

Conflicting Narratives: War, Trauma and Memory in Iraqi Culture

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1. Auflage 2012. Buch. Hardcover
ISBN 978 3 89500 806 1
Format (B x L): 17 x 24 cm

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Preface

I am delighted to have been asked to write a brief introduction to *Conflicting Narratives: War, Trauma and Memory in Iraqi Culture*.

This is an extraordinarily rich collection of essays, illustrating the profound paradoxes of modern Iraqi history, and, more unusually and more originally, the unsettling experience of *being Iraqi* in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Many of the scholarly essays focus on notions of home and exile, inside and outside, life at home and life in the diaspora. The collection examines current thinking on the 1950s; did the last years of the monarchy represent a period of freedom and creativity, or did they embody a degree of repression and exclusion almost as profound as that which prevailed for most of the republican period? The essays try to answer, or at least pose, difficult questions about authenticity: who has the right to claim the national heritage, or to ‘speak for Iraq’? They illustrate the very deep divisions of opinion over such matters as perception, heritage and entitlement that will be with us for a long time to come.

Much of the collection is concerned with culture, especially literature and poetry, and the proper social function of the creative artist/intellectual: should (s)he hang on doggedly at tremendous personal risk, or does exile, with all its attendant traumas, permit greater freedom – and is that freedom the only way for the individual to maintain her/his integrity? Should those who chose not to leave the country simply be regarded as having thrown in their lot with the regime, or did many of them (as some of those who stayed are now claiming) play an honorable, subtle, and dangerous balancing game, involving, however ambiguously, brave acts of defiance and subversion? And if they did embark on the latter course, and it was as risky and courageous as they claimed, how many of their readers understood what they were doing – their *taqiyya*, their dissimulation? And in what sense can ‘official’ artistic or literary production under a regime such as Saddam Husayn’s be regarded as ‘art’, or ‘literature’, or should it simply be dismissed out of hand?

The last section, *Shahādāt*, testimonies, has a special resonance; it consists of translations of five essays that describe ‘*al-makān al-‘irāqī*’, ‘Iraqi space’, or ‘Iraqi space remembered’ in the sense of Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*, ‘remembered realms’; memories of suffering, martyrdom, prison and war, descriptions of the cities of Najaf, Madīnat al-Thawra, Qal‘at Sukkar... Such material is largely inaccessible to the non-specialist, and the translators have performed an enormously valuable service in bringing it to a wider public. As Ḥaydar Sa‘īd says: “It is not important whether or not [the] image [of ‘Alī] matched reality. What matters is the relationship people made with his image as they imagined and shared it.” Memory is almost inevitably more subjective than objective; what is important is the *interpretation*, rather than the *record*, of individual experience.

In the famous opening sentence of his novel *The Go-Between* (1953), the novelist L. P. Hartley wrote: “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.” Just how differently they did things in Iraq is finely illustrated in this collection of essays, which is at once both stimulating and evocative.

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