



## The Purging of Identity Violence and Fractured Masculinity in Jawad Al Assadi's *Baghdadi Bath*

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### Abstract

In this paper we look at Jawad Al Assadi's play, *Baghdadi Bath* (Hammam Baghdadi) which mirrors post-war Iraq. We focus on issues of broken identity, crisis of manhood, and the ever present cycle of violence. The play takes place in a traditional bathhouse, or hammam, where two brothers which have not seen each other in a long while meet up. One is a writer that has been living in exile and the other is a member of a local militia. This paper presents the bathhouse as a symbolic setting where the brothers are stripped of their social roles. In this space they are forced to face their corrupted selves and the broken nation which they represent. Through close analysis of the play we look at how Al Assadi uses the body, dark humor, and poetic language to put forth criticism of the destruction of culture and intellectual life in Iraq. Also we look at the play's main theme which is that of the conflict between intellectual life and extremism which in turn represents the large scale divisions in the country. We use postcolonial theory and trauma studies in our analysis of the mental and emotional effects of war on people and society. In the end we note that *Baghdadi Bath* is More so than a political issue play it is a very deep look at the issue of healing which we fail at and the tragic loss of what use to be a common Iraqi identity.

**Keywords:** Jawad Al Assadi, *Baghdadi Bath*, Iraqi Theatre, Political Theatre, Masculinity

تطهير الهوية والعنف والرجولة المتصدعة في حمام جواد الأسدي البغدادي

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الخلاصة:

نلقي في هذا البحث نظرة على مسرحية جواد الأسدي الحمام البغدادي (الحمام البغدادي) التي تعكس عراق ما بعد الحرب. نحن نركز على قضايا الهوية المكسورة، وأزمة الرجولة، ودورة العنف الحالية. تدور أحداث المسرحية في الحمام التقليدي، حيث يلتقي شقيقان لم يريا بعضهما البعض منذ فترة طويلة. أحدهما كاتب يعيش في المنفى والآخر عضو في ميليشيا محلية. تقدم هذه الورقة الحمام كإطار رمزي يتم فيه تجريد الإخوة من أدوارهم الاجتماعية. في هذا الفضاء يضطرون إلى مواجهة أنفسهم الفاسدة والأمة المكسورة التي يمثلونها. من خلال التحليل الدقيق للمسرحية، ننظر إلى كيفية استخدام الأسدي للجسد والفكاهة السوداء واللغة الشعرية لطرح انتقادات لتدمير الثقافة والحياة الفكرية في العراق. وننظر أيضاً إلى الموضوع الرئيسي للمسرحية وهو الصراع بين الحياة الفكرية والتطرف الذي يمثل بدوره الانقسامات واسعة النطاق في البلاد. نحن نستخدم نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار ودراسات الصدمات في تحليلنا للآثار العقلية والعاطفية للحرب على الناس والمجتمع. في النهاية نلاحظ أن الحمام البغدادي هو أكثر من مجرد مسرحية قضية سياسية، فهو نظرة عميقة جداً لقضية الشفاء التي قشلنا فيها والخسارة المأساوية لما كان بمثابة هوية عراقية مشتركة.



الكلمات المفتاحية: جواد الأسدي، حمام البغدادي، المسرح العراقي، المسرح السياسي، الذكورة

## Research Question

What role does the Baghdad bath play in the drama of Jawad Al Assadi's Hammam which also looks at the broken relationship between the two main characters to present the breakdown of national identity and the male crisis in post war Iraq?

## Objective

To look at the use of theatrical and literary elements in Baghdadi Bath which in turn we see to present an allegory for the political, cultural, and psychological break down of Iraq in the wake of many years of conflict and violence.

## Introduction

In the Middle East the bathhouse or hammam has for long been a for physical and spiritual cleansing. It was a public setting for relaxation and socializing which played a key role in community life (Williams, 2012; Talmisani & Gandossi, 2009). But in his 2009 play Baghdad Bath (Hammam Baghdad) Iraqi playwright Jawad Al Assadi changes that which the traditional bathhouse is. In his version the peace filled bathhouse becomes a tense and violent setting. In his play he uses the hammam to present issues in post war Iraq. Rather than a place for cleanliness the steam in the bathhouse instead hides the truth and shows the enduring effects of trauma and violence which have damaged the country.

