



IRAQI  
Academic Scientific Journals



العراقية  
المجلات الأكاديمية العلمية

ISSN: 2663-9033 (Online) | ISSN: 2616-6224 (Print)

**Journal of Language Studies**

Contents available at: <https://jls.tu.edu.iq/index.php/JLS>



## The Multidirectional Memory of Iraqi Holocaust: A Study of Yazidi Genocide in Dunia Mikhail's *The Bird Tattoo*

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Received: 16/ 2/ 2024, Accepted: 26/3 /2024, Online Published: 30/4/2024

### Abstract

The present study examines Dunia Mikhail's *The Bird Tattoo* (2023) as trauma fiction that contributes to the concept of memory in trauma studies. The study argues that Mikhail's novel brings to the fore a history of subjugation and victimization inscribed upon the historical body of Sinjar and Nineveh's memory like a tattoo. It further argues that *The Bird Tattoo's* representation of different stories of suffering functions as a reflection of Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory, which effectively features colonial trauma studies. This argument is discussed alongside the poetics that the novelist in question relies heavily upon to project the bloody and overwhelming genocide committed by ISIS against Iraqi inhabitants during its terrorist existence in Nineveh during and after 2014. According to this context, the study aims to answer the following questions: how does Mikhail weave a coherent narrative structure in which raw materials are fueled by bloody conflict; and what is the function of such trauma fiction? These questions are answered through a critical approach that scrutinizes the aspects of colonial trauma with reference to the content and form of *The Bird Tattoo*.

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**Keywords:** multidirectional memory, trauma fiction, genocide, colonial trauma, *The Bird Tattoo*

الذاكرة متعددة الاتجاهات لمحرقه الهولوكوست العراقية: دراسة الإبادة الجماعية للازيديين في

رواية دنيا ميخايل وشم الطائر

أ.م.د. اوفى حسين محمد

جامعة تكريت

### المستخلص

تناقش الدراسة الحالية رواية دنيا ميخايل وشم الطائر باعتبارها رواية الصدمة التي اعتمدت مفهوم الذاكرة كأحد الكلمات المفتاحية في الدراسات النفسية لنظرية الصدمة. كما وتناقش الدراسة الالية التي عالجت بها الكاتبة تأريخ الاضطهاد والتعذيب المنقوش كالوشم على الجسد التاريخي لذاكرة سنجار ونيوى. وتذهب الدراسة لأبعد من ذلك فتناقش فرضية ان رواية وشم الطائر بتجسيدها لمختلف قصص المعاناة قد عكست مفهوم الذاكرة متعددة الاتجاهات والتي جاء به ميشيل روثبيرغ والذي بدوره اعطى ملامحا لدراسات الصدمة الاستعمارية. نوقشت هذه الفرضيات الى جانب الادبيات التي اعتمدها الكاتبة لتصور الإبادة الجماعية الدموية التي ارتكبتها قوى داعش الإرهابية ضد المدنيين العراقيين اثناء احتلالهم لنيوى خلال وبعد العام 2014. وعلى هذا الأساس فإن الدراسة تهدف الى الإجابة على التساؤلات الآتية: كيف نسجت ميخايل نسيجا سرديا اعتمد الصراع الدموي كمواد أولية له؟ وما هي وظيفة هكذا عمل ادبي؟ اجيببت هذه الأسئلة من خلال الاعتماد على نهج نقدي تفحص مفاهيم الصدمة الاستعمارية بالإشارة الى مضمون وشكل رواية وشم الطائر

**الكلمات الدالة:** الذاكرة متعددة الاتجاهات، رواية الصدمة، الإبادة الجماعية، الصدمة الاستعمارية،

وشم الطائر

### Introduction

Thinking about histories of victimization and collective memory is among the fundamental concerns of this study. This concern springs from the idea that literary manifestations of contemporary forms of violence, mainly wars, and genocides, are the products of resentful memories and conflicting views of the past. In contrast to the concept of competitive memory and zero-sum game, Michael Rothberg (2009), in his *Multidirectional Memory*, “encourages us to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually

come into being through their dialogical interactions with others; both the subjects and spaces of the public are open to continual reconstruction” (p. 3). According to this context, multidirectional memory involves reevaluating the interconnectedness among the historical experiences of many social groups that have been subjected to trauma. This leads Rothberg to question whether the memory of a certain overwhelming history, the Holocaust, for example, erases another traumatic one. Memory, as defined by Rothberg’s conceptual framework, is a meta modernist phenomenon that involves recollecting previous events in the present moment. As such, it is by focusing on agents and chronotopes of memory, particularly their interplay under distinct historical and political circumstances of conflict and dispute, one is enabled to combine several scholarly interests in cultural studies, such as history, representation, biography, memorialization, and politics. Multidirectional memory, in this sense, encompasses both the subjective and tangible elements of a collective link to the past while still occupying individual and unique artificial techniques of representation. Multidirectional memory, quoting Rothberg (2009), highlights the “dynamics of collective memory and the struggles over recognition and collective identity” (p. 7).

Broadly speaking, memory is intricately linked to identity, specifically the identity that has been affected by trauma. Traumatic events may profoundly affect people’s core beliefs, perceptions, cosmological understanding, and “the absolutisms of everyday life” (Stolorow, 2007, p. 16). Prior to catastrophic tragedies such as genocides, people lived with civilian selves/identities in a stable and peaceful environment. Yet, they are collapsed or disrupted because they endured a profound and overwhelming traumatic genocide—a matter that results in traumatized individuals who may lose their touch with their old selves. According to the theory of structural dissociation personality (TSDP), theorized by Van der Hart<sup>1</sup>, the aftermath of genocide is characterized by the presence of traumatized victims whose identities are fragmented into two distinct selves: the civilized self and the survivor self. These two selves live in a state of disintegration and dissociation.

Genocides, traumatized identities, and collective traumatized memory find their echoes in colonial trauma, which refers, generally speaking, to an intricate and ongoing process in which the imposition of colonial power has a cumulative and compounding traumatic effect on colonized people. This has resulted in their separation from their land, languages, traditions, and each other. Trauma, according to this context, is defined in the psychological literature as a state of severe anxiety rather than only intense, intentionally painful experiences. Citing Judith Herman (1992),

At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. When the force is that of nature, we speak of disasters. When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning. (p. 33)

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**This theory deals with the inadequate integrative capacities of traumatized individuals who <sup>1</sup> experience dissociation when faced with traumatic events and thus will not be able to integrate a narrative autobiography of the incident into their life.**

Trauma is a forceful and complete dehumanization that destroys the individual as a conscious and active being. This description accurately characterizes the impacts and practices of colonization, including domination, violence, excessive acts of brutality, and the deliberate elimination of collective citizenship and belongings. The consequences of colonialism on civilizations might be seen as the same as those experienced by a traumatized person. Herman gives a thorough explanation of all the various symptoms connected to trauma. These include amnesia, which results in feelings of fragmented self and being detached and cut off from society. However, some symptoms, such as daydreaming, can be considered acts of survival, aiming at working through trauma rather than acting it out.

What should be taken into consideration is that trauma is characterized by its indescribable (unspeakable) quality, which makes it hard to represent. Literary representation, however, overcomes this obstacle by means of adopting, as a case in point, the use of past tense to represent past experiences of trauma, as well as the fragmented structure of plot that manifests the fragmented memory. Trauma novel thoroughgoing reflection of trauma and its impacts, along with its comprehensive embodiment of the survival mechanism, provides deeper insight into trauma victimized characters. Trauma literature significantly represents the indescribable pain that victims of violent historical events have endured, validates the emotional and physical harm that marginalized communities have suffered, and inspires formerly silenced and vulnerable members of those communities to become involved in mainstream society.

However, victim and victimizer both stress the necessity of remaining silent. This phenomenon can show up through the direct imposition of power to repress language and thus weakens the victim's ability to respond, understand, and absorb the milieu he is surrounded by and confined into. Judith Herman (1992) discusses this as follows:

Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator's first line of defense. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure that nobody listens. To this end, he marshals an impressive array of arguments, from the most blatant denial to the most sophisticated and elegant rationalization. . . . The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail. (p. 8)

As a result of colonial pervasive brutality, the hallmarks of trauma are reproduced endlessly via the control of both the technical machinery of violence and surveillance. This puts a heavy burden on postcolonial historians to find alternative strategies that shed light on such experiences. They have a significant task in trying to uncover multidirectional memories about colonial trauma and its postcolonial consequences.

