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Cultural Memory and Poetics of Resistance in Dunya Mikhail's Poetry

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الذاكرة الثقافية وشعرية المقاومة في شعر دنيا ميخائيل

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Abstract:

The present research deals with the poetic strategy via which the Iraqi-American poetess, Dunya Mikhail's, activates the concept of cultural memory as a site of defying war, cultural deletion and exile. Grounded in Pierre Nora's concept of (lieux de mémoire) or (sites of memory), this research dwells upon the employment of folklore, myths, and historic fundamentals in Mikhail's poetry as a vehicle of establishing a poetic scope of resistance. The research uses a close analytical examination of Mikhail's selected poems, from her most famous collections of poems, namely: *The War Works Hard* (2005), *The Iraqi Nights* (2014) and *In her feminine signs* (2019), is applied as a method of uncovering how Mikhail relives ancient Mesopotamian characters, monuments and cultural tales, not as a mere regretful tacit, but as an assertion of her Iraqi cultural persistent and continuity. In her poems, Mikhail turns fragmented cultural remembrance into a symbolic persistence. Moreover, the research bridges Iraqi historic cultural past with its unstable present. In her poetic writing, Mikhail exemplifies what Nora perceives as symbolic sites of memory or imaginative spaces that protect cultural identity and resist the violence of war and exile. This research groups Mikhail's poetry within the broader outline of post-colonial poetic resistance. It argues that her activation of cultural memory overpasses mere poetic reflection. Instead, it serves as a valid assertion of national endurance and cultural continuity.

Keywords: Folklore, Myths, Cultural Resistance, Iraq, Exile, Poetry, Cultural Memory, Sites of Memory

الخلاصة:

يتناول البحث الحالي الاستراتيجية الشعرية التي تفعل من خلالها الشاعرة العراقية الأمريكية، دنيا ميخائيل، مفهوم الذاكرة الثقافية كمكان لتحدي الحرب والمحو الثقافي والمنفى. انطلاقاً من مفهوم بيير نورا عن (أماكن الذاكرة) أو (مواقع الذاكرة)، يتناول هذا البحث توظيف الفولكلور والأساطير والأسس التاريخية في شعر ميخائيل كوسيلة لإنشاء نطاق شعري للمقاومة. يستخدم البحث فحصاً تحليلياً دقيقاً لقصائد ميخائيل المختارة، من أشهر مجموعاتها الشعرية، وهي: الحرب تعمل بجد (٢٠٠٥)، والليالي العراقية (٢٠١٤) وفي علاماتها الأنثوية (٢٠١٩)، ويتم تطبيقه كطريقة للكشف عن كيفية إحياء ميخائيل للشخصيات والآثار والحكايات الثقافية القديمة في بلاد ما بين النهرين، ليس كمجرد ضمني مؤسف، ولكن كتأكيد على ثباتها واستمراريتها الثقافية العراقية. في قصائدها، تقوم ميخائيل بتحويل الذكريات الثقافية المجزأة إلى ثبات رمزي. علاوة على ذلك، يربط البحث بين الماضي الثقافي التاريخي العراقي وحاضره المضطرب. ومن خلال أعمالها الشعرية، تبني ميخائيل ما تعتبره نورا مواقع رمزية للذاكرة أو فضاءات خيالية تحافظ على الهوية الوطنية وتعارض وحشية الحرب والمنفى. باختصار، يُصنّف هذا البحث شعر ميخائيل ضمن الإطار الأوسع للمقاومة الشعرية لما بعد الاستعمار، مجادلاً بأن توظيفها للذاكرة الثقافية يتجاوز مجرد التأمل الشعري، بل يُمثل تأكيداً قوياً على الاستمرارية الثقافية والصمود الوطني. الكلمات المفتاحية: التراث الشعبي، الأساطير، المقاومة الثقافية، العراق، المنفى، الشعر، الذاكرة الثقافية، مواقع الذاكرة

1.Introduction:

Iraq's history is an overloaded tapestry, shaped by comprehensive cultural achievements accompanied by deep losses. From the earliest clay tablets of the Sumerians to the more recent deterioration caused by conflict and

terrorism, the Iraqi cultural legacy has repeatedly exposed threats of erasure. In their essay "Looting and the World's Archaeological Heritage: The Inadequate Response," Neil Brodie and Colin Renfrew assert a significant crisis in Iraqi cultural heritage in the years between 1991 and 1994. During those years, many museums were ruined, and a large number of antiquity manuscripts were robbed. Brodie and Colin further demonstrates that the damage reaches to valuable Assyrian sites in the north of Iraq, where Assyrian monuments at Nineveh and Nimrud were attacked and many slabs from Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh were destroyed. (2005, 346).

After 2003 invasion, the situation of Iraq was worsened, the National Museum in Baghdad and several libraries were damaged. Over 13,500 relics were stolen from museums, with only some number of them were recovered (Bogdanos, 2003). Surveys organized by National Geographic channel in May 2003 and UNESCO in June of the same year documented large-scale damage to historical sites, with estimates supposing that up to half of the site were destroyed via illegal digging. These acts of destruction shake not only Iraq's cultural heritage, but its collective memory as well.

As a result of these everlasting challenges, "Middle-aged and elderly Iraqis suddenly find themselves living in a world wholly different from that of their childhood and young adulthood," (Ghazoul, et al., 2008, p.196). In reaction, Iraqi artists rush into reviving their past "using autobiography as a way to give voice to a collective memory that has almost been obliterated" (Ghazoul, et al., p.197) by wars and trauma. Their literary works are designed to revive and preserve their Iraqi culture, legacy, myths, and folklore tales, allowing resilience in the face of cultural loss and elimination.

Most outstanding in this direction is Dunya Mikhail, an Iraqi-American contemporary writer, whose literary works serve as prominent assertions of cultural resistance and continuity. Mikhail's literary outputs in general, and her poetry in particular, manipulate Iraqi's rich mythological and folkloric legacy as poetic platforms of resilience and cultural continuity. In her poems, especially those she wrote in exile, Mikhail summons the mythic characters, traditions folktales, as well as cultural relics of her motherland, Iraq. Her foremost desire is not merely to lament the destruction and loss of these cultural relics. Instead, she tentatively recreates the memory of these cultural sites with the aim of burdening her readers with the sense of strength and agency. Therefore, cultural memory in Mikhail's poetry is elevated into a site of resistance. It gives her the ability to resist the brutal attempts to erase Iraq's culture and national identity.

2. The Aim of The Research:

The prime aim of this research is to uncover how Mikhail manipulates poetry as a testimony of cultural memory and resistance. Working within the theoretical framework of Pierre Nora's concept of (lieux de mémoire) or (sites of memory), this research demonstrates how Iraq's myths, folktales, and pre-historic monuments are exploited in Mikhail's poems as cultural sites of memory. Through activating the memory of these cultural sites, Mikhail instigates her readers to obtain a sense of resilience and empowerment in the face of trauma and exile.

