in this poem Malaika employed items for well-known pre-Islamic *qasidas* (poems), such as those of the Imru' al-Qays (*siqt al-Liwa*), Tarafa ibn al-'Abd (*burqat thahmad*), Zuhayr ibn Abi Sulma (*dimna*) and Labi'd ibn Rabi'a (*aramiha*) (Suleiman 96). "A Song to the Arab Encampments" also obliquely references Mutanabbi's famous poem about *Shi'b Bawwan* (*wa-tasta~jimu al-dar*), "where the protagonist describes how he (an Arab) could not understand the speech of the inhabitants of an agricultural area" (Suleiman 96). As Suleiman explains,

By proceeding in this manner, the poet conjures up a vivid picture both of the challenging tribulations of the present and the rejuvenating inspiration of the past. This intertextual linkage between the present and the past on the level of poetic expression may thus be regarded as a re-enactment of the continuity of the Arab nation through history, in a manner whereby the past is destined to inform and motivate the present, and the latter to resurrect the former through Arab unity. (96)

Malaika maintains this interest in Arab unity throughout the collection of poetry in which "A Song to the Arab Encampments" features *Shajaret al-Qamar* (*Tree of the Moon*) a poem which explores many other Arab nationalist issues (Suleiman 96). Malaika's poem

“The Limits of Hope,” which also appears in *Shajaret al-Qamar* directly tackles the theme of Arab unity. In this poem, Malaika expresses her feelings concerning the forthcoming “declaration of a tripartite agreement between Iraq, Egypt and Syria in 1963” (96). Similarly, in “The Limits of Hope,” Malaika describes how for a long time the Arabs had dreamt of reaching unity and how much they have fought to achieve it. For Malaika, unity was regarded to be an essential part of achieving an Arab social and cultural revival in the future (Suleiman 96-97). This is because, without Arab unity, Arab life was “cheerless,” “dry,” and “barren” (97). In “The Limits of Hope” she writes that: “our lands and trees have dried up, and our birds have left in tears” (Malaika 516 qtd. in Suleiman 97). Hence, Malaika linked the lack of Arab unity to the decline of nature and the souring of human and animal spirits: “Thus, when the union agreement was signed on 17 April 1963,” Malaika saw this event as a cause for celebration, as she believed it represented a new dawn for Arabs in Egypt, Iraq and Syria, fully justifying the Arab race’s past sufferings” (Suleiman 97). In this manner, Malaika’s nationalist sentiment was part of her belief in the benefits of Arab unity.

It is further obvious that Malaika sought to convey that there was a link between the state of the nation, her personal emotional state, and the subjugation of women in the Arab world. For example, her poem, “Revolt Against the Sun,” she represents the pain caused by unfulfilled hope as well as the bitterness and anguish that can result. The poet’s conflict between her hopes and beliefs and her experiences mark her deeply. This parallels her nationalist pride and hope with the realities of a country that is, to her, sinking under the weight of external forces, leaving no clear pathway that she can believe in or rely on. The poem, “Revolt Against the Sun,” also explores Malaika’s personal

experience of depression and, according to Khamisi, shows that her sadness is not caused by some kind of personal weakness, but is instead a manifestation of her state “of revolt and resistance” (75). This idea also correlates with the hypothesis that Malaika’s nationalist sentiment is a strong presence in her emotional inner life, and, consequently, her emotional state: “Careful! Do not let a bewildered sadness / Or a sighing tear in my eyes deceive you. / For sadness is the form of my revolt and my resistance” (Almahasheer 13). In these lines, Malaika laments to her reader that the sun will not be deceived as her sad features are the fountain of her pain and inspire her soul. She writes further:

If my bewilderment and the lines of my torrential poet's sadness

Should appear shimmering on my brow,

It is only the feelings that inspire pain in my soul

And a tear at the frightening power of life. (Almahasheer 13)

These lines reveal a close link between Malaika’s emotional state and her national consciousness. For Malaika, her depression serves to inspire her poetry, while fueling her revolutionary consciousness. Badawi asserts that Malaika’s poetry is an “attempt to describe the subtler shades of feeling and the twilight state of consciousness [. . .] which she says ‘treat state of mind relating sometimes to inner self, and other time to the Unconscious, and these are states seldom dwelt on in Arabic poetry’” (230). This is apparent in the way her poetry explores her emotional reactions to Arab nationalist

themes. The combining of nationalism and emotion are particularly apparent in poems such as “Cholera” (1947) and “Jamila and Us” (1958).

Suleiman (95) observes further that nationalist concerns are also present in Malaika’s collection, *Shajaret al-Qamar*. For example, in the poem “*Nahnu wa-Jamila*” (“Jamila and Us”), Malaika addresses Algerian combatant, Jamila Buhayrid, who was tortured by the colonial authorities. The poem expresses Malaika’s derision of the empty rhetoric which her fellow Arabs offered Jamila at the time of her suffering, where, instead of helping her, they mocked her (Suleiman 95-96). As Malaika recorded in her poem:

The teeth of France tore her flesh.

She was one of us, our kin.

And the wounds we inflicted are more painful to bear.

Shame on us for all the suffering of Jamila! (Aslan 585)

The above lines were repeated three times at the end of the poem in the original Arabic version. This use of repetition in the original version indicates how the poet emphasizes the Arab world's sense of shame concerning Jamila’s wounds and pain. As aforementioned, Malaika’s own depression was depicted through her poems and a sense of her rebellious consciousness. Thus, in the poem, the poet expresses her nationalism through the use of her personal emotions. Throughout the poem's title, the poet portrays “Jamila” as victim and “Us” as a villain. Notably, the use of “Us” as a common pronoun refers to Arab nation. Therefore, Malaika wrote the poem to express her outrage at the

lack of solidarity shown by one group of Arabs toward another. In other words, she expresses her sense of double consciousness through her indignation at "Us" as the group of spectators that do not display any reaction to "Jamila" as the oppressed group displaying resistance. In this manner, the poet, Malaika, is thus accusing the Arabs who have mocked Jamila of participating with the Algerian colonial authorities (Suleiman 96). However, this poem further reflects Malaika's sense of lament concerning her Arabic identity and her belief in the need for Arab solidarity. For this reason, in the last lines of the poem, the poet states that "the wound inflicted by a relative is the deepest and hardest to bear" (Suleiman 96). This wound makes "Jamila" suffering as caused by a "relative," or the Arabs themselves. Jamila therefore encounters "double wounds" from both the Arab nation, or "relative," and the colonial authorities. As Malaika laments in her poem:

They hurt her with knives.

We, with the best of intentions, hurt her with ignorant, uncouth words.

(Aslan 585)

The poem further expresses themes of loneliness, while highlighting the feminist struggle. O'Brien states that "Jamila and Us" reveals the "double wounds, double shift: against the patriarchal discourse of colonialism and nationalism" (52). Malaika's poem concludes that Jamila is not taken seriously because she is a woman, and that she is therefore challenging the conventions of her sex, leading her to become a figure illustrative of the feminist struggle, while one who, by doing so, is doomed to loneliness.

Similar themes are evoked by Malaika in another poem, "Washing of Disgrace," (1949) where she records the honour killing of a young woman by male relative (Moghissi 98). In the poem, she "laments for all women" (Moghissi 98):

Women of the neighbourhood

women of the village

we knead our dough with our tears

that they may be well-fed

we loosen our brides

that they may be pleased

we peel the skin of our hands washing their clothes

that they may be spotless white.

No smile

No joy

No rest

for the glitters of a dagger

of father

of brother

is all eyes.

(Boullata 1978:21)

Here, Malaika exposes her inner dissatisfaction for the condition and experience of women in patriarchal Arab societies through the poem's use of vivid imagery, in which the poet portrays the position of women who had to suffer in order to please others instead of themselves. To make patriarchal societies “well-fed,” the women “knead” their “dough” with “tears,” while the women’s skin peels off “their hands” when washing “their clothes.” In this manner, Malaika portrays patriarchal “social customs and [traditions] that victimize women” (Ghazoul 187) and make them hopeless with “no smile,” “no joy,” and “no rest.” Badawi states that Malika’s work thus “reveals the poet’s dissatisfaction with the limitation of [...] tradition, in prosody, themes and diction alike” (230). Therefore, nationalism, internal feeling, and the conditions of women are themes intertwined in the poet’s thought and creative processes, themes which are explored in greater detail in the following section.

Malaika and Identity

Identity is a central theme in Malaika’s poetry, as she wrote from a place of sadness and melancholy which provoked a revolutionary need within her, while also provoking episodes of depression (Khamisi 74; Starkey 82). As aforementioned, Malaika’s sense of identity was also closely linked to her sense of national consciousness. This is particularly evident in the poem, “Cholera,” where the poet expresses her sympathy for the “poor, downtrodden” Egyptians caught up in the 1947 cholera epidemic (Ghazoul 186). Khamisi observes that Malaika’s body of poetry represents a struggle to come to terms with a wide range of issues, and also her own identity as “her poetic production embodies [...] the struggle to attain an understanding of a wide range of

issues through the exploration of the meaning of her own identity” (74). Malaika accomplished this through contemplating nature and different aspects of life, such as the lived experience of those surviving through epidemics, and so forth. This is the likely reason why, as Suleiman observes, Malaika’s poetry is mainly thought to “generally locate in the realm of the ‘personal’ rather than in the area of issues that are traditionally regarded as of nationalist interest” (93).