Interestingly enough, this seeps into the trauma engendered in Iraq during ISIS's occupation of Sinjar and Nineveh. Along with several other religious and ethnic groups, including Yezidis and Christians, they were besieged by this terrorist force in the summer of 2014. Enslavement and forced religious conversion were the strategies adopted by Daesh and thus forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homeland and practice the experience of displacement. Depending on a report released in September 2015 by the

Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, an astonishing amount of about 10,000 Yezidis, Christians of Assyria, Muslims, Sabaeans, Mandaean, and Turkmen were killed over a short span of a few days. Numerous girls and women were abducted and then sold into enslavement. Upon the revelation of ISIS' murderous objectives, the area plunged into disorder, consuming Mosul and the small Yezidi towns around Sinjar. Men, old and young, as well as young adult boys were segregated from their wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters before being taken by ISIS to camps outside the town. Aiming at survival and then escaping, a few men pretended to be dead when ISIS fighters started shooting them. On the other hand, women were taken into unknown locations, and abducted as hostages, and forced to convert to Islam in order to serve as sexual slaves for ISIS fighters. (Kikoler, 2016, para. 2).

Fostering such traumatized history is exactly what Rothberg (2009) intends to discuss via his concept of multidirectional memory, he aims at confronting the danger of the uniqueness given to traumatized discourses—a matter that potentially create a hierarchy of suffering. Giving certain indigestible events a unique position at the expense of other similar events springs sometimes from the role opportunistic governments play in bringing to earth their own past and ongoing genocidal actions. However, opposing competitive memory and thus erasing a “blockage of recognition,” quoting Samantha Power's “*A Problem from Hell*” (2002), enhances the relationship among different histories. By establishing imaginative spaces where Othered voices may be heard, literature refutes what David Ben-Gurion, the Israeli Prime Minister, described the Holocaust with: “the only crime that has no parallel in human history” (as cited in Ardent, 1965, p. 176).

Examining the impact of ISIS' trauma on Iraqis in many of her literary works, Dunya Mikhail bears witness to the genocide committed by ISIS against Iraqi civilians in Ninevah and Sinjar. In her *The Beekeeper of Sinjar*<sup>2</sup> (2018) she explains:

I didn't ask my students if they knew that the letter was now being written in red on doors, notifying residents that they must leave their homes or else face death. Reduced to an N, those Nasara – “Christians” – were shaken out of sleep by megaphones blaring all over town that they had twenty-four hours to get out, and that they couldn't take anything with them; and just like that, with the stroke of a red marker across their doors, they would have to abandon the houses they'd lived in for over 1,500 years. They'd leave their doors ajar and turn their backs on houses that would become Property of the Islamic State. (p. 1)

Prior to her involuntary expulsion from Iraq, Mikhail worked as a journalist for the Baghdad Observer. Her poetic collection, titled *The War Works Hard*, received a nomination for the highly esteemed Griffin Prize. *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* received the Arab American Book Award for poetry in 2010. Dunya Mikhail was also awarded the United Nations Human Rights Award for Media Freedom.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Beekeeper in Sinjar* is a nonfictional book in which Mikhail Shares the horrific stories of several women who managed to escape from Daesh's clutches. The women interviewed by Mikhail have all been victims of sexual assault, psychological torture, the forced production of chemical weapons, the death of loved ones, and other atrocities.

***The Bird Tattoo: A Canava of Man's History and Trauma***

*The Bird Tattoo* (2022) is Mikhail's multi-generic novel in which she depicts fictitious worlds of great upheaval, love and loss, beauty and horror. The worlds she creates, the old pastoral and the present apocalyptic, are oppositional in all their aspects so as to represent the contrast between the old self and the new traumatized one. According to the context of multidirectional memory, Mikhail endeavors to recreate the connections that exist across various archives of cultural memory in order to uncover what Rothberg so well coined: "the rhetorical and cultural intimacy of seemingly opposed traditions of remembrance" (p. 7). The contrasted worlds give the novel multi-generic aspects in the sense that it can be read as a pastoral, trauma, and historical fiction.