3. Research Questions:

This research answers three essential questions:

- 1.How does Mikhail manipulate cultural memory, through myth, folklore, and historical references, as a framework of resistance to trauma, war, and displacement?
- 2.In what sense can Nora's notion of (lieux de mémoire) manifests the allegorical function of memory in Mikhail's poems?
- 3.How do Mikhail's chosen poems in this research establish poetic memory distances that confirm Iraq's cultural legacy in the face of war and exile?

4. Literature Review

Mikhail's poetry has received notable critical consideration for its engagement with themes of exile, war, and cultural identity. scholars have often positioned her literary products within postcolonial context, focusing on her works that deal with trauma, memory, and resistance. Nevertheless, whilst a large number of researches admit her engagement with myths, folktales and national symbols, few explore these act as a cultural memory sites which, in the context of trauma and exile, offer possibilities of resistance and self-identity assurance.

Brinda J. Mehta (2010), in her exploration of Mikhail's *The War Works Hard*, indicates how poetry can function as an act of creative dissidence, arguing that Mikhail's poetry implies resistance of war and exile by manipulating language as a form of protest. Though Mehta forcefully utilizes Mikhail's poetry as a resisting site, her indulgent does not extend to Mikhail's act of reliving the memory of ancient myths, relics and folktales as sites of cultural memory and resistance. Mehta framework is built on postcolonial resistance through feminist lens, leaving a gap

for a more profound investigation on how cultural memory in Mikhail's poetry functions as a tacit of resistance and preservation.

A more recent research by Abdulkadhim & Al-Abboodi (2024) is conducted on how Mikhail manages to defy the patriarchal and political brutality. Abdulkadhim & Al-Abboodi, once again, employ a feminist as its framework: applying Judith Butler's theory of performativity to dwell upon how Mikhail's poetry presents female's refusal to multifaceted shapes of authoritarianism. Although this research adds a further benefit to the exploration of Mikhail's feminist poetics, it fails to notice how activating the memorization of the past antiquity of her motherland, Iraq, offer a useful site of resistance to the trauma of war and exile.

In another research, Almaarof and Al-Maliky (2024) dig deeper to uncover the theme of identity and belonging in Mikhail's poetry. They strategy to do so is based on Homi Bhabha's Bhabha's concept of the hybridity, the interweaving of "cultural identities that emerge from colonial histories and migrations"(45). Their exploration offers an insight on how Mikhail's poetry defies the binary logic of belonging and non-belonging as an act of her refusal to submit to the prevailing narratives of belonging. However, Almaarof and Al-Maliky's research oversight the Mikhail's capacity of converting cultural memory into a site of resistance, capable of fusing Iraq's myths, symbols and folktales with its contemporary [ordeals](#). This gap offers a further aspect of Mikhail's poetry to be explored.

This research bridges this ongoing gap by investigating how Mikhail's poetry advocates antique Mesopotamian myths, relics and folktales as an act of survival and cultural continuity. It examines Mikhail's poetry through the lens of Pierre Nora's concept of (lieux de mémoire) or (sites of memory), utilizing its employment of past relics, myths and folktales as cultural sites of resistance and identity.

3.Methodology:

Chiefly, this research activates an analytical strategy to investigate Mikhail's selected poems. It examines how the concept of "cultural memory" in the poetess selected poems is used as a poetic instrument of advocating national resistance in the midst of war, trauma and cultural loss. Mikhail's selected poems are analyzed with a special emphasis on Mikhail's act of recreating the ancients relics, folktales and mythic figures of her homeland, Iraq. Activating Pierre Nora's concept of "lieux de mémoire" or "sites of memory" as a theoretical framework, this research dwells upon the symbolic role of memory in Mikhail's selected poems. Mikhail's allusions to Iraqi monuments, folktales and mythic figures are examined as spaces where collective memory is sustained and asserted as acts of resistance and endurance. Moreover, the research merges thematic analysis with theoretical observations to affirm how Mikhail's poetry works as a ground of cultural resilience and continuity.

4. Theoretical Framework:

4.1.Cultural Memory and Postcolonial Resistance

Over the last two decades, the term "cultural memory" has appeared as a prominent term to portray the intricate methods in which societies relive their past employing a different range of media. It enables individuals to learn from their ancestors' life stories, activating their experiences in present life's situations. "Cultural memory" elevates into a critical part of individual's national identity and is perceived as an aspect of collective memory shared by a group of people. It is typically preserved in objects such as historical monuments or conventions. In this way, "cultural memory", as an official concept, was theorized by Aleida and Jan Assmann who mark the onset of investigations into "Cultural Memory" (Erl, 2011). Aleida Assmann identifies cultural memory as a "system of values, artifacts, institutions, and practices that retain the past for the present and the future"(Assmann, 2021). "Cultural memory" transmits and protects historical heritage and by acting as such it, in Assmann's words, "supports the emergence and elaboration of distinct identities, because humans define themselves and are defined by their affiliation to one or various cultural groups and traditions" (2021).

Building on this foundation, Bommas (2011) defines "Cultural Memory" as "a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation"(p.4). He views it as a memory which is based on "stored media which allow members repeatedly to access data that can be re-told or re-envisaged until they become formulaic" (p.4). Furthermore, Jan Assmann, in his book, *Communicative and cultural memory* (2008), defines cultural memory as a "body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch" (p.39) which both frames the future and establish our understanding of the past.

In his essay, "Sites of Memory: An Urban Perspective", S. Mitroiu (2014) views 'Cultural memory' as "a form of collective memory, is shared by a community, characterized by a common collective identity"(p.2). Assmann (2008) goes further to maintain that "cultural memory" is "a sort of institution which is "exteriorized, objectified,

and stored away in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures, are stable and situation transcendent” (p.110). He explains how those cultural memory transfer from one social group to another, asserting that the “memory, which we possess, as being equipped with a human mind, exists only in constant interaction not only with other human memories, but also with things, outward symbols (p.110-111).

In postcolonial background, “cultural memory” is recognized an effective poetic tacit for colonized societies whose language, customs, and historical narratives have repeatedly underwent threat of occupation and erasure. In this vein, Edward Said, in his work, *Culture and Imperialism*, indicates that the mission of postcolonial scholars is to confront this erasure and to assert that their own cultural heritage. (1993, p. 332). Over time, “cultural memory” becomes an effective medium which enables marginalized societies to resist the colonized narratives and affirm their own cultural legacy. Put it differently, colonizer turns to cultural memory as a vehicle to transmit their inherited past across generations, viewing it as a site to assert their identity and cultural stability.

In the 1980s, the term ‘cultural memory’ was re-investigated and further refined into what is now acknowledged as ‘Cultural Memory Studies’. The act of cultural remembrance is thus viewed as “an element of humans’ fundamental anthropological make-up,” and cultural memory, constructed and maintained both institutionally and through memory practices, is seen as crucial in shaping identities (Erl, 2011, p. 13). Pierre Nora's concept of "lieux de mémoire" (sites of memory) is one of the most groundbreaking concepts in this field.