Examples of where Malaika explores her sense of identity in her poetry and how this relates to her national consciousness include her exploration of death in the first volume of her collection of poems. Here, she writes that “I don’t know why the new life does not emerge so that death’s face reveals itself, too” (Ghadamyari and Hosseini 591). For Malaika, death was “a gracious gift that freed humans from the misery and agony” of life. She reflected that death was both an unpleasant, sad loss, and something to aspire to (Ghadamyari and Hosseini 591). For example, in the introduction to her first volume of poems, *Shrapnel and Ashes* (1949), the stanzas reflect on death:

A dead silence has captivated me for eternity

The birds are either dead or hidden in their nests

All are silent even human desires

Darkness is dominant like omniscient death. (Ghadamyari and Hosseini 591)

As such, there is a duality in Malaika’s mentality regarding death, indicating that her sense of identity is strongly affected by the duality of many of the most serious events that impact humanity. Her dual take on death is Janus-like and reflects her own tendency towards sadness and depression (Ghadamyari and Hosseini 592). For example, in another

poem Malaika reflects on the reality of death, wherein the speaker states: “I can feel the meaning of nothingness and traces of annihilation wherever and whenever I close my eyes” (Ghadamyari and Hosseini 592). However, Ghadamyari and Hosseini note that there is a sense of optimism in Malaika’s writings on death, as despite her sense of duality and despair, she also sees death as both sweet and desired, as she observes “soon, I will meet the lovely death; the spirit of poetry loves the silence of the soil; you, death, I will meet you happy very soon” (592). Ghadamyari and Hosseini read these lines as an indication that Malaika’s take on death was influenced by the philosopher Schopenhauer. Summarising Malaika’s take on death and how it reflects her sense of identity, Ghadamyari and Hosseini (592) conclude:

Nazik Al-Malaika is a pioneer romantic poet who renders harsh realities of her era. She has been directly influenced by social issues in a way that she wrote her famous poem, Cholera, in 1947 and pictured her unfathomable sorrow of the event. She has subtle poems on life, salvation and man; her vision of death is dual under social conditions and her pessimism causes her approach to be contradictory in different occasions; however, finally, the emancipatory aspect of death dominates and she, too, awaits death. (593)

According to Badawi (as Malika asserts, too), the poet’s New Verse is “dealing with philosophical ideas and complex and conflicting feelings.” (229) In her poem “New Year,” Malika writes:

We wish to be dead, and refused by the graves

We wish to write history by the years.

If only memory, or hope, or regret

Could one day block our country from its path

If only we feared madness

If only our lives could be disturbed by travel

Or shock,

Or the sadness of an impossible love.

If only we could die like other people. (Malaika, 1)

This suggests that the imagery Malaika presents of death in her poetry has less to do with philosophical motivations and more to do with her sense of national identity, as reflected through her patriotism and pride in her heritage, both of which direct her thoughts and poetic tendencies. This can be found in many of Malaika's poems, including both "New Year" and "Revolt Against the Sun." Hence, Malaika's sense of national consciousness is viewed by her as the source of her depression, despair, and emotional conflict. Malaika expressed these nationalist sentiments through the medium of free verse and was one of the key founders of the movement, which is discussed in the following section.

Free Verse and Nationalism

The Iraqi Free Verse Movement had its origins in a revolution that took place in Iraqi poetry in the mid-twentieth century, which coincided with Iraq's freedom from

colonial rule and its new, liberated government. According to Starkey, “the new movement is associated with the spread of a number of attitudes, some literary, others rather political or social, which interacted in sometimes complex ways, and which had their roots in the inter-war period” (80). This poetic revolution called for the elimination of the excessively “artificial language and diction that characterised Arabic poetry,” as it had come to be recognised that such exact metrical regularity placed severe limits on the poet’s creativity (Kadhim 489). Arabic poets had been trying to find a solution to this problem for decades. For example, the Egyptian poet Ahmed Zaki Abu Shadi (1892-1955) “attempted to introduce variations of the basic prosodic order, such as the use of different meters in the same poem” (Kadhim 489). However, such experiments were largely unsuccessful. “It was not until the late 1940s that two Iraqi poets, Al-Sayyab and Al-Malaika, were able to devise a solution. Their approach involved a shift from the use of a predetermined number of feet to the use of a single foot as the basic metrical unit” (Kadhim, 489). In accordance with this approach, “the poet can use as many feet as necessary to meet the needs of his/her creative process” (Kadhim 489). Also, free verse poetry makes the use of rhyme “optional,” as “the poet can choose to use it throughout, sparingly, or he/she may choose not to use it at all” (Kadhim 489). According to the principles of free verse poetry, whatever decision the poet makes regarding rhyme, it will not destroy the integrity of the poem, which would be the case if a classical form of Arabic poetry was applied (Kadhim 489). Therefore, the emergence of free verse had a significant impact on the “freedom of the creative imagination of the poet” (Kadhim 489).

Critics Ghazoul (184), Jabr (344), and Badawi (225) acknowledge that Malaika was a key founder of the Iraqi Free Verse Movement. Although the beginnings of the Iraqi Free Verse Movement were visible before Malaika wrote the poem, “Cholera,” the movement only “began to take shape and combine theory and practice after Malaika became involved” (Ghazoul 184). When Malaika first read the poem, “Cholera,” to her father, he criticised her for departing from the classical form and “repeating the word ‘death’ three times” (Ghazoul 186). However, Malaika refused to make the changes her father proposed, stating that the poem represented the beginning of a new form of Arabic poetry. Ghazoul (186) explains that Malaika believed that renewal occurred due to the spiritual desire to mend divisions within the community. Although the artist may not be conscious of this divide, it is apparent that she does sense it in some way, inspiring her to mend it through renewal.

In fact, Malaika was the first Arab poet to clearly state that she aimed to write poetry in the free verse style (Jabr 344). According to critic ‘Abd al-Jabbar Dawud al-Basri, the introduction to Al-Malaika’s collection *Shrapnel and Ashes* in 1949 can be considered “the first manifesto’ of the free verse movement” (Ghazoul, 184) and “her most revolutionary work” (Badawi 230). Malaika’s free verse poetry was so significant at the time because it “call[ed] for change and rebelled against the old order of poetry in a domestic and social environment that was highly resistant to change” (Ghazoul 184). However, Kadhim suggests that “it was largely due to Sayyab’s highly sophisticated poems ... that this new form was widely adopted throughout the Arab world as has become the dominant poetic form in Arabic poetry” (489). The reason for this is that “although Al-Malaika wrote poems on political themes ... her treatment of these themes

remains at a superficial level, lacking the profundity and engagement of al-Sayyab's" (Kadhim 490). This indicates that some critics do not believe Malaika's political engagement to be sufficient enough to mark her out as one of the leading lights of free verse poetry.

This is not to say that Malaika was not an inspirational free verse poet, however. Jabr (344) points out that her husband, Dr. Abdul Hadi Mahbooba, commented on Malaika's impact on the free verse movement in the introduction to her 1962 work, *The Issues of Contemporary Poetry*. Here, Mahbooba makes the case for Malaika being the poet who allowed for Arab poetry to become less formal and restrictive. To do this, he focused on two cases of renewal movements affecting Arabic poetry. These cases were, firstly, the renewal movement affecting Arabic poetry throughout its history, and, secondly, Malaika's writing of the poem, "Cholera," which her husband argued was a watershed movement in the free verse movement. Badawi supports that the first example, the renewal movements, affected Arabic poetry and its meters on both individual and group levels over a long period of time. And the two Iraqi poets (Sayyab and Malaika) "did not develop this form independently, [...] but being an entirely new departure the new form, known as free verse, was a culmination of a long series of prosodic experiments started early in the century" (Badawi 226). According to Mahbooba, the poets, Abu Nu'as, Abu Tammam, Bashar Bin Bord, Muslim bin al-Walid, and Ibn al-Mu'ataz, from the Abbasid period all had some role to play in the origin of free verse (Jabr 344). Mahbooba then looked at contemporary renewal movements in Arabic verse, such as the immigrant, or *mahjar* poets. These included the likes of Jibran Khalil Jibran, Elia Abu Madi, Shafiq al-Maloof; the diwan group of `Abbas Mahmood al-`Aqad, Abdul

Rahman Shukri, and Ibrahim al-Mazini; and the Apollo group of Ahmad Zaki Abu Shadi, Khalil Matran, Muhammad Farid Abu Hadid, and Ali Ahmad Ba Kathir (Jabr 344). However, after analysing these works, Mahbooba concludes that these attempts at free verse never “went beyond the transformation of traditional two-line *bait*” or combinations into stanzas, although these works were described by their authors as ‘free verse’” (Jabr 344). These poets justified labelling their works as “free verse” “because they lacked consistent rhyme, something characteristic of traditional Arabic poetry” (Jabr 344). Hence, for the reasons previously outlined, Mahbooba concluded that these examples could not be considered true examples of free verse and that the movement had, in fact, originated with his wife.