In fact, each of these genres functions according to a certain context of the novel. Starting with the pastoral context of *The Bird Tattoo*, it is primarily situated in a natural setting, namely mountains. This setting often represents a pastoral romance when nature is at its peak. This particular setting clarifies the simplicity of the Halliqian tribe and its romantic oneness with nature—a matter that provides Halliqian with a high sense of spiritual freedom, it is expressed, for example, through an interest in music, the mouthpiece of nature's beauty:

No house in their village was without a flute, drum, or tambur. Even if there was nothing else in the house, there was at least one of those musical instruments, or else how would they play and sing and pass their songs from generations to generations. (Mikhail, 2022, p. 40)

The simplicity of this life is not confined to the lifestyle; it also includes their response to war; their lives are not even affected by Iraq's successive wars:

That had taken place one after the other [wars] had had not touched the Halliqi Valley...any Halliqian hearing such news [about war] would hit one palm on the other and turn his head to the right and to the left in regret and disapproval. No police, no sirens, no prisons, no car fumes. Children played outside, and their parents had no fear of them getting lost or meeting strangers...that remote spot [is] isolated from good and evil of the world. (p. 45)

A pastoral, as officially defined, is a literary genre situated in a rural environment that delves into the interrelation between humankind and the natural realm. Centering on straightforward and lighthearted shepherds, this environment provides a perfect union that evades the stresses of urban life embodied in 2014's Mosul (Ninevah.) This finds its echo in the rural customs of Halliqians including their celebration of the Day of the Bird, which is accompanied by the burning of the cages. Another example is the one that manifests the intimate relationship with the snake, which is a symbol of good luck according to the traditions of the Halliqians.

The qabaj bird, to which the title of the novel refers, is part of Halliqians oneness with nature. This particular bird, alongside the fig tree, is a symbol of freedom, happiness, and prosperity. It is also a symbol of dignity:

Whenever shot by a hunter, it flew as high as it could until bled its last drop of blood before falling to the ground like a stone. When wounded, it swayed in a way that resembled a sort of dance. The people of Halliqi called it the “dance of pain,” and sometimes they imitated it when sad music was played. (Mikhail, 2022, p. 40)

In addition, this bird functions as the occasion on which Helen and Elias, the main characters in *The Bird Tattoo*, meet each other for the first time and fall in love. Symbolizing an everlasting platonic love and spiritual union, they decide to draw the tattoo of this bird around their fingers instead of wedding rings. After falling as a captive at the hands of Daesh, the tattoo pulls Helen back to the memories of her old self whenever she experiences sexual assault or hard times. The pastoral world, therefore, with all its small details, functions as a site of nostalgic memory, offering feelings of imaginary protective fulfillments that are in stark contrast to Helen's traumatic reality and her new self-formed because of Daesh.

The site of traumatized memory, namely Ninevah after Daesh's occupation, contrasts the romantic tendency of the pastoral world and represents instead a waste, imprisonment, trauma, and a land of labyrinth wherein everything falls apart. Imprisonment, in particular, is foreshadowed by the qabaj caught in a trap. At the moment it is saved by Helen, it “spread its wings and flew into the open air” (Mikhail, 2022, p. 41). The idea of saving a bird from its trap seeps into another hint related to the idea of captive women who are separated from their children. Quoting Helen's words addressing Elias: “I didn't know this was your bird. The poor thing, it was almost dead, and suppose she is a mother and needs to tend to her chicks. Would you separate them?” The way she personifies the qabaj as a mother caught by a man emphasizes one of the touchstones and hints upon which the conflict is based, this hint is “like salt in the wound” (p. 42).