4.2 Pierre Nora's Concept of ‘Lieux de Mémoire’ in the Context of Resistance:

“Lieux de Mémoire” is a French term that means “site memory”. The term was coined by Pierre Nora in his three-volume collection, *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, in the 1980s. It is admitted as a mean of comprehending “the construction of the French national past” (Wright, 2003, p.4). In his work, Nora relates “lieux de mémoire” to the collective memory of a nation, as it offers a tangible contact with its ancient legacy. This concept represents “any significant entity which has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of a community” (Apryshchenko & Karnaukhova, 2019, p.91). Nora introduced this concept in response to the decline of traditional forms of memory that are rooted in community’s practices, customs, and ancestral continuity (Nora.1989, p.7). Nora identifies “lieux de mémoire” with sites, whether physical or symbolic, that arise out of the necessity to externalize, preserve, and transmit collective memory. For him, these memory sites can include: “monuments, cemeteries, festivals, treaties, rituals, or even mental constructs or symbols that crystallize collective memory” (O'Reilly, 2020, p. 57). These sites of memory have the capacity to “stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial” (Nora cited in Sharon B.Oster.2018,34). Nora goes further to highlight how “sites of memory” offer “places where memory crystallizes and secretes itself” (Nora.1989.p.7). For him, these sites are “not static relics but dynamic spaces that evolve with each generation’s interpretation and needs,” thus functioning as “powerful tools for cultural survival and resistance in the face of adversity” (Cited in Garwa,2024,26). Drawing on this fact, “sites of memory” is elevated into a concept of potent resistance, allowing colonized communities to resist allowing colonized communities stand against the dominant narratives that seek to erase their own history and identity.

4.3. Literature as a Medium of Cultural Memory and Resistance

In the literary field, the early decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed a prominent scholarly emphasis on “cultural memory”. Artistic and writers descending from colonized societies aggressively maintain “cultural memory” in their literary works. They, to a large extent, employ it as a vital vehicle to revitalize their culture and national identity. They consciously engage with the past to affirm the enduring significance of their national heritage, thereby openly challenging the pervasive erasure imposed by colonial authority. Through this enactment of cultural memory, post-colonial artists provide “a platform for marginalized voices to challenge colonial narratives and reclaim their identities” (De Marco, 2025a, p.63).

Commenting on the resistant capacity inherent in such cultural reclamation of the past, Cheryl McEwan (2003) notes that addressing the past has become a grand narrative in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. From his own view point, “individuals and nations are seeking to overcome their traumatic legacies through the establishment of historical truth and the creation of collective memory” (p.740). This intended coming up with the collective memory of the past fosters the creation of “counter-narratives and counter-contexts which refute, or at least decentre, orthodox versions of history, marginalised cultures insist on a more equitable and representative starting point from which to negotiate a post-colonial identity”(Gilbert & Tompkins. 2002 p.111). Consequently, post-colonial poets apply “cultural memory” as a mechanism for building “solidarity among those who have shared experiences of colonialism and oppression, promoting healing and reconciliation” (Sebastian, et al., 2016.p.55).

Put differently, to frame their literary resistance, post-colonial artist excessively turn to cultural memory's theoretical frameworks, such as Pierre Nora's "lieux de mémoire" or "sites of memory". Nora's concept proves particularly effective in uncovering how sites of cultural memory function as instruments of resistance among colonized populations. The poetry of Dunya Mikhail stands as a representative manifestation in this poetic vein. Her poems vividly demonstrate strategic appropriations of Nora's "sites of memory" as a powerful mediums of resistance and forceful assertions of national identity amidst war, displacement and cultural dislocation.

5. Discussion:

5.1. Mikhail's Poetry and Resistance Mindset:

Dunya Mikhail was born in Baghdad in 1965 to a Chaldean-Catholic family. Through her writings, Mikhail has established herself as an outstanding literary voice of resistance and continuity. Mikhail's early obsession with writing began in her youth, publishing her first literary work in the mid-1980s, while she was still a student at the University of Baghdad. During that period, writers who dared to criticize the ruling authorities faced threats and censorship (Khan, 2015, pp. 10-13). Forced into exile in 1995 due to government repression, Mikhail carried her homeland's memories and cultural heritage within her poetry, transforming them into powerful acts of resistance. In an interview with NPR's Renee Montagne, on March 21, 2013, under the title "Revisiting Iraq Through The Eyes Of An Exiled Poet" and in response to a question on how she remembers Iraq after more than 17 years, Mikhail says: The way that things come to mind, I feel that they are more as fragments. They are strange. They don't come in order anymore, so the happy moments and the sad moments climb over each other: our home in Baghdad with the roof where we would sleep [during] summer nights and we would go down when we [heard] the sound of the siren; the simple heater in the middle of our living room that was called Aladdin, and, on it, that pot of tea with cardamom. (Mikhail, 2013, para. 4) As a result, Mikhail's works is deeply rooted in memorizing the Iraqi folklore, myths, and cultural traditions. In the same interview, Mikhail (2013) declared poetry as "not medicine—it's an X-ray," highlighting its function in uncovering wounds and attending understanding. She asserted that, amid ongoing trauma, poetry offers a tool of survival, permitting people to feel both alienated and connected: "We all feel alienated because of this continuous violence in the world. We feel alone, but we also feel together. So we resort to poetry as a possibility for survival" (Mikhail, 2013, para. 5). She further reflected that "to say I survived is not so final as to say, I'm alive," (Mikhail, 2013, para. 5) acknowledging that trauma persists even after physical survival. Throughout her life, Mikhail witnessed Iraq's political upheavals and wars—such as: the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the Gulf War (1990–1991), US invasion to her homeland and the most recent destabilization by evidenced by ISIS. These wars and political unrest result in severe losses to Iraqi culture and identity. To a large extent, Mikhail works serve as literary responses to these wars and the deep scars they causes to the Iraqi culture and identity. B.J. Mehta (2023) positions Mikhail within "a pantheon of creative artists whose work reflects ancestral consciousness and the ravages of war." (208)

Frank and Malreddy (2020) locate Mikhail among Iraqi and Arab writers who observe the eradication inflicted upon Iraqi culture as "particularly traumatic"(p.4) They demonstrate that Mikhail and her companion writers do not consider artifacts, such as Assyrian vases or rare manuscripts, merely as ruins of historical or aesthetic value; rather, they admit these pre-historic monuments as "vital reservoirs of Iraqi self-representation and resistance"(p.4). They, Frank and Malreddy, in their work go to deeper, asserting the fact that throughout Iraq's tumultuous history, literature and art have functioned as essential testimonies via which Iraqis assert their identity and cultural persistence. Working within this theoretical frame, Mikhail's poetry employs folktales, historic monuments, and myths as deliberate sites of advocating cultural preservation and national resistance. In an interview with Literary Hub on September 9 in 2024, Mikhail declares poetry as "a form of mythmaking—a way to transform reality into something timeless" (para.2). Through storytelling and myth, she strives to emphasis her Iraqi identity and, hence, challenging the destructive forces which threaten Iraq's cultural fabric and integrity.