The second example Mahbooba expands upon in his introduction to *The Issues of Contemporary Poetry* is the pioneering role Malaika played in creating free verse, as her husband makes the case for her poem, “Cholera,” playing an integral role in creating a more free, creative form of Arabic poetry in October 1947 (Jabr 344). In the late 1940s, both Iraq and Egypt were emerging from British colonial rule. As Hardy notes that both nations were blighted by illiteracy, disease and poverty and aspired toward a more liberal future (5), it is unsurprising that Malaika would feel strongly sympathetic toward a nation that shared Iraq’s postcolonial experience. To express these feelings, Malaika felt the need to create “a new rhythmic language in order to express the present and explore the destruction caused by the cholera epidemic in all its complexity” (Ghazoul 186). It was therefore Malaika’s strong sense of Arab consciousness that led her to shake the foundations of classical Arabic poetry. In his introduction, Mahbooba then details the events that took place around the time Malaika wrote “Cholera,” referencing a notebook

in which Malaika recorded her thoughts each day (Jabr 344-345). From that book, Mahbooba quotes Malaika's conclusion on the outbreak of cholera in Egypt spreading to Iraq, recording that she observed that she did not care what others thought; she believed that her trauma over the cholera epidemic in Egypt had changed the face of Iraqi poetry for the best (Jabr 345). Malaika herself later explained that she wrote "Cholera" to express her feelings about the Egyptian people during the cholera epidemic. Thus, it was through her experiencing the horror of the cholera epidemic that Mahbooba argues his wife played a seminal role in the foundation of the Iraqi Free Verse Movement (Jabr 345).

Ghazoul notes that Malaika justified her rules for the Iraqi Free Verse Movement, not by citing that she had been influenced by Western poetry, but rather by expanding unofficial, "non-institutional forms" of Iraqi poetry, such as *al-band*, which were particularly popular in Iraq in the 1940s:

Although Nazik did not deny the influence of Western poetry on her awakening, she justified the rules of free verse not by referring to Western poetry, but by looking at contemplating unofficial, non-institutional forms of poetry, such as *al-band*, which was widespread in Iraq. (Ghazoul 185)

Malaika therefore did not totally abandon the traditional rules governing Iraqi poetry; instead, she simply relaxed them (Ghazoul 185). In the introduction to "*Shazaya wa ramad*" ("Shrapnel and Ashes") she explains that to be truly sensitive to the world around them, the writer must have a deep sense of culture, embedded in local literary tradition, both modern and ancient. This is perhaps a reflection of the arguments made by

Anglo-American poet, T.S. Eliot, in his essay, "Tradition and Individual Talent" (1919).

Eliot states,

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists, [...] whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature, will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities. (I)

Here, Eliot argued that the traditional is a fusion of the past and the present, where the poet embodies the entire past of literature and the nature of their contemporary environment at the same time (Datta 34). Moreover, Ma'ani (72) states that "in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot demands from the poets a historical sense, that is, an awareness of the change and this is exactly what the modern Arab poets insisted that they had" (Jabra 1971: 83). Additionally, the sensitive writer (Malikia) is familiar with foreign literature and "open to other cultures" (Ghazoul 185). Thus, "the interest taken in Eliot, which seems to be common to all the major figures in Iraq [...], is an expression of much wider concern with modern Western poetry in general" (Badawi 224). Malaika illustrates that the cause is the consequence; she noted that the modern writer should not rebel against the traditional methods employed by Khalil. Instead, the writer should modify them in accordance with changes in style and content that have taken place over the course of time (Ghazoul 185).

Therefore, Malaika's poetic revolution is not a revolt against the past and the tradition of theme and style, but rather it was a rebellion against "the basic conventions of Arabic verse" (Badawi 225). For this reason, Malaika "advocated a multiplicity of forms rather than one stock model." However, it is important to note that free form was limited by meter, which Malaika believed was essential to poetry (Ghazoul 185-186).

An important point concerning Malaika's role in the foundation of the Iraqi Free Verse Movement is that her form of free verse came about independent of previous efforts that had been made to create a freer form of Arabic poetry, as it was inspired by her sadness that then evoked intense feelings of national consciousness. Malaika later recalled that when she had begun writing free verse poetry, she had been unaware of previous efforts to create freer forms of Arabic poetry. She recalled that when she published her 1962 volume, she had concluded that free verse poetry began in Iraq, and then spread to other Arab countries. At this time, she had been unaware that free verse poetry had been written in the Arab world prior to 1947. However, she was later surprised to learn, through researchers and critics that a small number of free verse poems had appeared in literary journals from 1932 onwards. She had not known this because she had not read these poems or the journals they were published in (Jabr 345-346).

It was following the publication of Malaika's 1962 volume of poetry that she came to know of other free verse poets, including Ali Ahmad Ba Kathir, Muhammad Farid Abi Hadid, Mahmoud Hasan Ismail, Arar of Jordan, Louis Awad, and a free verse poem written by Badi'a Haqqi before either Malaika or Sayyab published their free verse works (Jabr 346). Following this, she then recalled that Dr. Ahmad Matlub found a free verse poem entitled, "After My Death," that was published in a Baghdad newspaper in

1921 under the subtitle, “Free Versification” (Jabr 346). However, while these examples do indicate that free verse poetry had been conceived of in Iraq before Malaika and Sayyab were active in the late 1940s, it is clear that Malaika’s particular form of free verse can be considered an interesting, unique example due to the emotions and national sentiment that led her to seek to express herself in this manner.

Notably, in the introduction to *The Issues of Contemporary Poetry*, Malaika appears to imply that her poetic revolution was also a social revolution. Malaika stated that she achieved both by publishing poems that broke with the traditional Arabic poetic scheme, but also by adhering to four key conditions: (1) intention, (2) a confident announcement of what the poem intended to achieve, (3) the provocation of a significant reaction, and (4) that the poem would serve as provocation for other poets to begin writing in the same style (Jabr 346). For the reasons outlined here, Malaika’s poetry inspired something of a social revolution in mid-twentieth century Iraq. This is because Malaika’s poetic resistance led to the foundation of a women’s liberation movement in Iraq, as she claims that “the greater freedom and simpler diction afforded by the new form” (Badawi 226). For example, in the 1950s, she gave two lectures on women’s position in a patriarchal society. These were “Women between Passivity and Positive Morality” (1953) and “Fragmentation in Arab Society” (1954) (Zangana 35). To this end, Malaika also composed her famous poem, “Lament of a Worthless Woman” (1952) as contemporary forms of Iraqi *Sihhr Halal*, which means “lawful magic.” *Sihhr Halal* themes are meant to transmit social institutions and moral codes [...] to increase [poets] their own power and to decrease the power of their enemies” (Pierce 199). However, the poem

“includes free verse that contrasts with traditional forms [...] and exemplifies how authentic traditional culture hurts Iraqi women” (Pierce 199):

The doors did not hear the story of her death.

No window curtain overflow with sorrow and gloom

To follow the tomb until it disappeared

The news tumbled down the avenue its echo not finding a shelter

So it stayed forgotten in some hole, its depression the moon lamenting.

(Pierce 199)

Here, Malaika shines the spotlight on the lack of status women had in Iraqi society. As such, Malaika’s stance could have been said to have, inadvertently, challenged the patriarchal artistic establishment (Carreno 1). Wherefore, “Lament of a Worthless Woman” can be considered to be an implicit call for survival “much like the sorcerer’s use of magic to summon the help of the spirits in time of trial” (Pierce 199). Examples include the foundation of women’s publications and magazines, the birth of education for women and schools and universities, the foundation of women’s associations and the increasing presence of women in the public sphere in mid-twentieth century Iraq (Ashtour et al., 11-15). Consequently, Malaika’s work and achievements can be considered to have made a profound contribution to the struggle for women’s liberation in Iraq in the 1940s and 1950s, as she worked to “keep women’s freedoms and rights in the political forefront” (Pierce 199).

Importantly, Malaika's championing of free verse was implicitly related to her nationalism. It was these nationalist sentiments that inspired her to write "Cholera." This was the watershed moment that led the young poet to break with the rhyme and meter of the traditional *qasidah* (poem). This decision was further informed Malaika's knowledge of music (Carreno 1). For instance, from her own musical knowledge, she recalled that meter is the way through which the soul enters literary material and transforms it into poetry. Therefore, feelings and images cannot become truly poetic until they have been touched by music, which turns these into poetic meter (Malaika 28). In "Cholera," Malaika writes: In every heart there is fire / in every silent hut, sorrow / and everywhere, a soul crying in the dark (1). According to Ghazoul, these lines reflect Malaika's sympathy for the poor and disadvantaged. He states:

Nazik al-Mala'ika felt the pain of the poor and downtrodden, who always pay the highest price: "In the shack where grief lives/everywhere a spirit screams in the darkness." With her sensibility, her profound sense of her identity and belonging, and her sympathy with the weak and poor, al-Mala'ika was shaken to the core when faced with disease and death, and in turn, she shook the foundation of classical Arabic poetry, creating a new rhythmic language that could contain the present in all its complexity. (Ghazoul 185)

Hence, it is Malaika's acute compassion for other nations which allowed her to found one of the most significant modern Arabic poetic movements. According to Badawi, Malaika "claimed that one of the main factors that led to the appearance of the [free verse movement was] the tendency of realism" (226). Malaika writes that "in every heart there

is fire / in every silent hut, sorrow,” she depicts passionate images—her use of “every” indicates that she generalises the pain, while “there is a fire” to illustrate the continuity and the intensity of the pain. These images appear demonstrative of the character and vigour of Malaika’s poetry and its “ever-renewed vigour” (Jayyusi 530). Moreover, Jayussi states further that, “Al-Malaikah produced poems of very high quality which laid dilemma of the Arab individual [. . .], probably because of her personal approach to universal problems” (350). In “Cholera” Malaika emphasises that “everywhere, a soul [is] crying in the dark.” “Everywhere” is the key word as it is repeated three times in the poem and is thus illustrative of the universal nature of grief experienced as a result of the cholera epidemic. The frequency use of the word “every” and “everywhere” of “Cholera” illustrates that society was universally affected by the devastation caused by the epidemic. The universal nature of grief is further a nod to Malaika’s Pan-Arabism, as demonstrated in the poem: “Even the gravedigger has succumbed / the muezzin is dead / and who will eulogize the dead?” (18-20). These lines focus on the severe nature of the cholera epidemic and emphasise its seriousness by stating that it was thus not possible to practice the Arabic and Islamic traditions to the fullest. The “gravedigger” will not keep doing his habitual job, and the “muezzin,” the official man who calls Muslims to prayer five times a day, will not recite the call anymore. These two people are essential to the practice of the traditional Islamic funeral, wherefore the poet asserts that it is hardly possible to properly honour the dead in accordance with Islamic rites as a result of the cholera epidemic.