About the novel, Dunya Mikhail explains:

Before I began writing the novel, I went on a field trip. I visited villages in Northern Iraq after being away from the country for over twenty years. I visited refugee camps, locations of mass graves, and Lalish Temple and met with women who had recently fled ISIS' capture. This was a difficult experience for me, psychologically speaking...listening to the women's heart-breaking stories and then describing feelings of indignity after being sold at the market like merchandise. However, I feel that if I did not interact this would have been an even harder experience. Their pains were not mere clouds I could let pass then go about my business as usual. Only pure literary art can enable us to turn tragedy into a form of beauty. When we achieve this, our characters succeed in attracting the world attention. My writings, in general, whether it be in prose or verse, focus on human fragility and those little issues which cast the largest shadow. I tried in *The Bird Tattoo* to focus on those large shadows. (Arabic Fiction Prize, 2021, 1:16-2:44 )

The novel, therefore, can be seen as a testimonial narrative that aims at voicing the unvoiced so as to work through the collective memory of Yazidi's genocide. The *Bird Tattoo* follows the painful journey of Helen, a Yazidi woman who is held captive by ISIS in the north of Iraq. Though successfully escapes Daesh captivity, she couldn't reunite with Elias, and his memory remains as a "snow that would [not] melt away" (p. 255).

Helen, whose name in Kurdish language means the bird's nest, functions in *The Bird Tattoo* as an eye witness to what is inflicted upon Halliqi, that peaceful and primitive spot of Iraq:

She witnessed the massacre as if it were in front of her on TV. Men thrown into ditches and shot. Boyes without shirts lined up with their hands raised, and the Organization members checking them, ordering those who had grown hair under their armpits to join the camps. Others who had no hair yet departed with their mothers to the gusts place while they were prepared for sale. (Mikhail, 2022, p. 36)

In response to what she witnessed and herself experienced, Helen's trauma is projected through her constant feelings that her senses are out of place. She longs for the substance of a ghost so as to move everywhere unseen and goes back to where her people live: "in a village that is not on the map. Homes were open day and night...their world is the color of their birds and the shapes of fig tree" (p. 264). By contrast, the world she lives in at the present time is a "nightmare from which she could not wake: finding herself with the dead who made her sleep with them in their graves" (p. 26). Her old life\ self is her real essence, which contradicts her actual traumatizing present, compared to a "terrifying film. Escaping this, rape, for example, usually motivates, shakes, and awakens her memory, which pulls her back to her old life. This is best exemplified by the memories of her parents, which she recalls meanwhile Ayash is raping her. Another example is the memory of Helen's daughter, which is motivated by the sight of the daughter of the "desert emir, a man from Chechnya, playing in the kitchen with LEGO cubes. She remembered Umm Hameed with whom she has left her new-born and unnamed daughter:

Helen closed tearful eyes and remembered. Umm Hameed must be worried about her, because she had not returned since that terrible day. It could be that her daughter did not even wonder about her absence. She had been a newborn when Helen left her. But she had breastfed her before she had been taken, so perhaps her daughter felt the absence of Helen's breasts? (p. 31)

Mikhail constantly emphasizes the dynamic nature of remembrance, highlighting how individuals, communities, and societies may have varied—a matter that encourages a more comprehensive understanding of traumatic history. It is that Yazidi and Iraqi history that Mikhail aims to represent via poetic symbols alongside the simplicity of journalistic style, she wants to present sublimity next to facts derived from real events, inherited myths, and traditions. One of the poetic images the novelist used is the myth of "the whale swallowing the moon...[as a result] there will be a lunar eclipse" (p. 57). This myth is referred to in two different ways. The first one highlights two wars: Iraq's war against Iran and the "Desert Fox" war against coalition forces in 1998: "Whenever the war ended,

people said, “Finally, the whale left the moon alone” (p. 77). Ironically, this tale is repurposed to show that the Halliqi peasants who flocked to the mountaintop to protect the moon from the whale were ultimately helpless in the face of Daesh and ironically those same people who symbolically celebrate freedom in the Bird Day struggle to regain their freedom.

Mikhail, furthermore, adopts the experimental techniques and approaches of trauma fiction in a unique manner. These techniques, including flashbacks, dialogism, multiple perspectives, intertextuality, cinematic techniques, and metafiction, enable the novelist to show the contrast between peaceful life before Daesh and the difficult times after their occupation; it is “this difficult time in which she [Helen] was unable to die or to live” (p. 17). It is not only a difficult time, but traumatic as well. This is enhanced when Helen narrates that since the first day she was captivated, she has suffered from insomnia, a symptom of trauma. She adds that whenever she closes her eyes, she feels more awake: “It was not an awakening in the sense of not sleeping but in the sense of remembering” (p. 23).