Despite never physically returning to Iraq, Mikhail's poems frequently revisits her homeland, line by line and stanza by stanza, establishing a surviving site through cultural memory. She re-imagines her childhood nights lying on the roof of her home in Baghdad, listening to her grandmother's storytelling, which she portrays as her earliest encounter with literature. Commenting on such experience Mikhail says: The first stories and folk tales I heard were narrated by my grandmother. We would lie on the roof of our home in Baghdad, under the open sky, as she shared these tales with me. Those nights were my first encounters with literature; and the stories, rich with personal and collective wisdom, etched themselves into my soul. They shaped how I see the world and craft my words. (Mikhail, 2024, para.2).

As such, Mikhail poetic works are designed to “reborn the myths of old, carrying the weight of history while illuminating the complexities of modern life,” thus preserving Iraq’s cultural legacy despite exile (Mikhail, 2024, para.1).

Supporting this viewpoint, Pasquale De Marco (2025_b) notices that, during eras of oppression and tyranny, myths and storytelling operate “as a powerful tool for resistance and empowerment”.(p.28) These stories help to preserve cultural traditions, challenge dominant narratives structures, and instigate optimism. Mikhail’s strategic invocation of mythic figures and relics exemplifies Mikhail’s role as a cultural guardian—using poetry as a site of resistance to confront cultural erasure and stir resilience.

To terminate, Mikhail’s poetic resistance is deeply rooted in the vital use of cultural memory as a poetic strategy of asserting national identity and opposing cultural erasure. Her poems meet Corbin Shepherd’s (2025) firm faith in “poetry under oppression” as “a testament to the enduring power of the human spirit to resist tyranny and to create beauty and meaning even in the face of unimaginable suffering”(p.25). Thus, Mikhail stands among those literary writers who realize the empowering capacity of embracing cultural memory in their works. Reinforcing this philosophical outlook, Zaidi (2025) writes that “culture memory can help societies heal from traumatic memories, fostering resilience and reconciliation” (p. 161). Building upon this viewpoint, the coming section of this research is going to analyze Mikhail’s selected poems, from her poetic collections: *The War Works Hard* , *The Iraqi Night* and *In Her Feminine Signs*, through the lens of Pierre Nora’s concept of (lieux de mémoire) or (sites of memory). The analysis of the poetess selected poems is going to focus on her poetic reconstruction of the cultural memory of her Iraqi legacy as a vehicle of opposing war and exile.

5.2 Analysis of Dunya Mikhail’s Selected Poems through the Lens of Cultural Hybridity and Sites of Memory

Mikhail’s earliest collection of poetry, *The War Works Hard* (2005), serves as an intense exploration of resilience and identity in opposition to war and exile. The collection was translated from Arabic by Elizabeth Winslow. Generally, it revolves around the 1980-1988 Iraq-Iran war, post Saddam Iraq, and the experience of living in exile. (Raymond, 2017, p.37). Various poems in this collection resonate with the elements of Pierre Nora’s concept of “lieux de mémoire” or “sites of memory”, namely: its two well-known poems: “I Was in a Hurry” and “Inanna”.

"I Was in a Hurry" is the first poem that Mikhail wrote in America. It is a masterpiece of using cultural memory as an act of defiance the loss of identity and seeking connection with her homeland. The poem evokes a sense of exile and the sudden changes in the speaker’s life. It enacts Mikhail’s agony as an immigrant in the U.S. and her yearning for her country. Furthermore, the poem reflects Mikhail’s strong faith in the capacity of her poetry to bridge the physical and emotional space between herself and her country. Commenting on the circumstances of composing the poem, Mikhail declares: I wrote when I came to America. So, the first year I came here, I was trying to find my space and see how I could alternate to my place. Poetry helped me do this. Concerning this poem, as it is the first poem I wrote here, of course, I was thinking of my background, of my homeland, 'Iraq'. As I say, "I was in a Hurry" when I left my country, so the poem tells it all: somebody comes from the war (Mikhail cited in (Ibrahim & Rahman Jaf, 2023, p. 719). The poem opens with a poignant depiction of “the tragic plight of the persona,” (Lieberman, 2017, part 6) and her feelings upon losing her homeland. The poem’s initial lines, “Yesterday I lost a country. / I was in a hurry, / and didn’t notice when it fell from me”, (Mikhail.2005.p.31) stir collective memory and assert the suddenness of loss. Mikhail likens the loss of her country to “a broken branch from a forgetful tree,” (Mikhail,2005, p.31) In their research, “Journey of Displacement: Dunya Mikhail’s Poetic Exploration of Loss and Belonging in the Poem “I Was in a Hurry” (2023), Rubaya and Jaf notice that the “broken tree” in this line “represents a communal or historical memory that has become foggy with time” (p.718). After establishing a sense of loss and rapid change in life, the poem delves into mediating the persona’s inability to find connection with her homeland, portraying her continuous search for it. Mikhail introduces her country as a precious object and she suggests many places where this precious object might be encountered:

perhaps in a suitcase
open to the sky,
or engraved on a rock
like a gaping wound,
or wrapped
in the blankets of emigrants,
or canceled
like a losing lottery ticket,

or helplessly forgotten
in Purgatory,
or rushing forward without a goal
like the questions of children,
or rising with the smoke of war,
or rolling in a helmet on the sand,

(Mikhail, 2005,p.31)