Importantly, it was the severity and extreme nature of the cholera epidemic which led to the creation of free verse in Iraqi poetry. Starkey (79) suggests that following the

end of the Second World War, new forms of poetic expression, such as free verse, emerged naturally as a way for poets to convey the new experiences they were facing as previous, traditional poetic forms were not adequate for this purpose, “thus freeing him (or her) from one of the main constraints of the traditional verse pattern” (80). The argument here is that the inflexible meter and rhyme system of the traditional form of Arabic poetry was not fit to handle modernist themes. As such, a modern poetic form was needed to handle modern events, wherein “human values [...] and strong relationship with inner experience” (Jayyussi 564). Similarly, Boullata observes that it was not feasible for modern poets to write about themes directly caused by modern issues such as national consciousness, such as freedom, unless they were prepared to leave the traditional forms of poetry behind and use a newer, more liberating style that would allow them to express themselves fully, free from restraint. Therefore, “a completely new way had to be devised in order to extricate Arab consciousness from the lethargy that had taken hold of it for centuries” (Boullata 51).

Although Malaika lived much of her life outside of Iraq, it is clear that Iraq was where her heart was. For example, in 1951 and between the years, 1945 and 1955, she lived in the United States, first studying Literary Criticism at Princeton University, which was a considerable achievement since women were not allowed to attend the University until 1969, and she had gained a Rockefeller scholarship there, and second, studying at the University of Wisconsin at Madison where she gained a Master’s degree in Comparative Literature (Carreno 1). Nevertheless, in between these trips, Malaika always returned to Iraq, where she taught at the University of Baghdad, and alongside her husband, Dr. Mahbooba, helped to establish the University of Basra (Carreno 1). In the

1950s and 1960s, she also continued to write poems and papers on literary theory and criticism, while maintaining a reputation as one of the world's greatest Arabic modernist writers (Carreno 1). However, even when she was working as an academic full-time, Malaika struggled to give the oppressed a voice. For this reason, her poems explore the identity of Arab women, the fight against colonialism, revolution, and social and economic inequality. Most importantly, however, they give a voice to those without the means to speak up (Carreno 1).

Malaika's nationalist sentiments deepened in the 1960s and 1970s, following the rise of the Baath Party. Due to the privations of the increasingly oppressive ruling regime in Iraq, Malaika was eventually driven to flee Iraq, never to return (Carreno 1). She lived in Kuwait from 1970 to 1990, when Saddam Hussein's forces invaded. Thereafter, she moved to Cairo, where she lived until her death in 2007 (Stevens 1; Carreno 1). Her experiences outside of Iraq fundamentally altered the course of Malaika's poetry, which, after her move from Iraq, revolved around themes of isolation, depression, frustration and sensibility (Carreno 1). Consequently, it has been said that she realised that it was impossible for her to function within the increasingly harsh, oppressive Iraqi society. For this reason, as an exile, she lived in sad isolation, where she was lonely but could live in peace (Khamisi 75). Examples of the poetry Malaika wrote during this period of exile include "The Tragedy of Life and a Song of a Man" (1970), which built on the themes she had explored in her 1952 poem, "Lament of a Worthless Woman" and her last poem, "I am Alone," (2005), a eulogy for her recently deceased husband (Stevens 1). The enforced exile from her homeland led Malaika to experience even more profound feelings of depression than ever before.

Conclusion

Malaika's sense of national consciousness has not been something that critics have immediately noted. Instead, most analysis of Malaika's considerable body of poetry focuses on her championing of women's rights and her use of poetry to express her emotional state, as her poems often seem to dwell on her frequent depressive thoughts. Nevertheless, national issues are often referred to in her works. Examples include several poems in her collection, *Shajaret al-Qamar (The Moon Tree)*, where she uses poetry to put forward the case for Arab unity, recognised via a pact between Iraq, Egypt, and Syria, and signed in April 1963. Also, nationalist sentiments play a part in poems written by Malaika which reflect feminist causes, such as "Jamila and Us," (1958) "To Wash Disgrace," (1949) and "Lament of a Worthless Woman" (1952). In the former the poet attacks her fellow Arabs for taking part in the torture of Algerian freedom fighter, Jamila Buhayrid. In the latter, Malaika relates the lonely death of a young woman killed in an honour killing ordered by her male relative, and then calls out and equates such events as due to the position of women in a patriarchal society.

It can be argued that Malaika's nationalist beliefs and consciousness formed against the backdrop of her childhood: in the 1920s and 1930s, Iraq was under British rule, something that was unpopular with the Iraqi population. However, Malaika and other upper class, educated Iraqis were influenced by Western culture, particularly Western literature. This sense of a mixed identity was present in Malaika's poetry. In addition, the oppression of women in the Arab world and the rise of the Baath party in

Iraq from the 1960s onwards led Malaika to leave Iraq permanently in 1970, contributing to her sense of sadness and a tendency towards reclusiveness in the later years of her life.

Perhaps most significantly, Malaika's national consciousness and sense of national identity led her to develop a form of poetry that allowed her to express these sentiments without any creative limitations. Several critics, including her husband Dr. Mahbooba, credited Malaika's emotional reaction to the 1947 cholera epidemic that began in Egypt to leading to the creation of the poem, "Cholera," which further led to the creation of the Arabic Free Verse Movement. While other poets had created works of free verse before Malaika did so in 1947, her belief in the cause, along with the works of Sayyab, clearly contributed to the promotion and popularising of free verse in the Arab world from the 1940s onwards.

On the basis of the evidence presented here, it can be concluded that a sense of national consciousness is present in Malaika's poetry, and for her, her nationalist beliefs were inherently intertwined with her emotional state. This is made apparent by her decision to create a form of free verse to properly convey her emotions to the reader when writing "Cholera," and to link her inner emotional life to nationalist sentiments in other poems, such as "New Year" and "Revolt Against the Sun." For this reason, it can be concluded that, for Malaika, nationalist sentiment and her deep inner emotional life were inherently linked to one another. This means that, while her poetry might be read as an exploration of her emotional inner life, it is, in fact, an expression of her desire to rebel against the constrictive, discriminatory nature of Iraqi society. Thus, while her mission ultimately failed, her spirit lives on. This is apparent in the poetry of a later generation of Iraqi women whose lives have been blighted by war and hardship, most notably the

contemporary Iraqi poet, Dunya Mikhail (b.1965), whose works are discussed in the following chapter.

National Consciousness in Postcolonial Iraqi Poetry

Dunya Mikhail

Chapter 3

Three of the most influential Iraqi poets, Badr Shaker al-Sayyab (1926-1964), Nazik Al-Malaika (1923-2007), and Dunya Mikhail (b.1965), offer valuable insights about Iraqi national consciousness. As founders of the Iraqi Free Verse Movement, and as nationalists at a time when Iraq was trying to come to terms with the realities of independence, their work proves to be a deep, humanistic, and perceptive reflection of Iraqi national consciousness.

This chapter focuses on globalisation and its effects, as illustrated in Iraqi literature through the works of Dunya Mikhail, who, according to the 2018 article, “Plastic Death” is an Iraqi-American poet who has worked in both Iraq and the United States (Mikhail 2). According to an article on Mikhail by the Poetry Foundation, she was born and raised in Baghdad. In addition to publishing poetry in Arabic, she had worked as a journalist and translator for the *Baghdad Observer* before her poetic work and resistance to Saddam Hussein’s regime meant she was placed on the Public Enemies list, and forced to immigrate to the United States in the mid-1990s (Poetry Foundation 1). After she immigrated to the United States, Mikhail enrolled at Wayne State University and went on to publish several collections of poetry in English (Poetry Foundation 1). Some of her collections published in English include *The War Works Hard* (2005), translated by Elizabeth Winslow and *The Iraqi Nights* (2014). She has also published non-fiction and memoirs, including *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* (2009) and *The*

Beekeeper of Sinjar: Rescuing the Stolen Women of Iraq (2018). To consider Mikhail's sense of Iraqi national consciousness, two of her poems will be analysed: "The War Works Hard" and "America." These poems will be read not only to explore Mikhail's national consciousness, but also the ongoing effects of the global capitalist system. The main theoretical framework this study uses applies Frantz Fanon's "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness" to explore an understanding of national consciousness and its attempt to redress the lack of research into how Arab literature has worked both to define and shape national consciousness.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework behind this research relies on the ideas explored in Fanon's seminal work, "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness" (1963). According to Fanon, history teaches that the battle against colonialism does not immediately run along the lines of nationalism. Instead, for a long while, the native devotes his energy to eliminating the abuses committed against him and his contemporaries. Such examples include the death penalty, unequal salaries, forced labour and a lack of political rights. Fights against colonialism emphasise that democratic governance will end such oppression (Fanon 119). Fanon argues that if individuals do not want their country to regress, or at least be subject to halts and uncertainties, they then must find both "national consciousness" and "political and social consciousness" (163). This is because nationalism is neither "a political doctrine nor a programme" (Fanon 163).