In the present time Jawad Al Assadi is a giant of the modern Arab theater. He is known for his political and experimental plays which address tough issues of war, exile, and the human condition. Born in 1947 in Karbala' his work was shaped by local religious practices as well as his formal study in Baghdad and Bulgaria (Myers & Saab, 2018). Also he used the body of the actor as a medium to present themes of vulnerability and suffering. "Baghdadi Bath" is his most noted work which also won international awards. The play is that of a tense brother reunion of Majid who stayed in Iraq and adapted to the environment and Hamid an intellectual brother back from exile a man full of trauma. Their meeting personifies the great divide in Iraqi society between those that collaborated and those that resisted and between secular and extreme views (Hassani, 2022).

In this paper we see how Baghdadi Bath uses the hammam and the broken brother relationships to present the fall of national identity and the manhood crisis in post war Iraq. Al Assadi transforms the stage into a symbolic setting which in turn personalizes the political. The bath's cleaning ritual becomes a violent and failed attempt to exorcise the nation's demons. The play is not just a story of pain; it is a very much a poem and a philosophy which looks at the issue of impossible forgiveness when society has been torn by violence. We see in this play that is also a question of whether a shared identity can be restructured from the war's



ruins and what it means to be an Iraqi man when tradition elements like culture and honor have gone (Joubin, 2013).

In this paper we look at the history and theory behind the play which is a very first time. We look at the past of Iraqi political theater and the very unique style of Al Assadi which is a mix of Western concepts like the Theatre of the Absurd and Eastern traditions (Nashef, 2019). Also we will put to use postcolonial theory and trauma studies in our analysis of the play's main themes. In detail we look at the two brothers as symbols of a divided nation, the meaning of the hammam as a symbolic space, and also Al Assadi's use of the body and language to present trauma. In the end we bring all of that together to present that Baghdadi Bath is a great work of political theater which also talks to the universal human cost of war.

### **Data and Theoretical Background**

In order to fully grasp what Baghdadi Bath is about we must look into the past of Iraqi theater, the style of its creator Jawad Al Assadi and the theories which put forth the play's themes. The stage is a part of a large scale of political theater in Iraq in which art has time and again been a means of social and political critique. What gives the play its power is Al Assadi's blend of many theater styles and his unflinching look at the trauma of his country. This section we present the background of modern Iraqi theater, Al Assadi's style, and the theory which this paper will use.

### **The Landscape of Modern Iraqi Theatre**

In Iraq theater has a very long history of getting involved in politics and society. At the start out of the gate the stage was a platform for political issues, with writers using it to comment on the issue of the time (Midhin, n.d. report). But this has not always been an easy road. Under Saddam Hussein's rule the theatre was a prop for state propaganda and many artists were censored or left the country (Tripp, 2013). Also reported is that in the Arab world -- in Iraq in particular -- theater was mostly put to the side, only flourished when it supported what the government was saying (Zayed et al. 2024). That created a struggle between the theater as a true voice of the people and as a tool for the man in power. The 2003 U.S. led invasion and the violence that followed did in fact break that dynamic even more. While the fall of Saddam's regime did bring freedom it also brought new issues which turned Baghdad into a place of destruction and conflict (Zayed et al. 2024).

In a very hard time we saw the emergence of a group of Iraqi theater artists which included Jawad Al Assadi who put forth the idea of what they called "serious theatre that looks at and presents life in Iraq after the attack" (Zayed et al., 2024). This wasn't theater which supported a new government or gave easy



answers. What we saw was a presentation of the deep trauma and division in Iraqi society. It was theater born out of personal and collective loss. Al Assadi himself reported it felt as if “a butcher had come and divided my city and its political life into pieces” (Joubin, 2005). What these artists did face was how to put onto stage the terrible experiences and the feelings of hopelessness which had taken over their country (Mantoan, 2018).