The words “suitcase,” “rock,” “blankets,” “lottery ticket,” and “Purgatory” that Mikhail refers to in the previous poetic lines, work as symbolic sites of memory. They incarnate Mikhail’s collective experience in exile and her progressive search for connection with her country. Through these figurative sites, Mikhail uncovers the complexities of her past, struggling to get connection with her land or cultural roots. A certain powerful moment of resistance that the poem reaches is evident in Mikhail’s saying “Or stolen in Ali Baba’s jar” (Mikhail.2005.p.31). The line powerfully draws upon cultural memory to advocates a sense of resistance and connection with homeland. It recalls an ancient folk narrative that is famous in Mikhail’s homeland, the tale of Ali Baba’s jar. Mikhail perceives in this tale a source of memory from which she can evoke a sense of resilience connection with her country. Mikhail proposes that the “jar” of Ali Baba could be among the objects where her country might be concealed. The creation of the memory of such folk narrative locates Mikhail’s suffering within a cultural context. It recalls the ancient middle eastern folktale of "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" from *One Thousand and One Nights*. Although the collection is not purely Iraqi, yet Baghdad was the setting of much of its events. Mikhail reference to this folktale comes out of her desire to find an empowering source that enable her resist exile and prove connection with her land. In the original narrative, Ali Baba, a well-known merchant who lived in Baghdad during the 9th century, has owned a slave-girl whose name is Morgian. Morgiana defeats the forty thieves, who want to attack her master and hide themselves within the jars of oil, by pouring hot oil into the jars (Bell. 1895.p.52). For Iraqis, Morgiana’s notable bravery in protecting her household becomes a symbol of resilience and collective strength. In this context, Mikhail draws upon the bravery and defiance implied in this folktale to stir sense of cultural resistance. The courage and resilience, key morals to this folk narrative, are exploited as dynamic sites of memory which evolve to stir cultural resilience and continuity. In other words, by alluding to such tale, Mikhail re-asserts the Iraqi cultural legacy, transferring it, this tale, into a site via which she could keep connection with her land. The poem terminates with the poetess strong appeal, saying: “Please return it, sir / Please return it, madam / It is my country” (Mikhail, 2005,p.31). In this concluding appeal, Mikhail urges her readers to return her lost country if they encounter it. The re-current use of “please return it” indicate the seriousness and urgency of Mikhail’s demand. It involves the readers in the poetess process of remembrance and recovery. Whilst, the last line, “It is my country” is an assertion made by Mikhail to declare her persistent connection with her country, despite the physical separation. Similar to “I was in a Hurry” is Mikhail’s “Inanna”. Once again, the poem examines culture memory in the light of Nora’s concept of “lieux de mémoire” or “sites of memory”. The poem deals with national myths, symbols and historical figures as cultural sites of remembrance via which Mikhail confronts the erosion of Iraqi heritage. As it is indicated in its title, “Inanna” portrays the mythical figure of Inanna, the “goddess of love and war” (Kramer,1946. p.10) in Sumerian mythology. She, Inanna, is the “patron and special goddess of the city of Uruk, ruled by Gilgamesh” (Kramer,1946. p.10). She is a figure who stands for the “feminine power that defies social conventions and transcends traditional norms of behavior. As the original myth asserts, Inanna rebels against “the gods and men” to demand “her place of power” (Mane, 2024, p.60). Working on the resisting and courageous qualities of this figure, Mikhail recalls the figure Inanna as a poetic memory site from which her readers can get power and resilience.

The poem opens with Inanna, declaring herself: “I am Inanna / And this is my city” (Mikhail, 2005, p. 11). This opening, immediately, relives the character of Inanna, an enduring Iraqi mythic figure which symbolically embodies Iraq’s pre-historic strength and divine authority. Moreover, Mikhail’s Inanna innovatively recalls the ancient Sumerian myth of Inanna, taking her themes of resilience and empowerment and applying them to modern issues, utilizing how this ancient figure offers resilience for her contemporary era. The poem does not directly quote or summarizes a specific ancient Sumerian text, however, it employs Inanna's myth as a cultural site, anchoring her identity within the mythic landscape of Mesopotamia. This aligns Mikhail’s allusion to Inanna with Nora’s perception that sites of memory are not merely physical distances, but mental and symbolic constructs that sustain collective memory in times of crisis and ordeals.

Through recalling “the deity of Uruk, the fabulous polis of Sumer and Babylonia, Mikhail seems to be referring in this poem to the ruined Baghdad in 2003 under the fire of war, “now roofless and full of people running from bombs” (Bjering, et al., 2024, p. 42). Mikhail writes:

I see my old neighbors

on the TV

running

from bombs ,

sirens

and Abu Al-Tubar

(Mikhail, 2005,p.11)

The lines above highlight the brutal obliteration of Iraq’s landscape and heritage. Mikhail further anchors her poetic resistance in folklore by referencing to the Iraqi communal tale of “Abu Al-Tubar”. In Iraqi community, ‘Abu Al-Tubar’, also famous as ‘The Hatchet Man,’ Hatem Kazem Al Hadum was viewed as “an international smuggler, serial killer, and secret police agent” (Mackenzie & Shah, 2025, p. 1). He is also noted to have “killed many people and terrorized the city of Baghdad in the early 1970s” (Mackenzie & Shah, 2025, p. 1). Thus, he becomes an active site of memory which advocates a sense of fear and violence. His tale, while initiated in real life, has evolved into a terrible remembrance of a brutal era in Iraqi history, notably during the 1970s in Baghdad. By employing an allusion to this ominous figure, Mikhail relates her personal agony with national unrest. Then, Mikhail delves into contrasting the “old neighbors / running from bombs” with “new neighbors / running for their morning exercises”, a contrast which juxtaposition the ongoing trauma and the hope for renewal and continuity. These paradoxical images operate as symbolic testimonies of memory. They provide memorial spaces where collective trauma is not merely acknowledged, but challenged through everyday acts of resilience and normalcy as well. Mikhail ends up with “Inanna”, commenting on how modern technology can be used to reconnect with her homeland. Mikhail says: “I search you on the Internet,” (Mikhail, 2005,p.12) an act that figuratively reactivates collective memory in a digital space. The fragmented “antiquities scattered / and broken / in the museum” (Mikhail, 2005,p.12) are converted through her poetic invocation into mnemonic sites that oppose cultural erasure. Mikhail saying: “My necklaces are among them” (Mikhail, 2005,p.12) humanizes this loss, bridging individual memory with collective heritage. It empowers the notion that cultural artifacts, material or symbolic, are active sites of Iraqi identity. Then, Mikhail’s tone shifts into anger. This completely true in the defiance she makes in the concluding lines of her poem, saying:

Stop fighting

over my clothes and gold!

How you disturb my sleep

and frighten a flock of kisses

out of my nation!

You planted pomegranates and prisons

round red and full.

These are your holes in my robe.

And this is our meeting.

(Mikhail, 2005,p.15)

In this way, Mikhail establishes a vital protest, instigated by the revitalization of the myth of Inanna, a goddess whose story occupies the core of ancient Iraqi culture and memory. Alluding to this outstanding figure, Mikhail sustains the strength to resist contemporary trauma, ensuring that Iraqi identity endures despite physical collapse. This manifestation aligns with Nora’s concept of memory as “lieux de mémoire”, serving as dynamic sites of collective memory amid chaos and disappointment. Not so far from *The War Works Hard*, is Mikhail’s more recent collection of verse, *The Iraqi Nights*. Mikhail composes this collection amidst her exile, as she was forced to leave Iraq and live in America. The original Arabic version of this collection was published in 2013. Then, it was translated into English by Kareem Abu-Zeid in 2014. (Jasim, 2022,p.636). The collection serves as a deep literary exploration of cultural preservation and resistance. Composed during a time of growing bloodshed, widespread displacement, and continuous destruction of Iraq’s cultural legacy, Mikhail’s *The Iraqi Nights* is admitted as a skillful tapestry woven with mythic allusions, storytelling traditions, and cultural symbolism. Instigated by the aesthetic of *One Thousand and One Nights*, Mikhail’s collection focuses on storytelling as a vital mode of resistance. Her narrative role in this collection mirrors that of Scheherazade, using storytelling not only as a way of survival, but also as a potent tool for cultural resilience and renewal. In this relation, Boumaaza notes that in this collection Mikhail “personifies the role of Scheherazade in the *Thousand and One Nights*, who saves herself