The reason for Fanon's assertion is that the nation was not founded on the basis of an agreement between the leaders of the revolution and the majority of the population. For this reason, revolutionary sentiment must therefore take place in view of "the general background of underdeveloped countries." Thus, the revolutionary forces need to constantly battle "hunger, ignorance, poverty and unawareness" to capture the hearts of the masses (Fanon 164). Fanon also emphasises the importance of collective action as he believes that, in the effort made by the people in colonised countries to overcome the oppression they have experienced under colonial rule, it needs to be a collective endeavour to ensure a universal release from colonial oppression. As such, this can be viewed as "a sort of common destiny" of the colonised (Fanon 164). Such a collective effort to end the oppression of colonial rule is a necessity for a revolutionary government to free its people both on a political and social level. To do this, an economic programme must be in place, as well as a plan to divide wealth and social position. As such, this sort of programme must be able to mould the future of the population of the revolutionised former colony and "there must be an idea of man and of the future of humanity" (Fanon 164).

Fanon goes on to explain that both social and political consciousness are quickly developed in underdeveloped countries, as a bourgeois elite that endorses nationalism to the general population will fail to do so and will, instead, become the victim of a series of traps. However, "if nationalism is not made explicit," it cannot be deepened, and thus rapidly transformed into a national consciousness that embraces the political and social needs of the people (Fanon 165). Therefore, the elite powers in formerly colonised underdeveloped countries hijack national consciousness for their own regimes, making it

off-limits to the general population. This makes it difficult for the people to find their own form of national consciousness. Fanon's vision seems to have been realised in several underdeveloped countries, which do not conform to the neoliberal paradigm, such as Zimbabwe, where Hwami suggests that Fanon's prophecy has been fully recognised, as he asserts that nationalists will dominate the state system instead of sharing power equally among the general population, and the "elite nationalists domesticating the neoliberal market system to achieve selfish economic aggrandizement while the rest of the population experience immiserating poverty" (19). Applying this to Iraq, in 1987, Abdullah explains how Saddam's regime "adopted a policy of rapid privatization by selling off all state farms and industries except those deemed necessary for national security such as oil, defense and steel" (190). Such a policy, of course, affected Iraqi middle classes negatively and "led to a decline in production [...] and rise in inflation and unemployment" (190-191).

Meanwhile, Western powers support those regimes in line with their interests. For example, the Iran-Iraq war "flared up in 1980 was the direct result of [...] Saddam Husain's tendency to pursue his personal ambitions with reckless abandon" (Abdullah 184). However, Western powers supported such leaders and helped Saddam's regime to survive (Aarnivaara 19-20), as "the United States agreed to provide Iraq with some intelligence reports on Iranian troop movements" (Abdullah 187). Ten years later, Western reaction toward Iraq has changed and "the developing hostility between Saddam's regime and the USA went well beyond Iraq's invasion and annexation of Kuwait" (Abdullah 193). As such, notions of globalism and globalisation fail to consider that the governments of underdeveloped countries may not conform to the first world

neoliberal ideal, leading instead to a kind of nationalism that asserts itself in an authoritarian ruling regime. This is indeed what happened in the case of Iraq in the mid-twentieth century and was the situation which prevailed until the United States invaded the country in 2003.

Another aspect of Fanon's theory of national consciousness relevant to this study is the fact that anxieties exist concerning cultural nationalism and an emerging native consciousness within the post-colonial context. He suggests that it is important to look at the "culture" of a nation to assess the nature of its "national consciousness" (Nayar 4). This is because colonialism aims to estrange the nation from its indigenous culture, so as to alienate it from its past, as Fanon asserts that colonialism "turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it" (169), meaning that it cannot once again become an assertive, independent, powerful nation. However, also according to Fanon, all national cultures have certain base characteristics in common, meaning that it is possible for all former colonies to develop a national consciousness, while battling an ongoing colonial and imperialist influence (Nayar 4). Throughout history, colonisers have sought to destroy national cultures, to prevent national cultures countering the forces of colonialism. Also, through developing a sense of a national consciousness, the colonised also develop a sense of independence from the colonising nation (Nayar, 10). Thus, the so-called "pitfalls of national consciousness" allow the colonised to reclaim their indigenous culture (Fanon 148; Nayar 10-11). Hence, an emerging national consciousness on the part of the colonized has often been viewed negatively by colonising nations.

In relation to the Iraqi context, Iraq fits in with scholars' understanding of postcolonial frameworks, having, prior to the 1910s, been part of the vast Ottoman Empire, and then the British Empire until 1928, ultimately being freed from British influence in the 1950s.

Instead, it is clear that the experience of colonisation continues to have effects after independence is declared—it is only expressed in different ways. Bill Ashcroft agrees with this point, arguing that after the coloniser has given up direct control of the country, which is from that point on gaining independence, the colonial experience does not just stop “all the culture affected by imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (Ashcroft 2). Therefore, it is evident that national consciousness is not something that is confined to the past, to a time when the nation was under direct colonial rule.

Iraq in the Colonial Context

In terms of the modern Iraqi context, Fanar Haddad observes that Iraq was formed as “an artificial state and that segments of the Iraqi people were often unwilling participants” (Haddad 22). This unwillingness frames the development of Iraqi national consciousness throughout the twentieth century. Similarly, Huggan has talked of Arab nations' attempts to escape colonialism or neo-colonialism as an “unfinished struggle,” while Shohat observes that colonialism is “a dynamic process or ongoing condition” (Shohat 112). Similarly, Johan Ramazani (251) notes that the “historical realities” of imperialism are often “still present” in former colonial states. Thus, the condition of the

Arab postcolonial world should not be considered as settled, as if the colonial problem has been removed and replaced by an entirely new set of concerns. Instead, Gilbert Achcar claims that “in the context of Arab world, colonialism, incomplete decolonizing processes and continued Western intervention all contribute in a significant manner to present ‘inter-regnum’ of suspended revolution” (Achcar 13).

Today, the causes of political tensions and violence in Iraq can still be traced to the colonial experience. For example, Wali Hassan argues that Islamic fundamentalism serves as a way of resisting both “Arab governments and neo-colonialism” and is a response to the West’s decision to support repressive and “corrupt Arab governments” (Hassan 55). One cause of such reactionary violence is the way in which imperialist colonisers divided up Arab lands, artificially creating new geographically and politically divided countries, leading to a further lack of nationalist sentiment and an increase in violence, as “a crucial influence on the political geography and recent history of the Middle East” (Johnson 191). This weakness in Arab geography and politics has frequently been exploited by the Islamic State (aka ISIS or Da’ish) (Moore 7). Dale Stahl agrees with this point, noting that:

The outcome of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the subsequent civil war, and the rise of the so-called “Islamic state” in 2014 can only be understood in terms of the local and regional history and politics that came before. (12)

Hence, the experience of colonialism in the Arab World has led to political conflict in the present. Another key feature of the postcolonial experience is globalism, as it leads to wars and political and social upheaval. This is because globalism is widely considered to

be another form of imperial domination, leading the poor and marginalised members of postcolonial societies to experience the neoliberal process of globalisation as a form of re-colonisation (Dhawan and Randeria 562).

However, one area of suffering that does not seem to have attracted the attention of writers, but that is the focus of this thesis, is the creation of the recognition of national consciousness within individuals and societies, as postcolonial studies of the Arab world “are now starting to see the emergence of fine-tuned analysis of Arab world creative production that uses postcolonial terminology and concepts” (Moore 5). Such analysis may be performed through consideration of an individual nation’s literature, but may also equally be undertaken through study of a particular region. The “World Literature” framework proposed by WReC suggests that individual literatures are indeed important, shedding light on national experiences, but also allowing the perspective that these individual experiences form together a broader category of nations that are experiencing the same global force—albeit in different forms at different times (4). The WReC’s framework provides an alternative to the criticisms made of postcolonial studies in terms of other frameworks, as it suggests a worldview with international capitalism and globalisation as forces affecting everyone, rather than only being imposed on one part of the world by another. Equally, the “World Literature” framework pays attention to the continuity involved in the postcolonial experience, understanding that these forces do not end with the individual nation’s declaration of independence. Furthermore, it does not limit its attention only to works written in English. Moore considers that postcolonial studies continue to provide “a hospitable interstice” able to deal with the complexities thrown up by the overlapping of colonial, neo-imperial, and nationalistic temporalities

and concerns that may collide (9). However, Robert Young explains that early accounts of life in the colonies “rarely considered the ways in which colonialism was experienced, or analysed, by those who suffered its effects” (64).

Modern postcolonial studies are interested in addressing the lack of attention given to cultural history and national consciousness, giving voice to the colonies, and understanding the effects that colonisation has had, along with the reactions it has provoked. As such, the analysis of Iraqi poets in the postcolonial context is an ideal way of exploring how colonialism has affected these individuals as well as their burgeoning national consciousness.

Mikhail’s National Consciousness

This section applies the theories of colonialism, postcolonialism, and national consciousness as presented above to two of Mikhail’s poems, “The War Works Hard” and “America.” Don Walicek and Jessica Adams suggest that Mikhail’s poetic message reflects Edward Said’s assertions in his last book, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004), wherein he argued that a more democratic form of humanism is needed to build a dialogue between different cultural traditions. In this vein, according to Mikhail, the purpose of poetry is to convey a commonly held feeling or sentiment. She states:

The poem travels between solitude and society, between the individual gesture and the multicultural exchange. The poem is itself the end and not the means to an end but when it reaches the audience, another deep

process occur[s], a process of transformation into adopting a common feeling. (Walicek and Adams 25)

Here, Mikhail therefore suggests poetry allows for deeper communication between different cultural traditions. Hence, while Fanon uses the development of a national consciousness to suggest how oppressed colonies can rise up against their colonisers, Mikhail extends this idea to explore how different national traditions can communicate with one another, with the aim of achieving peace.