### **Jawad Al Assadi’s Theatrical Aesthetic**

Jawad Al Assadi’s work is a response to that challenge which he rises to. He has developed a very unique style which is a mix of Eastern and Western traditions. From the religious plays of his childhood in Karbala to the European Theatre of the Absurd (Myers & Saab, 2018) he draws inspiration from many sources. That mix is what gives Baghdad’s Bath its power. In terms of play structure which is very much a repeat cycle, open ended and that feeling of endless wait – it is very much in the style of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (Nashef, 2019). Also the two brothers trapped in the hammam, they are like the characters Vladimir and Estragon and their dialogue is a mix of deep thought, bitter argument, and dark humor. But what Al Assadi does is he takes this very Western absurdist style and places it in a very specific Arab and Iraqi setting which is filled with the cultural and political realities of post war Baghdad (Myers & Saab, 2015).

In terms of approach, Al Assadi’s direction is very much on the body. He has developed what I term a “theatre of the body” in which action is as important as word. Also his actors are often in the nude which isn’t for shock value but very symbolic. In the piece, *Baghdad Bath* for instance, as the brothers strip they are in fact removing their social masks which leaves them in a very raw and vulnerable state. Their bodies which are scarred tell the story of war. This focus on the body and the physical aspect of pain is a way to put into practice what is too large for words. It is a theater which is to be felt not just thought.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

To understand the many layers of meaning in *Baghdadi Bath*, this paper uses several theoretical ideas, including postcolonial theory, trauma studies, and the symbolism of space.

Postcolonial theory does in fact present a framework through which we may look at the play’s themes of occupation, resistance, and broken identity. We see in the characters of the two brothers, Majid and Hamid, which play out the two sides of a postcolonial society -- the traitor and the resister (Hassani, 2022). Majid the practical one who enrolls with the American occupiers for survival represents a form of defeat brought on by despair. Hamid the intellectual who comes back from exile to a country he doesn’t recognize plays the part of the out of touch and often impotent voice of those that left. Their conflict is that of postcolonial societies which are still trying to define themselves after foreign rule



(Al-Shetawi, 2013). Also the play puts forth the idea that the US invasion was for the most part about resource control like oil and not at all about liberation (Ghassemi, 2009).

In the field of trauma studies we see a way to look at the psychological impact of war on characters as well as on Iraqi society. Hamid is a very much a traumatized character, haunted by memories of violence which he was made to be a part of under Saddam's rule. His guilt and mental pain are a tell-tale sign of post-traumatic stress disorder. The play in this regard is a "theater of trauma" which is a term used for works that try to present and work through the psychological scars of violence (Al-Shamma, 2013). The play's structure is repetitive, the narrative breaks down and the focus is on the body which is very much a reflection of trauma. In this view the hammam is not a place of healing but a place where trauma is relived over and over again, a kind of hell with no exit.

In the play we see that the stage design is key to its allegorical success. The hammam is a multi-layered symbol. As a site of cleansing and social coming together, the fact that it is re worked by the author as a place of violence is a powerful stand in for the breaking down of Iraqi culture and society (Williams, 2012). Also a transitional space, between the public and the private, the past and present, the bath house is a place where the normal rules of society do not apply which in turn allows for a very raw and open look at the truth. Also the steam in the hammam is used symbolically. It stands in for the muddled issue of memory and the oppressive atmosphere of post war Iraq. By reversing the traditional role of the hammam the author has created a very potent image of his nation's state: what is meant for cleaning has become a bloodletting ground, what was a community center has become a site of brother against brother.

### **Literary Analysis**

Jawad Al Assadi's Baghdad Bath is a prime example of theatrical allegory. In each element – the characters, the setting, the language and the action – we see a very deliberate reflection of the political and psychological state of post war Iraq. The play's power does not come from a complex plot, but in its in depth and symbolic look at a single issue. Within the small frame of the hammam Al Assadi looks at his nations broken soul, he displays the raw pain of trauma, betrayal and lost identity. We will look at the key literary and theatrical devices which the play uses. We will look at the two brothers which are the main characters, the symbolic value of the bath house, the use of the body, and the poetic and absurdist language which all work together to present a picture of a ruined society.