through the telling of , the tales” (2016.p.35). Boumaaza further maintains that “unlike Scheherazade, Mikhail isn’t writing to escape death, but to confront it through grief and love while summoning the strength to endure” (2016.p.35). To achieve her desire, Mikhail manifests a deliberate effort to invoke and reconstruct the collective memory of Iraq’s ancient civilization: evoking “Sumerian mythological space whether in characters, symbols, suggestions or written symbols that furnish the text and creates a new vision concerning the values of life in Iraq,” (Jasim, 2022,p.636) particularly in the post-war era. Mikhail’s collection falls into seven parts, each blending poetic lyricism with mythic narratives. It is haunted with imagery inspired by Sumerian clay tablets, imitating the symbolic and visual language of ancient Mesopotamian civilization. The seven parts of the collection paint a texture of mythic symbolism, which, at Mikhail’s hands, are transformed into dynamic memorial sites that has the capacity of challenging cultural erasure and affirming her collective Iraqi legacy.

The first section of this collection starts with a description of the first years of war along with the image of a man and woman playing a domestic game, “bride and groom”:

In the first year of war
they played “bride and groom”
and counted everything on their fingers:
their faces reflected in the river;
the waves that swept away their faces
before disappearing;
and the names of newborns.

Then, Mikhail maintains that with the recurrence of the violence of war, this image begins to fade away:

Then the war grew up
and invented a new game for them:
the winner is the one
who returns from the journey
alone,
full of stories of the dead
as the passing wings flutter
over the broken trees;
and now the winner must tow the hills of dust (Mikhail,2014,p.6)

These lines reveal a notable transformation of war from a childhood game “bride and groom” to a pervasive force that "grew up / and created a new game". This shift reflects the fracturing of Iraq’s cultural landscape and the destruction of its sites of memory: the everlasting environments where memory unconsciously resides. Then, Mikhail imagines the "winner" returning back alone, telling stories of violence and the dead. This indicates the deep isolation thus, the opening section establishes a sense of violence, loss and disappearance. It settles the core pressure of the Iraqi community, the erasure of physical sites of memory which requires the formulation a poetic allegorical ones. In the second section, Mikhail return back to the mythical past to frame her contemporary suffering. She links contemporary Baghdad with that of Haroon Al Rasheed, positioning herself within the lineage of Scheherazade, the storyteller who employed storytelling as a survival weapon. Mikhail writes:

Five centuries have passed
since Scheherazade told her tale.
Baghdad fell,
and they forced me to the underworld. (Mikhail.2014,p.7)

This connection is more than literary; it functions as a strategic parallel to a character who applied cultural memory as resistance against cultural erasure and war. Like Scheherazade, Mikhail retells narratives to endure the feelings of exile and displacement. The portrayal of watching shadows —"not one of them looks like Tammuz"— (Mikhail. 2014.p.7) powerfully evokes a Mesopotamian deity associated with an outstanding Iraqi site of memory. In Sumerian texts, “Tammuz is called Dumuzi and is identified as the consort or lover of the fertility goddess Inanna, the Babylonian Ishtar” (Aaron, 1995).

Tammuz was also “associated with crops, spring vegetation, date palms, and barley” (Cicero,2006,p.41). He incarnates “the spring growth of new life in all of nature” (Cicero,2006,p.41). He is considered “the very first dying- and-rising god to be named in recorded history” (Cicero,2006,p.41). Inanna “handed him over to the demons of the underworld, where he then ruled as a king” (Cicero,2006,p.41). The descent of Tammuz to the underworld and his return therefrom signifies “the natural cycle of decay and reawakening in

the vegetation world”(Lurker.2015). Tammuz’s annual descent into the underworld becomes a resonant metaphor for Iraq’s suffering and the exile’s yearning:

He will cross thousands of miles
for the cup of tea
I will pour by my hand.
I don’t want the tea to get cold.
Worse than death is a cold tea.

(Mikhail.2014,p.7)

In these lines the mundane and domestic narrative of pouring tea, in the lines above, becomes a potent site of memory which draws sense of cultural connection and continuity. The "cold tea" signifies the rupture of these cultural bonds, the damage of common tradition, and the loss of remembrance. In contrast, keeping the tea warm, through memory and awareness, is perceived as an active site of resilience. Tammuz’s myth is elevated into a site of memory, capturing the deep rooted seasonal hope of Iraqi culture. Mikhail, much like Iraqis, finds in Tammuz’s story of return and renewal a flame of hope in the midst of war and exile. This conception profoundly mirrors Mikhail's faith in Iraq’s capacity to endure war and renew itself.

In the third section, Mikhail delves deeper into discovering the capacity of memory to redeem the scars of war and exile. The "cracked jar" found only when "lonely enough / to think of every glitter a gold" (Mikhail,2014, p.8) signifies the exile’s profound consciousness and the potential value inherent within fragments. Inside lies "the magical herb / always sought by Gilgamesh" (Mikhail.2014.p.8). Gilgamesh, was a legendary King of Uruk, a Sumerian city. Driven by the fear of death, especially after the death of his friend, Enkidu's, Gilgamesh wants to find the secret to eternal life. With this purpose, Gilgamesh visits Utnapishtim, he and his wife were the only humans who survives the universal flood. Utnapishtim reveals to Gilgamesh the place of “the planet of eternal youth” (Hines.2007. 253) Gilgamesh quest for the herb immortality is evolved in Mikhail’s poem into a site of memory for Iraqis’ resistance, manifesting humanity’s effort to defeat mortality, loss, and the search for meaning. His quest reverberates deeply with Mikhail’s own poetic quest. Mikhail writes:

I will show it to Tammuz when he arrives.
We will go as quickly as a camera’s flash
to the seven continents of the world.
Everyone who smells the herb
will get cure
or liberation
or the secret word.

(Mikhail,2014, p.8)

The myth of Gilgamesh and his magic herb echoes the function of culture memory as a “cure” for ordeal or vehicle of “liberation” from depression, serving as the “secret word” of belonging and identity. In the lines above, Gilgamesh’s herb is used as a symbol of how cultural myths and memories can heal individuals. The implication that Gilgamesh’s herb which "travel across seven continents" with Tammuz turns into an active interface of memory and hope. Mikhail ends this section saying: “I don’t want Tammuz to come too late / for my urgent song” (Mikhail,2014,p.8). This indicates the potent function of poetry, along with cultural memory, in keeping a national identity alive.