The intense emotional, physical, and mental aspects of traumatic memories stored within Helen's brain are the raw materials of flashbacks, nightmares, and somatic responses experienced by her. Flashbacks are often characterized by the recollection of traumatic events in a fragmented and disconnected way, resulting in a fragmented traumatic individualized memory. The heightened arousal response might elucidate the emotional intensity and linguistic challenges associated with the recollection of painful memories.

The embodiment of emotionally heightened release might also explain the recurrence of persistent shock symptoms such as panic, heightened alertness, anxiety, and disruptions in sleep. In addition, as a sign of re-experiencing, nightmares are common among those who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The characteristics of post-traumatic nightmares are: recurrence, emotional intensity, perceptual vividness, and involvement of mental imagery connected to a painful experience. All these characteristics feature Helen's traumatic memory. After being released, Helen explains to Linda, who works for a humanitarian organization, that she frequently has nightmares in which she sees herself hiding. In one of the strange nightmares, Helen practices the desire to explore different aspects of her traumatized identity: “I was a husband even though I was a woman, and they raped my wife in front of me. I screamed at them, but they did not see or hear me” (p. 242). From Freudian perspectives, dreams usually indicate repressed desires. In this regard, shouting is Helen's unfulfilled desire, which she repressed each time she was raped. Moreover, decentralizing selfhood and shifting of roles, as part of wish fulfillment, challenge Daesh's dominant ideology and thus erase its demand for unquestioned obedience.

However, Helen practices tactics of survival against her traumatized memory via a negative capability through which she accesses her old self without the pressure of her new one and its traumatic reality. According to the concept of negative capability, introduced by the romantic poet John Keats, a poet has the power to bury self-consciousness, dwell in a state of openness to all experiences, and identify with the object contemplated. This is

manifested in the way Helen closes her eyes attempting to establish a bridge of connection with her old self, old life, and people:

She went to them in her mind because they didn't come to her. She took time each day to be alone with them. She kept her eyes closed as tightly as possible because she wanted to see them for a long as possible. Sometimes they talked to her. Other times they looked at her without talking. (p. 207)

Closing her eyes and transcending her overwhelming reality, Helen is able to cling to a lovely truth even when it doesn't conform to any concrete reality. Mikhail would have Helen experience the emotion of passing over the truth of trauma, and live the moments of purgational nostalgia. Helen experiences in these moments the beauty of her true old self. In relation to this, Keats asserts:

I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination - What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not – for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty. (Keats in letter to Benjamin Bailey (Saturday 22 November, 1817)

Helen, as such, has the exceptional ability to withstand fear and anxiety, allowing herself to exist in a condition of uncertainty that fosters the emergence of a fresh self. The significance of negative capability can only be comprehended in connection to creative imagination, beauty, and the broad potential for positive capability. The truth she feels and becomes part of through her imagination enhances her positive capability to fill the “empty space here in [her] heart” (p. 244). Whenever she closes her eyes, she sees the photos of her life printed on her eyelids. These photos function as a “patch of light in the darkness,” a matter that gives “her a special feeling that only the image of a loved one would give” (p. 264).

Mikhail's “literary explorations of the past lead to the examination of wounds, whether personal or national... representation of trauma, invites – or even requires – readers to act as ‘co-witnesses’, and so offers a form of redemption or working through for the victims” (Beata, 2014, pp. 11-17). Instead of using political clichés, overused metaphors, and slogans, Mikhail writes with an innocent, and sensitive language wrapped with a childlike style. Personifying Mosul, Mikhail (2022) articulates, for example, the ruined quality of the land in the aftermath of Daesh occupation:

The city of Mosul looked pale, silent and slow as never before. There were no crowds or loud music coming from the shops. Black flags had replaced the neon advertisements. Even the Tigris River, flowing under the bridge, looked completely destroyed and oblivious of everything going on above it. (p. 12)

Like feminine territories, cities are seen as strongholds to be conquered and dominated. This fits with the idea of women as a land metaphor, particularly in depictions of power and subjugation. Mikhail subtly juxtaposes the destroyed communication that defines

Mosul with enslaved and objectified women. She shows how power boundaries are as pervasive in the city as they are on women's bodies and how, in such an environment, communication is useless.