Mikhail's poetry has been described as "a deeply ironic, satirical, subversive form of *Sihr Halal*" (Pierce 200). The poetic genre, *Sihr Halal* (lawful magic), is a kind of soulful musical poetry, which uses words, musical tones, and vivid imagery to give the audience a magical experience through characteristically subversive rhetoric (Pierce 199). In ways similar to Nazik al-Mala'ika, Mikhail uses her poetry to "inspire other women" and rally them against oppression (Pierce 199). In the introduction to Mikhail's 2005 volume of poetry, *The War Works Hard*, Saadi Saimawe describes her poems as "child-like," in the sense of the wise, subversive child who calls out the Emperor in the fairy tale, "The Emperor's New Clothes" (Batchelor 1). A childlike, positive style of writing to portray war is particularly evident in *The War Works Hard*— this was a purposeful artistic decision Mikhail made to encourage her readers to think deeply about the real effects and implications of war (Boumaaza 41). Nevertheless, her poetic style serves to allow Mikhail to challenge the status quo in a non-confrontational manner. This is in part due to the censorship system in place in Iraq when Mikhail was writing. As she later recalled in an interview with Cathy Linh Che,

In Iraq, there was a department of censorship with actual employees whose job was to watch ‘public morals’ and decide what you should read and write. Every writer needed approval first before publishing. That’s why I used a lot of metaphors and layers of meanings. (Poetry Foundation 1)

However, Mikhail’s poems, to coin phrases from William Blake, are songs of experience, not innocence, as illustrated below. Hence, her childlike style simply reflects her need to layer the meaning of her words against the state in poetic metaphor. This is because the purpose of Mikhail’s poetry is to criticise war and explore what the consequences of war and violence are for Iraqi society. This can be found, for example, in her collection, *The War Works Hard*. In the first edition of this volume, Mikhail notably employs irony and satire to criticise the meaning of war and its aftermath (Boumaaza 40).

It is interesting to note that Mikhail herself has been subject to Western bias. For this reason, it has been necessary to refer to interviews with the poet herself throughout the analysis, as Suman Gupta suggests that “geopolitical and inter-cultural disparities of power and hegemonic relationships are often transmitted through translation” (89). For example, when introducing the translated version of Mikhail’s collection, *The War Works Hard* (2005), Saadi Simawe compares Mikhail’s poetry to John Donne for its “metaphysical qualities” and Emily Dickinson due to its “playfulness and stimulating vision of the world” (Mikhail and Winslow xiii). Such comparisons ignore the strong Arabic cultural influence on Mikhail’s poetry and the fact that many of her poems are inspired by the serious matters of politics and war in Iraq, which had to be constructed in a certain way to avoid censorship.

In her poem, “The War Works Hard” (*Al-Harb Ta'malu Bi-Jid*), the nature of the world system to continually provoke war and its consequent material suffering is given a heavily ironic treatment. War, representing death, and by extension the evils of the system which engenders it, is seen as vibrant and full of life, but given no respect by the people. The efforts of the people to resolve the effects of their national consciousness through acceptance of conditions as unchangeable or through criticising them without doing anything to change them is a feature of this poem. “The War Works Hard” is an example of Mikhail’s poetry which was written to allude to women’s experiences of living in a war zone, by offering a female perspective on the Iran-Iraq War. To this end, the poem reflects Mikhail’s experience of living in Baghdad between 1985 and 1996 (Pierce 200). War is a recurring theme in Mikhail’s poetry, as she is an Iraqi exile who fled her country after being placed on Saddam Hussein’s enemies list. She wrote her first poem as a teenager in Baghdad as the Iran-Iraq War was beginning, and thus the poem is an ironic take on the meaning and consequences of war written as a response to the Persian Gulf War of 1991 (NPR 1). In the poem, the effects of war are reflected in one passage:

[It] builds new homes
For the orphans,
Invigorates the coffin makers,
Gives the grave diggers
A pat on the back
And paints a smile on the leader’s face.
The war works hard with unparalleled diligence!

Yet no one gives it

A word of praise. (Mikhail and Winslow 7)

Here, Mikhail appears to be suggesting that war is part of the capitalist system, a very suggestive assertion which will be explored further below. In an interview with Solmaz Sharif, Mikhail explained that she was inspired by the “literature of mobilisation” commonplace in Iraq in the 1990s, which encouraged soldiers to go to war (Sharif 1). For this reason, “The War Works Hard” appears to adopt the tone of a work of propaganda. However, Mikhail herself sees war as an entirely negative situation. For example, in an interview with Renee Montague she described war as “by default a ... lose-lose case I believe that there is no winner in the war because, you know, the killed one dies physically and the killer dies morally. So they are both dead” (NPR 1). Herself opposed to war, Mikhail uses her poetry as a platform to argue that, for some, war represents money and capitalist gain, at the expense of many. Hence, the poem reminds the reader that war is both a concept and a lived experience that leads to destruction and which stops for no one (Al-Ali and Al-Najjar xxxviii).

“The War Works Hard” further reflects Mikhail’s use of *sihr halal*, as her style uses fable, parable, and lyrical laments to create a poetic form of journalism (Pierce 200). Mikhail’s poetic voice “serve[s] as a summons for help, much like the sorcerer’s use of magic to summon the help of spirits in times of trial (Pierce 200). Mikhail not only uses *sihir halal* as a classical or traditional form, but also as a form of “modern adaptation.” While some critics assert that “classical *sihr halal* themes are meant to transmit social institutions and moral codes, traditional *sihr halal* and its modern adaptations “not only

transmit cultural traditions and behavior codes, they are also forms of public protest” (Pierce 200). Therefore, Mikhail’s poetic use of *sihr halal* adapts Iraqi’s poetic aesthetic considerations to the challenges of western capitalism.

Thus, the very title of the poem uses the vivid imagery of *sihr halal* poetry, alongside a sardonic account of war, life, and how these are represented in Western media:

How magnificent the war is!
How eager
and efficient!
Early in the morning
it wakes up the sirens
and dispatches ambulances
to various places
swings corpses through the air
rolls stretchers to the wounded
summons rain
from the eyes of mothers
digs into the earth
dislodging many things
from under the ruins. (Mikhail and Winslow 6)

As such, as Mikhail explains in her article, “Writing Without Falling into Narrow Political Poetry,” that her poem is a form of public protest which uses the traditional

poetic form of *sihr halal* to transmit cultural traditions and behavioural codes that are being increasingly challenged by the demands of the modern world (Mikhail 1). The use of such traditional forms also serves to hide the subversive nature of Mikhail's poetry, as censorship was in place when she was writing works as this poem, meaning that she was obliged to use metaphor and symbolism in order to fly under the radar of the state censor (Sharif 1).

Her poem, "America" also appears in Mikhail's collection, *The War Works Hard*. This poem is a longer work than "The War Works Hard," and revolves around the efforts made by Iraqi immigrants to outrun their past and to find new hopes and lives which are, nevertheless, frustrated by new circumstances and requirements. While America is a refuge to those seeking peace and prosperity, there are numerous unending barriers in place preventing those seeking relief from finding it. The confusing interplay between cause-effect-remedy creates sadness and confusion that appears to have no end, a comment on the belief that colonialism and its effects cannot be consigned to the past only, but that they still continue to haunt its victims today and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. In the poem, an Iraqi refugee asks America to desist on questions and "open the gates to other refugees" (Segell 46-47). However, ultimately, time passes and the protagonist (the refugee) arrives in America without her father and other family members. Then, after her father dies, the refugee is haunted by "the dead floating past her in her dreams" (Segell 47). As such, "America" deals with the aftermath of war as well as the experience of not quite being accepted in a foreign county that is now home, and, supposedly, a refuge from war and violence.

Interestingly, it has been observed that there was a notable change in how Mikhail wrote and perceived national consciousness after she moved to the United States (Boumaaza 38). In an interview with Cathy Linh Che, Mikhail revealed that after she had left Iraq, she was able to speak her mind, and not have to speak in metaphor, leading to a shift in her poetic style. She explained that the use of metaphors and layers of meaning

Was probably good for my poetry but, still, you do not want to use such figures of speech just to hide meanings. Here, in America, a word does not usually cost a poet her life. However, speech is sometimes limited to what is acceptable according to public norms. So, in Iraq, text precedes censorship. In America, censorship precedes the text. (Poetry Foundation 1)

Significantly, in her biographical work, *The Beekeeper of Sinjar: Rescuing the Stolen Women of Iraq*, Mikhail recalled that “America” was the first poem she read to a public audience in her newly adopted country (Mikhail 143). It was then Mikhail noticed that people in America do use official censors as they do in the Arab world; instead, they censor themselves (Mikhail 144). For example, in “America,” Mikhail speaks frankly about the violence and destruction she experienced living in Iraq:

...the river wriggles between us
Like a well-cooked fish...
And we are waiting for the signal
To throw the shell in the river.
We know that the river is full
Of shells

This last one

Wouldn't matter. (Mikhail and Winslow 34-35)

Here, Mikhail conveys her message through the use of simile, describing the situation in Iraq as like a winding "river." The "river," or Iraq is depicted further by comparing it to "a well-cooked fish." This use of visual, kinesthetic imagery to describe the condition of Iraq is apt because if a fish is out of water, then it is struggling while wriggling and flailing about. The use of these obvious poetic devices of comparison here help Mikhail express her experience of the shells and landmines in Iraq and the destruction they cause.