In section four, Mikhail presents a notable aspect of “lieu de mémoire”. She makes a mundane list to be given to Tammuz upon his return. Mikhail writes:

I'll give him all my lists:
books,
lost friends,
favorite songs,
cities to see before you die,
lists of ordinary things
with notes to prove
we are alive.

(Mikhail, 2014, p.9)

This list is extraordinary in its capacity for resistance. In other words, Mikhail admits that in the context of war and exile, individuals are belittled to numbers and identity is threatened. However, reciting such mundane items becomes a revolutionary act of resistance. This perception parallels Nora’s notion that, in the context of resistance, site of memory materialize the immaterial. Thus, Mikhail’s list does accurately this, turning feelings into proof. Every item, such as food, books, and lost friends, becomes a brick in the wall against erasure. The list itself

becomes a battlefield where memory fights deletion. It implies that while war may destroy our cities, it cannot erase an individual's list of mundane things. Mikhail terminates with notes to assert that each component on the list is a significant in the chain of cultural memory. Mikhail's list itself elevates into a textual site where memory is reclaimed and given meaning. It is an effective shape of resistance against erasure and eradication of collective identity, a hint at the importance of documenting history as a site of memory and resistance.

In section five, Mikhail demonstrates how individuals reconstruct themselves from scraps when they are exiled. She keeps saying, "As if..." over and over, like a person attempting to remember a fantasy:

As if I hear music in the arch of the boat.
As if I smell the river the lily the fish.
As if I touch the skies falling from 'I love you.'
As if I see those small notes to be read again and again.
As if I live the life of birds carrying their feathers only. (Mikhail, 2014, p. 10)

These sensory annotations in the lines above, such as music, smell, touch and sight, are the elementary ingredients of memory. They are the components of the "milieu de mémoire" that the exile brings unconsciously. The "arch of the boat," the "river," the "lily," and the "fish" recreate Iraq, especially its two rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, which are essential to Mesopotamian identity. The "small notes to be read again and again" echo the lists of Section four, manifesting the valuable textual ingredients of connection. The final image, "the life of birds carrying their feathers only," is deeply effective. It speaks to resilience and the possibility of flight, of survival with the minimal but vital essence of self-intact. This section demonstrates how sensory memories, activated by poetry, function as internal (lieux de mémoire), permitting the exile to reconstitute a sense of self and connection to a lost home.

In the sixth section, Mikhail alludes to "Aladdin's lamp", a famous folk tale from *One Thousand and One Nights*. The tale presents a magical lamp with a powerful genie which brings extreme wealth and power for Aladdin, and makes him a king with enormous palaces and mounds on mounds of riches (Bane,2020,p.100). Mikhail, like many other literary writers of her time, converts this tale into a site of memory to advocate "larger themes of power, identity, and resistance (Sharma, et al., 2025, p.631). She writes:

My shadow,
imprisoned in Aladdin's lamp,
mirrors the following:
a picture of the world with you inside,
light passing through a needle's eye,
scrawlings akin to cuneiform,
hidden paths to the sun,
dried clay,
tranquil Ottoman pottery,
and a huge pomegranate, its seeds
scattered all over Uruk.

(Mikhail.2014.p.10)

The images in these lines presents a tapestry of how war has violated Iraqi heritage. The "Cuneiform" and "dry clay" evoke the memory of very important Mesopotamia's sites that is the clay tablets, the foundational texts of Iraqi civilization. The "Ottoman still cup" that Mikhail refers to layers histories of occupation, while "Uruk" advocates Gilgamesh's city, the cradle of urban identity. Mikhail ends this section saying, "gigantic pomegranate with seeds / scattered all over Uruk. The pomegranate, in Eastern tradition, incarnates abundance, fertility and immortal life. Its brutal scattering mirrors war's devastation and how it results in the displacement of Iraq's citizens and the collapse of their cultural artifacts.

Mikhail terminates her collection, *The Iraqi Nights*, with a revolutionary spirit. She handles Scheherazade's storytelling tacit one more time, saying: "In Iraq / after one thousand and one nights, / someone will talk to someone else" (Mikhail, 2014, p. 12). This is not merely a callback to the frame tale: it is Mikhail asserting that her country, like Scheherazade, will outlive its tyrants through the sheer continuity of daily life. Then, Mikhail turns into a litany of the mundane made sacred:

Markets will open
for regular customers.
Small feet will tickle
the giant feet of the Tigris.

Gulls will spread their wings
and no one will fire at them.
Women will walk the streets
without looking back in fear.
Men will give their real names
without putting their lives at risk.
Children will go to school
and come home again.
Chickens in the villages
won't peck at human flesh
on the grass.
Disputes will take place
without any explosives.

(Mikhail.2014.p.12).

Thus, after pages of mythic symbols, Mikhail dares to imagine reformation not through demanding extraordinary revolution, but through demanding the ordinary. For her, returning to life's normalcy is a desired condition in a country where everything cultural has been violated, from the Tigris to the pomegranate seeds scattered across the land, demanding the mundane is revolutionary. Mikhail closes her collection with a call for optimism. In other words, the terminating lines of this collection serve as a whisper to maintain resilience and continuity. Mikhail claims that despite all sufferings the sun will rise equally for the living and the dead; that is cosmic justice. A hand waving to someone coming or going, represents human dignity rebuilt. Mikhail writes:

A cloud will pass over cars
heading to work as usual.
A hand will wave
to someone leaving
or returning.
The sunrise will be the same
for those who wake
and those never will.
And every moment
something ordinary
will happen
under the sun.

(Mikhail.2014.p.12).

Overall, Mikhail's collection *The Iraqi Nights* exemplifies a deep engagement with the interconnection between collective memory, cultural resilience, and resistance amidst the trauma of war and displacement. By interweaving Iraq's pre-historic myths along with its contemporary life, Mikhail hopes to endow her readers with a sense of endurance and optimism. After reading this poetic collection, readers are empowered to revive their cultural legacy and anticipate a future of renewal. Her poetic invocation of sites of memory, derived from Iraq's ancient civilization, works as a vital mechanism for both defying erasure and preserving cultural identity. In other words, to establish an atmosphere of normalcy and stability to the context of ongoing struggle and displacement of her present life, Mikhail's poems in this collection oscillates between past and present. Her poetic articulation implies the urgency of activating cultural monuments as poetic sites of resilience. This explicitly asserts reveals the fact that the revival of everyday life and cultural rituals is a potent act of resistance, a guide or a way toward cultural healing. Evidently, Mikhail's prolonged collection of poems insists the enduring capacity of myth, storytelling, and cultural memory in the act of evoking hope and continuity in face of wars, exile and adversity.