Mikhail blurs the line between fact and fiction. She captures the spirit, atmosphere, and details of two different periods, providing readers with a sense of the historical context in which the narrative unfolds. This is recognized in the political, cultural, religious, and social details the novelist gives so as to place the conflict in its suitable context. Mikhail, for example, provides the readers with many authentic details about Daesh's obligatory rules imposed upon people by Ayash, one of the fictional leaders of the State:

...monitoring and enforcing the State's rules that men left their beards unshaven and women wore the sharia attire. He imposed fines on anyone selling Western clothes, especially T-shirts with foreign words on them...if he spotted a smoker, he would punish him with twenty-five lashes, ...If he saw a boy wearing trousers that did not fall slightly above his ankle, he would punish the boy's parents, specifically his father, with twenty lashes. (p. 28)

Like children whose many colorful toys take on a magical life of their own in their minds, she experiments with words freed from their mundane associations and taken on a life of their own, shocking the reader with feelings of shame for the atrocities committed by humanity against one another in times of war and persecution while simultaneously filling the reader with joy and sadness at the splendor of this wounded land, Iraq.

### **Colonized Women as Absent Referent**

*The Bird Tattoo* (2022) opens with the backbone of the novel's conflict, indication of its title, and Helen, its major character:

Members of the Organization had taken all the captive's possessions, including their gold wedding rings. But Helen's wedding ring was not a ring. It was a tattoo of a bird. She was staring down at her finger when someone started shouting "Twenty-seven! Number twenty-seven!" (p. 1)

Power relations and objectification are the two dominant thematic keywords of the above quote. It indicates that the exertion of power triggers a natural inclination to pursue advantageous objectives, subsequently resulting in the objectification of those objectives for practical purposes, including sexual objectification. Calling Helen as number "twenty-seven", as well as all other captives instead of her name is a sort of objectification that aims at degrading and devaluing her individuality. This can be thoroughly articulated through the concept of the absent referent tackled in Carol J. Adams's *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1999).

Adams' book metaphorically links meat with male dominance: "Meat was a valuable economic commodity; those who controlled this commodity achieved power. If men were the hunters, then the control of this economic resource was in their hands" (p.

13). On the other hand, quoting Adams, “The word vegetable acts as a synonym for women’s passivity because women are supposedly like plants” (p. 15). According to this existential discourse of being and non being, Adams presents the concept of absent referent:

One does not eat meat without the death of an animal. Live animals are thus the absent referents in the concept of meat. The absent referent permits us to forget about the animal as an independent entity; it also enables us to resist efforts to make animals present. (p. 21)

According to this context, When the missing referent is used as a metaphor, its meaning is elevated to a “higher” or more creative role than what its actual reality might indicate or explain. An instance of this occurs when women who have experienced rape or domestic violence express feeling of objectification and dehumanization, they use the metaphorical phrase: “I felt like a piece of meat.” Women in *The Bird Tattoo* (2022) are the absent referent for their individuality is not what is desired by men of the Organization but rather their bodies and the sexual attraction of these bodies. This is enhanced by labeling women with numbers, establishing markets of selling women, and forcing them “to change into “promo” clothes for pictures and sale exhibitions” (p. 3).

The absent referent might be anything whose original meaning is absorbed into another hierarchy of meaning. The experience of animal death serves as a metaphor for the actual reality of women, especially rape victims and mistreated women. Helen, since the moment she was taken captive, started to understand the laws of women's sale market. For example, when a man takes a woman to a certain room for his pleasure and returns her immediately after, it means that he wants her for temporary pleasure. Another example is that when “one of Helen's previous buyers used to temporarily sell her whenever he needed money, and then take her back” (p. 4). The number of raped women can be easily counted depending on “the number of bruises on their bodies” (p. 4). Multiple experiences of women are fictionally represented so as to reflect on the multidirectional memory of that mass rape.