By way of comparison, in "The War Works Hard," Mikhail refers to the destruction of war in a far more mystical, allegorical fashion: "entertain the gods / by shooting fireworks and missiles / into the sky" (Mikhail and Winslow 6). Thus, in her earlier poetry written in Iraq, Mikhail speaks about bombing as if it were a form of entertainment. In contrast, "America" is a profound example of how Mikhail and others can speak freely about their experiences in the West, something which is not possible in the Arab world.

Another aspect of "America" is its hopeful, optimistic tone. Mikhail's sentiments here echo her continuous search for hope, for herself and for others (her fellow Iraqis). Thus, her work "goes back to the past without embarrassment, explores the present deeply, and yearns for the future" (Boumaaza 46). "America" also refers to the optimistic tone of capitalism, which Mikhail refers to as her "sweetheart":

I do like my sweetheart's handwriting

Shining each day in the mail.

I salvage it from among ad flyers

And a special offer:

“Buy One, Get One Free”

And an urgent promotional announcement:

“Win a million dollars

If you subscribe to this magazine.” (Mikhail and Winslow 36)

Mikhail’s poetry suggests that there is something seductive, or even deceptive, about capitalist rhetoric and culture. She expresses a similar sentiment in “The War Works Hard” when she refers to the Gulf War as “magnificent, eager, and efficient” (Mikhail and Winslow 6). This comparison indicates that there is a kind of similarity between life in America and life in Iraq, as both are united by a positive external image that hides internal brutalities and hardship.

In this manner, Mikhail’s mixed feelings toward the United States are hinted at throughout the six pages of “America.” The poem opens with the line, “Please don’t ask me, America” (Mikhail and Winslow 33), a sentiment that appears to refer to the American Citizenship Test and the difficulties of being a foreigner in the United States, where one is regarded with constant suspicion, an experience Mikhail reflects in the lines:

Stop your questioning, America,

And offer your hand

To the tired

On the other shore and

Offer it without question

Or waiting lists. (Mikhail and Winslow 34)

The poet's sentiment, "Please don't ask me, America," further refers to the post-traumatic stress experienced by Mikhail and other migrants as a result of life in war-torn Iraq, which the poet still experiences even from the relative safety of exile in America.

Paradoxically, the intertextual reference to "America" here refers to Emma Lazarus' famous poem, "The New Colossus": "Give me your tired, your poor / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," as she "perceived [America] as a land of opportunity, a place where prospective immigrants can achieve prosperity and upward mobility"(Abramitzky and Boustan 1). Mikhail's America depicts different voices to show the efforts of people to outrun their past and find new hope and lives, for which their efforts are frustrated by new circumstances and requirements. This contradictory mode of address explores how America is viewed as a refuge; however, it is one which places seemingly unending barriers to those who look to the country for relief. The confusing interplay between cause-effect-remedy in the poem creates both a sadness and a sense of confusion that appears to have no end, which is a further comment on the belief that colonialism and its effects cannot be consigned to the past only, but rather that they will haunt its victims into the future. She elaborates:

I don't remember

How long they walked under the sun

Or how many died.

I don't remember

The shapes of the boats

Or the number of stops...

How many suitcases they carried

Or left behind,

If they came complaining

Or without complaint. (Mikhail and Winslow 34)

In both this passage and the previous passage, Mikhail appears to be expressing two sides of national consciousness: pride for her own country and culture, alongside ambivalence toward America.

Mikhail's national consciousness has clearly been shaped by her experience in the United States, as later on in "America" she suggests that herself and America have become joined somehow, joining forces: "We will bloom: / two leaves of a tree," and growing old together, "I'll look at your eyes / to see your new wrinkles, / the lines of our future dreams" (Mikhail and Winslow 37-38). However, the speaker of Mikhail's poem concludes with the idea that she still does not know how America will respond to her, stating:

How should I know, America,

Which of the colours

Was the most joyful

Tumultuous

Alienated

Or assimilated

Of them all?

How would I know, America? (Mikhail and Winslow 39)

Thus throughout “America,” Mikhail exhibits a dual national consciousness: one that values her Iraqi culture, and one that attempts to join with her new, adopted culture of America. However, while America has granted her asylum, Mikhail apparently does not feel welcome or at home in her adopted country, leading to a sense of ambivalence. Despite the ambivalence toward America the poem reflects, Mikhail may be Iraqi in origin, but she is now an American citizen. Notably, the American poet, Allen Ginsberg, expressed similar sentiments toward his country. Mikhail’s “America” thus uses Ginsberg's poem, “America,” as an intertextual influence for focusing on depicting a sense of national consciousness. By comparing those two poems, the similarities in the use of ambivalence thoughts and voice that operate here could be due to ignoring a country’s history. According to Jason Spangler, Ginsberg well understood the dangers that obtain when we turn our backs on history. Social psychologist Arthur G. Neal describes the value of remembrance:

The enduring effects of a trauma in the memories of an individual resemble the enduring effects of a national trauma in collective consciousness.

Dismissing or ignoring the traumatic experience is not a reasonable option.

The conditions surrounding a trauma are played and replayed in consciousness through an attempt to extract some sense of coherence from a meaningless experience. When the event is dismissed from consciousness, it resurfaces in feelings of anxiety and despair.

(Spangler 150)

Following this analysis of two of Mikhail’s seminal poems, it is important to compare her understanding of national consciousness to Fanon. As aforementioned, he

argues that although, initially, nationalism allows the people to mobilise and organise a programme of popular resistance against colonial rule, it becomes their enemy in the process of decolonisation. This is because nationalism acts as a barrier to national progress (163). The reason for this is that the new ruling forces use their colonial past to create the kind of nostalgia as “the ceremony of independence enabled a retrieval of the past as meaningful. With independence, what had previously to be borne as defeat could be re-conceptualized” (Lazarus 45). That means the public ignores the fact that the country remains a dependent nation and has not become an independent powerhouse in its own right (Lazarus 67-68). Fanon explains that, in this sense, nationalism highlights a national regression, which, if it were applied properly, would have been avoided. Fanon argues that while “nationalism is not a political programme or a doctrine” (163), to avoid the country regressing, “a rapid step must be taken from national consciousness to political and social consciousness” (Fanon 163). In the case of Iraq, it appeared that in the 1980s and 1990s the nation had gained its independence and developed a national consciousness. However, it had not developed a social or political consciousness. In accordance with Fanon, Mikhail does express a political and social consciousness present throughout her poetic output, which is explored in the following section.

Gupta suggests that Mikhail’s sense of nationalism, when referring to both Iraq and the United States, is “abstract” in nature (91). Nevertheless, it is also apparent that Mikhail sees the nation as a meaningful, important and significant part of individual identity (Gupta 92). For example, in her poem, “An Urgent Call,” Mikhail refers to Lynndie England, an American prison guard and a significant figure in the Abu Gharaib prison torture pictures (Mehta 90): “This is an urgent call / for the American soldier

Lynndie / to immediately return to her homeland (Mikhail and Winslow 13). Here, Mikhail identifies England emphatically with her nationality through the distant medium of an airport announcement. This is part of a recurring theme present throughout the collection, *The War Works Hard*, where Mikhail “expresses herself through displacement” (Gupta 91). The reason for this is that in *The War Works Hard*, Mikhail is negotiating how the emigrant or refugee fits in with their adopted country. Mikhail does this through a series of abstractions around the themes of desire or revulsion, or sometimes both (Gupta 90). The primary abstractions used by Mikhail are of nationhood, of the nation left behind (Iraq), and the one arrived at (America). These abstractions are expressed as “entities” or “personifications” (90). Also, Gupta notes that such abstractions of nationhood are often experienced through the emigrant poet (Mikhail’s) sense of dissociation or loss (90). In fact, Barba (1) points out that throughout *The War Works Hard*, Mikhail is coming to terms with the loss of a country. For example, in “I Was in a Hurry,” Mikhail notes that “If anyone stumbles across it,” (Iraq) “return it to me, please / Please return it, sir” (Mikhail and Winslow 31). Additionally, feelings of dissociation and loss are expressed in poem: “Yesterday I lost a country. / In was in a hurry / And I didn’t notice when it fell from me” (Mikhail and Winslow 31). As an emigrant, Mikhail’s sense of nationalism is expressed through a sense of dissociation and displacement.

Mikhail is displaced from Iraqi culture from the outset. Yasmeen Hannosh emphasises that although Mikhail identifies as Iraqi, she was raised in an urban, cosmopolitan environment, which set her apart from her native Chaldean culture from the outset, creating a divide between her outlook and Iraqi identity and that of those who

grew up in her hometown, Telkaif, the north Chaldean village where her forebears came from (406). While the Chaldean rubric, the native rhythm of her ancestral people, does appear in Mikhail's poetry, it is a mere hint of her ancestry, as if the narrator can only relate to her ethnic origins in a detached manner, from a point external to its context (Hannosh 406). For example, in *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* (1995), Mikhail recorded a visit she made to Telkaif in the early 1990s:

I filled the tank with the gasoline of fear and memories and went to Talkef [Telkaif] village. I saw the Chaldeans looking after their sheep even in the time of war. In a room with no ceiling I sat watching the cocks fighting for no apparent reason...The village was smaller than a graveyard and bigger than the planet Venus fell into the tanour [kiln] of my aunt so her bread had a flavour of roses. (Mikhail 12)

These disjointed thoughts illustrate Mikhail's indifference, and even opposition, to her Chaldean origins. Consequently, Hannosh suggests that Mikhail is marginalised from her indigenous culture (407). Hence, Mikhail's sense of self is alienated from her native culture, as well as her adopted one (America). Despite this, it can be suggested that through war and displacement Mikhail has nevertheless located a sense of nationhood, which is discussed below.