### **The Brothers as Symbols of a Divided Nation**

In Baghdad Bath the primary issue is the dynamic between the two brothers, Majid and Hamid. They are more than just characters – they are symbols of the



very wide and in some ways unbridgeable divides in Iraqi society. Their struggle is a stand in for the country's internal war, a dialogue between two parts of a broken whole. Majid the elder brother is the realist, the survivor. He stayed in Iraq through it all – under Saddam's regime and the American occupation. He is a bus driver which to Hamid's anger he used to transport people no matter what side was in power (Zayed et al., 2024). Majid's is a philosophy of hard practicality. He represents that part of the population which chose to go along to get along in order to survive, which put aside ideals for the chance at a better life. We see in his character a study of compromise not out of malice but out of a bitter necessity to live in a world which does not value idealism.

In turn, Hamid, the young brother, is that which is still wounded in the national psyche. He is the thinker, the author, the exiled which returns to a home he does not recognize. He is a product of past and present regimes' doings. At one point he was made to carry out massacres under Saddam – an experience that left him with heavy guilt (Zayed et al., 2024). His return from the safety of exile into the violent present reality of Baghdad, a reality his brother has adapted to. Hamid is shocked by Majid's collaboration, which to him is a traitor's act against the country. What is at stake between the brothers is a look at the crisis of manhood in Iraq. Also both brothers present forms of broken masculinity. Majid's manhood is that of crude survival, without honor or principle. Hamid's is that of powerlessness, of trauma and intellectual impotence which paralyzes him from action in the face of the horror which surrounds him (Joubin, 2013). That they are unable to find common ground is the play's main tragedy and its most powerful political statement.

### **The Hammam: A Hell for Stripped Souls**

The stage choice of the hammam is a great theatrical decision. Al Assadi takes a space with positive connotations of cleanliness, community and spiritual renewal and instead presents it as a negative – a place of filth, isolation, and violence. What should be a place of purification is in fact a hell where characters' souls are exposed and they are made to face their own corruption. Some have noted that Al Assadi plays out a “symbolic relationship between physical nakedness in the large space of the bath and that of the soul” which in turn is a metaphor for the “blood bath that Iraqis are living through under occupation. (Zayed et al., 2024). The physical setting of the hammam is large and abandoned; its void reflects the breakdown of Iraq itself (Talmisani & Gandossi, 2 in 2009). In this space the ritual of bathing has become a brutal act. Majid's line that I will “scrape your body as father scraped mine until your filth goes down the drain” (Zayed et al. 2024) is filled with threat. What should be a cleansing act has become an aggressive one. The steam that fills the bath is also a symbol, it is the fog of war, the confusion. regarding truth and also the paralyzing fear in a city which is choked by violence.

### **The Body as a Story of Trauma**



In his other work, Al Assadi uses the actors' bodies as primary vehicles to present meaning in *Baghdadi Bath*. In their near nudity, the two brothers are not out for shock; rather, it is a core element of the play's themes. Without their clothes, they also are without their social roles, reduced to their most bare, vulnerable human states. Their scarred and exposed bodies tell a story of their suffering. Hamid's psychological trauma is played out in his physical state – he is pale and skin and thin, a product of physical torture in prison (Zayed et al., 2024). His body is a map of pain, a physical record of the which he has lived and been a part of. The violence in the play is also very much physical. The brothers' arguments go past the verbal; they are desperate and brutal physical struggles. The “jarring and violent personal experiences” (Myers & Saab, 2018) of war are not only talked about; they are put out there through the body. This focus on the body is a key part of what they term the “theatre of trauma” in which the actor's physical presence is used to get across what is beyond words (Al-Shamma, 2013). The audience is not Reported on the horrors of war; they experience them through actors' physical performance (Mantoan 2018).

### **Language: The Poetry of Absurdity**

In many ways the play is a very physical experience but at the same time its language is very powerful. Al Assadi has created a dialogue which is a masterful mix of the poetic, sharp political comment and the dark repetitive style of the Theatre of the Absurd. The influence of Beckett is present in the play's circular arguments, in its dark humor and in the over all feel of existential dread (Nashef, 2019). The brothers are trapped in what seems to be an infinite cycle of blame and defense, their conversation going nowhere which is very much like the characters in *Waiting for Godot*. This absurdist structure does a great job at capturing the feeling of being stuck and without hope in post war Iraq, a world which is a repeat of past nightmarish events. Also within this absurdist style the language is very poetic. The dialogue is filled with strong images which turn the brothers' argument into a deep study of loss and memory. The mix of the poetic and the absurd which Al Assadi uses allows him to create a language that is at once very real and very symbolic, a language which does justice to the great tragedy which is presented (Myers & Saab, 2015).