Butchering women, metaphorically, is a recurrent motif in *The Bird Tattoo*. Chosen for sexual pleasure, women are reduced to specific body parts such as “legs,” “breasts,” and “butts,” as if they were separate products on a menu. Kate Millet (1970) offers a discussion of this as follows: “This is a formula for sexual cannibalism: substitute the knife for the penis and penetration, the cave for a womb, and for a bed, a place of execution—and you provide a murder whereby one acquires one’s victim’s power” (p. 292). The female body is perceived by the Organization as an assemblage of distinct components, devoid of cognition and emotion. This is recognized whenever any woman is about to be sold, her mouth, teeth, and smell are all checked so as to make a deal about her price. However, in the case of Rehana, one of the captivated women in the novel, she is given to the Organization soldiers for free for the purpose of domestic services rather than sexual pleasure because she is over fifty. This echoes the antifeminist universal discourse of female senescence, which confines aged women within the stereotypical image of passive and feeble objects. The price of a young woman, by contrast, is higher than the price of an

aged one. Helen's price, for example, “started at seventy-five dollars because she was in her thirties” (p. 4).

Investigating the reasons behind reconsidering these overwhelming experiences by Mikhail, one can underscore that such experiences, though presented in a fictitious form, are testimonial documents of women who are in need of giving their trauma a speakable quality so as to jump above the trap of forgetfulness and silence. In relation to this context, Karen A. Duncan's *Healing from the Trauma of Childhood Sexual Abuse: The Journey for Women* (2004) hopes that: “all women, men, and children who have been sexually abused have the opportunity to travel the path of recovery and restore their lives through healing. Each one deserves to be heard, understood, and believed” (p. 184). This is manifested in a scene of mass rape in which women, though dehumanized, are capable of breaking the silence and sharing collective yet incomprehensible screams. Soldiers of Daesh, in response are:

Shocked by the collective reaction, the men beat the women with all their might. But eventually the room fell quiet, and the men seemed exhausted from all the beating and probably felt shame...the captives exchanged looks of encouragement, as if they were patting each other's shoulders, although that would hurt with all bruises they now bore. Some of these women could not move for several days. (p. 5)

Breaking the silence via shouting is a motif employed by Mikhail to indicate resistance. This motif is further exemplified by the character of Ghazal, who has lost her voice after being kidnapped by Daesh. For a long period of time, her mouth is like “a solitary confinement room in which the words had been trapped” (p. 232). However, her resistance against the traumatic memory of Daesh and regaining freedom is marked by “liberating [her] and releasing [her singing]” (p. 232).

*The Bird Tattoo's* ending suggests the distinctive tincture of bitterness and the trace of sadness that are easily felt in the "dance of pain" many characters of the novel dramatize. Though traumatized, they are not broken, they just have a scare like a vessel or ceramic pot with a crack. Its true beauty springs from its imperfection because “Perfect beauty is false” (p. 264).

### **The Conclusion**

*The Bird Tattoo* manifests the long-term effects of traumatic events, namely sexual assault and oppression of minorities—a matter that transcends individual memory to include the collective one. As such, throughout the novel, Mikhail is particularly attentive to the historical context alongside the fictional experiences of exclusion and persecution.

The novel is a duality of pain and beauty. Therefore, the novelist juxtaposes different oppositional binaries, such as past vs. present, primitive world vs. modern complicated one, and freedom vs. captivity. All these are weaved together to symbolize the uncomprehend reality of life where one is trapped in his destiny. This thematic concern relies heavily upon an adequate technique of narration in which Mikhail does not try to impose her personality. In contrast, she lets her characters speak about themselves and

their tragedies. Their simple language suits their simple backgrounds—a matter that places the novel beyond the novelist's subjectivity and poetic tendency so as to address the universal truth of a collective trauma. The multiple perspectives of multiple characters enhance the multidirectional memory of Yazidi's genocide. The story of one character does not erase the stories of other characters. For this reason, the novelist uses the cinematic technique to move as far as possible from one story to another, from one time to another, and from one character to another.

Though multi-generic, one can never ignore the fact that the novel relies upon the techniques of trauma fiction and its keyword that is memory. The shift from present to past and the unchronological pattern of the plot enhance the traumatic structure the novelist aims to emphasize. Examining the grammatical language of the novel fosters the fact that Mikhail uses the past tense to emphasize the act of remembrance. This act, answers the question of why Mikhail wrote this novel. The novel motivates empathetic, sympathetic, and above all cathartic effects that heal the wounds of a collective traumatized memory.

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