As aforementioned, in particular, the poem, "America," outlines the "desperate plight of exiles" (Segell 46). As the poem states, "I don't remember how long they walked in the sun or how many died" (Mikhail and Winslow 34). The speaker of the poem has been accepted as a refugee at the price of leaving her family behind, an act compared by Mikhail to having a photograph album full of "loneliness" (Mikhail and

Winslow 37), yet another example of the evil of war and the displacement experienced by its victims. In some ways, it appears Mikhail's thought process links to Hannah Arendt's understanding of the "banality of evil," which considers what is at stake during war, i.e., "the reality of the world," which is "guaranteed by the presence of others, by its appearing to all" (Arendt 199). This link is explored by Graham MacPhee and Angela Naimou, who assert that Mikhail's poetry often expresses care for what the world looks like. To understand Mikhail, they assert, it is important to put her into context. Mikhail is an Iraqi poet who came to the United States as a refugee after being censored by Saddam's Hussein's government because her publications challenged the legitimacy of his regime (MacPhee and Naimou 13). As such, Mikhail was part of a generation of Iraqi poets active during the Iran-Iraq War (198-1988) dubbed the "war generation" by critics. While a "post-war generation" of Iraqi poets was predicted to emerge once the war was over, the invasion of Kuwait prolonged the war generation of Iraqi poetry because of the rapid response by the United States to the international crisis, which was characterised by a spectacular display of aerial high-tech warfare in Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm (MacPhee and Naimou 13). These two wars encouraged Mikhail to respond directly to her critics. To this end, she published an article in the *Baghdad Observer*, in which she reminded would-be post-war critics "that there might be no post-war generation, as the war seem[s] to be contiguous. It was an ironic article, in which I objected to the whole situation" (Mikhail, 1).

As discussed, it is evident that war has had a profound influence on Mikhail's poetry. Alluding to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which destroyed her homeland, Mikhail comments: "All the violence in war makes us feel alienated but also feel together in our

alienation and we resort to poetry (to art in general) to give some sort of form to all that mess ... we try to frame the war before it frames us” (Walicek and Adams 25).

Mikhail’s thoughts on war link her to Fanon, in the sense that she suggests that the collective experience of violence and destruction has brought her and her fellow Iraqis closer together as they are all trying to make sense of the devastation. Thus, for Mikhail, it is the uniting experience of war that has created a form of national consciousness amongst Iraqis, something Fanon believes is necessary if a nation is to achieve national independence. MacPhee and Naimou also suggest that war has influenced Mikhail’s poetic style, leading her to often adopt a “banal” or sarcastic tone in her poems (13). For example, in 2010, Mikhail stated that as a result of directly witnessing the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War, “my eyes were opened to war, and now, when I close my eyes, I still see war” (MacPhee and Naimou 13). This suggests that Mikhail’s banal tones are a result of over-exposure to war and violence, leading to her becoming desensitised to them. Consequently,

In her [Mikhail’s] poetry, spectacles of war are shot through with the everyday and the ordinary, and ordinary stories are rife with the effects of war, pointing to the impact of militarized violence on how we imagine the relationship between politics, society, and art. (MacPhee and Naimou 14)

Hence, war has both honed Mikhail’s sense of national consciousness and trivialised acts of war and violence for her.

In relation to these points, it is interesting to note that since arriving in America, Mikhail has refused to share the poetry she wrote about her experience of war whilst

living in Iraq (Mattawa 362). Instead, she continuously shares the poetry she has written as an Iraqi living in exile in America as she considers this to be her most relevant subject (Mattawa 362). This fact indicates that Mikhail feels alienated from her past in Iraq. In the previous section, it was noted that Mikhail's poetic style has changed since coming to live in America, partly because her poems are not subject to censorship laws in the United States as they were in Iraq. For example, in "The War Works Hard," Mikhail adopts a childlike style that could be interpreted as praising Saddam Hussein's regime. Here, she seems to refer to the positives of the Gulf War when she states it "paints a smile on the leader's face / It works with unparalleled diligence!" (Mikhail and Winslow 7). The reader has to read between the lines to find Mikhail's critique of the events around her. For example, in the poem, Mikhail observes that war "achieves equality / between killer and killed" (Mikhail and Winslow 7). Nevertheless, in "America," Mikhail is freely able to refer to the atrocities she witnessed in Iraq without fear of censure. It can therefore be suggested that her exile has deeply shaped Mikhail's sense of national consciousness as much as war and violence did.

Conclusion

As proven in this thesis, Fanon's assertions concerning the development of national consciousness are applicable to Iraq in the postcolonial period. Since then, Iraq's national consciousness has mainly been informed by the conflict caused by colonialism and neo-colonialism. Resistance to colonialism and the following authoritarian regime of Saddam Hussein, led to poets such as Sayyab, Malaika, and Mikhail experiencing poverty, a lack of a sense of national identity, and active censorship, all challenges which are revealed in poems analysed in this study, "The Blind Prostitute," "I," "Cholera," "The War Works Hard" and "America." Fanon asserts that the colonial system created simultaneous "fear of and desire for the racial Other" (Hassan 47), first from the development of a strong antipathy the colonised had for the coloniser, followed by an attraction that the coloniser would have for the colonised (Fanon 47). The psychological and political pressures of colonialism had severe effects and the Iraqi poets, Sayyab, Malaika, and Mikhail, reveal aspects of both the colonial and postcolonial experience of the Iraqi people as it was, and one can assert further, continues to be.

Notably, too, in terms of the form of their work which informs their subjects, all three poets are united by their use of traditional Arab poetic styles—versions of *Sihir Halal*, in the cases of Mikhail and Malaika, and free verse in the case of Sayyab and Malaika (Pierce 199). Iraq, in its positioning as a semi-peripheral country, has indeed suffered, and is still looking for its cultural identity. In consideration of the current World Literature view, as proposed by the WReC, it contends that national literature will act to register the effects that the society experiences, therefore it is clear that Iraqi literature helps readers to understand this suffering. Badr al-Sayyab (1926–1964), one of the most

respected of modern Iraqi poets, is recognised one of the founders (along with Malaika) of the Free Verse movement in Iraq. One of his most celebrated works, “The Blind Prostitute,” tells the story of a young, blind prostitute as an allegory of Iraq, struggling just to survive after being plunged into poverty and social disgrace. The poem emphasises her pain and despair, as she despises the life she has been forced to endure but fails to find hope of anything better. This reflects the sense of national consciousness that the Iraqi population has experienced. Various levels, or strata, of Iraqi society are represented in the poem, and their contributions to the country’s plight are also explored, with those collaborating for their own profit viewed as suffering in the degraded lives they lead as well as the moral and intellectual poverty they exist in. Sayyab uses harsh imagery and does not hold back from assigning blame, while exposing the nature and severity of the suffering that has been caused to his country and his people.

Along with Sayyab, Nazik Malaika (1923-2007) was a co-founder of the Free Verse Movement in Iraq. While the two did not collaborate, they experimented with the same techniques at the same time. Her poetry, too, is highly reflective of the pain of the Iraqi people and the doubts and internal struggles they endured, which can be read as their sense of national consciousness. Her poem “I” is centered on the theme of identity and meaning, illustrating the self-doubt, uncertainty, and contradictions felt by both the poet and the people she is writing for.

Dunya Mikhail’s poetry represents a call to unity through an understanding of different cultures, rather than national separatism as alluded to by Said. In interviews, she has suggested that the alienation that results from war has led to a development of a form of Iraqi national consciousness. Here, it is important to mention that Mikhail’s

cosmopolitan, Westernised upbringing appears to have led her to become disconnected from her cultural roots, leading her to be divorced from her indigenous culture, even before war broke out and she was forced to leave Iraq. Therefore, it was because of war that Mikhail was able to develop a lasting bond with Iraq and a sense of national consciousness. It is also interesting to note that Mikhail's idea of national consciousness has changed over time, most likely because of her move from Baghdad to the United States. This is echoed in the stylistic differences between "The War Works Hard" and "America." Whereas in "The War Works Hard," Mikhail was obliged to refer to the damage and destruction caused by the Gulf War in oblique, disguised terms, in "America" she is able to speak openly about her experiences of war and violence. Perhaps it is for this reason that Mikhail prefers to couch her experience of national consciousness in that of the immigrant, rather than return to her past in a war-torn country. In short, in ways similar to Malaika and Sayyab before her, war, violence, and oppression caused Mikhail to develop a particular national consciousness. Her experiences as a refugee and a migrant affected her feelings toward her home country. Thus, her sense of national consciousness is expressed in terms of her experiences of duality and ambivalence.

Together Sayyab, Malikia, and Mikhail provide insights into the Iraqi postcolonial condition that is essential to understanding what colonialism has done to the people, and how their suffering continues. As this thesis has discussed, the postcolonial experience of Iraq can be understood through Iraqi poetry and its influence on Iraqi national consciousness, through the often similar, yet different, perspectives of these three Iraqi poets. Most importantly, the analysis of Iraqi poetry in this thesis seeks to address the

lack of research into how Arab literature has defined and shaped ideas of postcolonial Iraqi national consciousness.

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