### **The Three-Scene Structure and the Cycle of Violence**

In *Baghdadi Bath* which is made up of three main scenes we see the brothers' relationship play out as well as the state of Iraq. Each scene in the play adds to the story and in doing so gives us a greater look at the trauma and conflict. In the first scene we are in an abandoned Baghdad hammam. Here we are introduced to the brothers for the first time and we see how different their views of the world are. The empty bath house is a symbol of Iraqi society's void after years of war. What is supposed to be a center of life and community is instead quiet and deserted (Williams, 2012). The brothers begin their ritual of bathing in the water but very



soon it is revealed that this is not a tranquil act at all. The scrubbing is violent and aggressive and it is a display of the which is present underneath their relationship.

In the second scene we see the border between Jordan and Iraq. In this we see the chaos and corruption of the post invasion period. Hamid is trying to get a political candidate across the border which is a very dangerous and uncertain thing to do. At the border we see the American soldiers which represent the foreign occupation and they instill fear and humiliation. This scene also shows how the war has turned everyday activities into life and death situations. The death of the candidate at the border is a powerful symbol of the failure of the political process and the point that so called democratic reforms have broken down (Zayed et al., 2024). The argument which breaks out over the dead body shows how human life has come to have no value in this new Iraq.

In the third scene we see back at the hammam which in turn completes the play's circular theme. This return isn't what you may call a happy homecoming, rather a final goes at things. Hamid attempts to clean slate, he puts faith in the bath to wipe out his guilt and trauma. What the play does put across is that this is not to be. The steam is thick and the argument between the brothers more intense. In the end though they just melt into the mist, there is no tie up or peace. That ending is very off putting indeed, it has no hope of repair. The brothers are caught in a cycle of violence and blame which has no out. Also this structure of the play mirrors that of larger scale violence in Iraq in which each generation is handed down the past trauma (Al-Shamma, 2013).

### **The Role of Memory and Forgetting**

In Baghdadi Bath memory is a key issue. The brothers are plagued by past events which they live through again but which they remember very differently from each other. Hamid is affected by memories of the mass murders he took part in during the days of Saddam – for which he feels great guilt. This guilt is a sort of moral compass, a choice to not forget what went on. He can't shake off those memories which in fact run the show in his life. What he feels is a form of moral consciousness, a stand against what transpired (Al-Shamma, 2013). Also, Hamid stands in for a segment of Iraqi society that has no peace until it comes to terms with the past.

In the case of Majid, he has chosen to let go. He has adapted to every new regime which comes by, putting away his past in a box in order to just get by. His pragmatism is a form of amnesia, a willful blind eye to the morals of what he is doing. To Hamid he says that the past is dead weight and that what we should be focused on is survival. This issue of which to remember or forget is at the core of the play. It puts forth the big issues of how a society deals with trauma. Can a nation truly heal without looking at what went before? Or is it that sometimes



forgetting is a necessary step for survival? The play doesn't give us easy out to these questions, but it does put them right in our face (Hassani, 2022).

In the hammam the steam is a symbol of memory which at times is hazy and unreliable. Brothers have trouble seeing each other through the steam – as do they in trying to understand each other's points of view. The fog in the air represents the difficulty of knowing the truth in a setting which has many versions of what transpired. This ambiguity is a key element of the play which in turn mirrors the complex Iraqi situation (Tripp, 2013).

### **The Failure of Intellectualism**

One of the most painful themes in *Baghdadi Bath* is the failure of intellectualism in the face of violence. Hamid is a writer, an intellectual who believes in the power of ideas and words. But his intellectualism has proven useless in the brutal reality of war. He was unable to protect himself or others, and his education did not save him from being forced to commit terrible acts. When he returns to Iraq, he finds that his ideas and his writing have no place in the new order. The country is now ruled by militias and foreign occupiers, and there is no room for intellectual debate or cultural life (Joubin, 2005).