Not far from her collections, *The War Works Hard* and *The Iraqi Nights* is Mikhail's *In Her Feminine Sign* (2019). The collection once again celebrates the employment of Nora's conception of 'sites of memory', especially in her most quoted poem, "My Grandmother's Grave". The poem stands as an act of cultural resistance, utilizing Nora's concept "lieux de mémoire". The poem is composed as a reaction to the widespread destruction of Iraqi heritage by extremist groups, namely ISIS. In an interview published in 2016, Mikhail (2:15–2:45) declares that "extremist groups were destroying the statues of Iraqi civilization". She asserts that their actions were not merely about murdering the Iraqi citizens, but about "attacking Iraqi history homes" (Mikhail, 2016, 5:10–5:40). She further

asserts that "extremist groups even destroyed graves just because they are symbols they did not understand like Aramaic, Hebrew or crosses" (Mikhail, 2016, 5:10–5:40).

In reaction to all these violations, Mikhail wrote "My Grandmother's Grave". The poem serves as a declaration of her resentment against "the monstrous acts of lone wolf terrorists towards the Iraqi heritage and their disrespect to the deceased" (Bahooty,2020,p.85). Through this poem, Mikhail preserves and honors the collective memory of Iraq's ancient cultural symbols, which have been savagely targeted and obliterated. Drawing on these symbols as cultural "sites of memory" of her nation, Mikhail skillfully connects her grief with collective cultural trauma, transcending personal loss into a symbolic act of remembrance and resistance.

This is clearly evident at the opening lines of the poem where Mikhail transforms her personal mourning into a symbol of the enduring presence of Iraqi cultural memory. She writes: "When my grandmother died / I thought, She can't die again"(Mikhail,2019, Ll.1-2). After reflecting on the moment of her grandmother's death, Mikhail delves into remembering various aspects of her grandmother's life, "her bed", "her tales", "black clothes" and "her mourning for her daughter". This memorization establishes Mikhail's personal grief and personal memory which she seeks to transform into a collective historical consciousness. This is powerfully implied through the references Mikhail makes to historical symbols of her land such as "Sumer", the world's earliest known civilization from southern Mesopotamia, and their "clay tablets". According to Nora, these cultural symbols are "sites of memory", which embody collective history and serve as anchors of cultural continuity. Mikhail writes:

First were the Sumerians,
their dreams inscribed in clay tablets.
They drew palms, so dates ripen before their sorrows.
They drew an eye to chase evil
away from their city.
They drew circles and prayed for them: (Mikhail,2019,Ll. 14- 19).

In this vein, Ian Pople, in his review (2020) of Mikhail's *In Her Feminine Signs*, dwells on how the personal and cultural become one another in this poem. He explores that "the juxtaposition of Mikhail's grandmother and the Sumerians runs the processes of a life and the processes of a civilization against each other" (Pople,2020,p.1). He then illustrates how Mikhail demonstrates the interconnectedness of individual and collective development, even in the face of disruptions and trauma.

As the poem progresses, Mikhail delves into employing cultural memory in more clearer sense: she alludes to wider range of Iraqi cultural sites such as the "Tower of Babel" and the "Hanging Gardens" of Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. These references, along with phrases like "light is exile, / blurred, / its codes crumbs of songs / leftover for the birds," (Mikhail, 2019, Ll: 26-29) affirm the fragmentation of cultural memory instigated by war and displacement. Mikhail proposes that even in disarray, these fragments can be relived or reinterpreted, asserting that cultural memory is resilient and capable of reclamation. In a poignant manner, Mikhail's poem fulfills its peak with the depiction of her grandmother's grave and its destruction at the hand of the terrorists. This portrayal metaphorically signifies the terrorists violent assault directed toward Iraq's cultural foundations. Mikhail writes:

Then the barbarians came
to the mother of two springs.
They broke my grandmother's grave: my clay tablet.
They smashed the winged bulls whose eyes
were sunflowers
widely open
watching the fragments of our first dreams
for a lifetime. (Mikhail, 2019, Ll. 46-53)

In these lines Mikhail criticizes the act of destroying multiple Iraqi cultural sites, namely: the "clay tablets" and the "winged bulls", viewing these acts as brutal assaults on collective memory of her land. Her allusion to the "clay tablets" serves as "a powerful symbol of deep historical roots, the enduring nature of human experience, and the intersection of memory, trauma, and diaspora in the context of Iraq's complex history." Similarly, Mikhail's reference to "winged bulls" represents a powerful site of cultural memory which offers a space of maintaining poetic resistance. The "winged bulls", Mesopotamian mythological beings, are known by the name of Lamassu in Akkadian. These "winged bulls" were considered in "the medieval Assyrian period (15th century BC) as a garrison spirit that guarded the gates of temples, palaces and cities and evicted them from evil" (Husseina,2020, p.743).

Mikhail asserts the notion that despite the material collapse of these cultural sites, war cannot erase the collective memory of them. The collective memory of these cultural fragments operates as a source of timeless connection to her national roots. In other words, through these poetic lines Mikhail's relives the symbolic significance of these sites of memory, turning them into monuments of resistance which echo the continuity of her Iraqi legacy. This connection is vividly explored at the conclusion of the poem when Mikhail writes, "My hand on the map / as if on an old scar"(Mikhail. 2019. Ll:54-55). In these two lines, Mikhail's gesture of placing her hand on the map as if on a scar re-creates the enduring connection between personal memory and collective history. It asserts that despite terrorist desire to erase the cultural heritage of her land, yet the memory of Iraq's cultural sites remains a potent fountain of cultural hope and resilience.

Conclusion:

The research explores how Dunya Mikhail's poetry activates the concept of "cultural memory" as an ongoing platform of poetic resistance in the face of war, displacement, and cultural erasure. Working on Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* or 'sites of memory', Mikhail deliberately recreates various Mesopotamian folktales, myths and historical monuments as memorial sites of endurance, resistance and cultural reclamation. Her most famous collection of poems: *The War Works Hard*, *The Iraqi Nights*, and *In Her Feminine Signs*, revitalize ancient Iraqi symbolic figures such as Inanna, Tammuz, and Gilgamesh, etc. Those national figures and relics are summoned not as mere ruins of the past, but as dynamic cultural reminders of Iraqi resilience and continuity. Thus, Mikhail's poetry connects Iraq's ancient legacy with its turmoil contemporary life, demonstrating that cultural memory is not a static phenomenon but a dynamic force. Moreover, Mikhail's strategy of recreating Iraqi clay tablets, folktales, and sacred monuments, helps her to establish a "portable homeland" that resist geographic exile and pre-established severity. Acting as such, Mikhail's poetry functions as both a documentary archive and an act of resistance. It preserves her Iraqi cultural identity while opposing narratives of erasure. Her innovation lies in her skill to re-build cultural memory as a potent vehicle of empowerment. In her poetry, Mikhail exceeds personal mourning. She gives her readers an opportunity to reconnect with their roots and conceive their future. She admits the fact that 'cultural memory' can be activated as a valid poetic site of post-colonial resistance, one that affirms the continuity of her Iraqi identity amid never ending wars, displacement and upheaval.

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