This issue of intellectual failure is a tragedy for Hamid and for Iraq as a whole. War's most devastating result is the destruction of intellectual and cultural life. When writers, artists and thinkers are silenced or made to leave, a society loses the ability to reflect on itself and to dream of a better future. Al Assadi himself lived this when he came back to Iraq to find that the cultural institutions which he knew were destroyed (Joubin, 2005). The play is a eulogy for this loss, a grieving for the death of Iraqi intellectual life.

In Iraq today we see a large scale growth of anti-intellectual feeling which Majid's attitude to Hamid represents. In a world which has survival as the only aim, ideas are a luxury. What Majid sees in Hamid's guilt and moral questioning is weakness. For him action not thought is what is required. This play also looks at the conflict between action and thought, between the practical and the ideal in which we see play out the divides in Iraqi society (Mantoan, 2018). Also suggested is that the war has done in more than just the physical structure of the country it has also torn at the intellectual and moral fabric.

### **The International Context and Western Audiences**

Baghdad Bath is a play which springs from Iraqi experience but also has put on stages in the West. That which is put out for international audiences, and especially in the West, brings with it the issue of how the play is received and interpreted by those that do not live through the Iraqi experience. For Western audiences the play may be uncomfortable as it forces them to look at the results



of their own governments' actions in Iraq. The American invasion and occupation are not background in this play; they are at the core of the brothers' struggle (Al-Shamma, 2013).

In some studies, the play is looked at as a "theater of trauma" which we present to our Western audiences in a way that we try to create a connection and empathy. We look at the story of two brothers which in turn makes the war's statistics very personal and real. What the play does is force the audience to see the Iraqi people past the distant victims they are made out to be in the media and instead present them as complex individuals with their own stories and issues. That is a very political thing to do in a world which tends to dehumanize Middle Eastern people (Mantoan, 2018).

In fact, we see a risk that Western audiences will treat the play as a sort of trauma tourism which in turn causes them to watch the pain of others from behind a safe distance without really looking at the politics of the issue. Al Assadi is aware of this issue, and his play in fact pushes back against easy consumption. It doesn't present a black and white good vs. evil story which Western audiences may look for, also it doesn't give out that catharsis which they may be looking for. Instead what it does is leave the audience with difficult questions and unsolved issues (Al-Shamma, 2013). In this sense the play challenges it's audience to think more deeply about their role in the Iraqi tragedy.

## **Conclusion**

In the case of Jawad Al Assadi's Baghdad Bath we have a great piece of contemporary political theater which puts forth a very powerful and indelible image of a country's descent into violence and division. What he does so well is take the traditional symbol of the hammam and turn it on its head -- what is meant to be a place of purification becomes instead a hellish environment -- in this he gives us a very disturbing picture of the post war Iraqi soul. What the play does best is that it doesn't give you easy out or a neat conclusion. In the steam filled bath house which is no purifier at all we see brothers Majid and Hamid which represent the tragic split in a society that has been broken by tyranny, foreign occupation and internal conflict. Their unresolvable issue which plays out to the point of their disappearance into the fog is a very haunting stand in for the uncertain future of Iraq at large, a country still on the path to peace and healing.

In this analysis we see how Al Assadi has put together a powerful blend of Western absurdist thought and Eastern tradition to create a very unique theatrical language which in turn presents the unspeakable traumas of war. In the case of the two brother characters -- the practical collaborator and the guilt ridden intellectual -- we see representation of the broken state of Iraqi identity and a deep crisis of masculinity in a world which has seen traditional values fall apart. The play's physical style which uses the naked and vulnerable body as a principal



element -- puts forward the physical and psychological scars of violence in a way which goes beyond words. Through use of postcolonial and trauma studies theories we see in Baghdad Bath a deep critique of the violence cycle and a very close look at individual and collective trauma.

The play itself however transcends the particular issue of Iraq. Although very much an Iraqi story it is also about universal themes of violence, identity, and the human price of war. Baghdad Bath is a piece which proves the stage's value in bringing to light the truth, in asking tough questions, and in looking at the worst aspects of what we as humans are capable of. This is not a play which presents easy hope; instead its hope is in its truth telling, in its artistic courage, and in its great empathy for the war's victims. At the end we do not get a remedy from Jawad Al Assadi for the ills of war but he does force us to look at the hard reality that some scars will never fade.

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